

The Yemen Review

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FIVE YEARS SINCE DECISIVE STORM



The Yemen Review

The Yemen Review Launched in June 2016, The Yemen Review – formerly known as Yemen at the UN – is a monthly publication produced by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. 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, hold private meetings with local, regional, and international stakeholders, and analyze the domestic and international context surrounding developments in and regarding Yemen.

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

COVER PHOTO:

Pro-government tribesmen stand guard at the border between Marib and Al-Jawf governorates on March 31, 2020 // Photo Credit: Ali Owaida

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Taiz city, on the evening of February, 12, 2020 // Photo Credit: Ahmed Basha

The Sana'a Center Editorial

End the War Before the Pandemic

‘Operation Decisive Storm’ was a moniker meant to convey a sense of speed but instead became a synonym for hubris and failure. The regional military coalition intervening in Yemen chalked up another anniversary this March – five years since Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led the way into a war thinking it would take only weeks to force the armed Houthi movement to retreat and to restore the internationally recognized Yemeni government to power. How plans go awry. The end of March saw Houthi missiles flying toward Saudi cities from northern Yemen, Saudi airstrikes in the Houthi-held capital, Sana’a, the Yemeni government fraying and its troops battling to prevent the Houthis from overrunning one of the country’s most strategically important governorates – and everyone praying to be spared the new coronavirus that is surging around the planet. Meanwhile, the United States, which has backed and armed the coalition’s intervention from the start, reduced the humanitarian aid it provides Yemen. It would be easy to conclude there is no end in sight for the conflict today and that half a decade of war will only beget half a decade more. It may be more productive, however, to peer into the darkest of all things – a pandemic that threatens to be especially cruel to an impoverished, war-weakened and malnourished society – and recognize the only choice is to stop fighting each other in order to confront a greater, shared threat.

Despite some attempts to prepare for the virus' near-inevitable spread in Yemen, the country's already rudimentary healthcare capacities have been fragmented and eviscerated by the war, meaning many Yemenis will be left without medical recourse in the face of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. That the coronavirus will have a terrible impact in Yemen seems beyond question – how catastrophic it will be is not foretold, however, with the difference being whether there is a coordinated and cohesive nationwide effort among local, regional and international stakeholders to fight the disease.

Simply put, the worst-case scenario is in no one's interest, and cooperation between the warring sides is the only option to avoid such. Both the Houthis and the anti-Houthi coalition acknowledged this, at least tacitly, in announcing near the end of March that they would heed a United Nations call for a nationwide cease-fire to focus on combating the coronavirus. That hostilities continued to rage on numerous fronts at month's end revealed that public commitments to a cease-fire are fleeting.

The United Nations – through the special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths – must put in place a meaningful framework to use this window of opportunity before it is lost completely to the country's rapidly developing circumstances. The clearest and most realistically achievable step to gain momentum for deescalation is to start with a prisoner exchange. Today. Even before the coronavirus threat, both sides had backed the idea of a prisoner exchange for years but endlessly haggled over the prisoner lists. Now the potential for highly cramped prisons to become breeding pits for the virus has created an added incentive for the warring parties to release the thousands of prisoners they agreed to in February without any further delay. With the convergence of interests and necessity aligned, the moment is Griffiths' to seize and Yemen's to lose.

Importantly, the need for a collective response to confront a shared threat comes as Riyadh is also looking for a means to exit the costly quagmire Yemen has become. At the end of March, Saudi Arabia invited Houthi and Yemeni government representatives for peace talks inside the kingdom. A skilled mediator would leverage the moment and the immediacy of the coronavirus in his efforts to create a face-saving cover for the Saudis to escape the military fiasco they created. It is precisely because this pandemic is so dire that it can overwhelm the war's established norms and radically alter the current course of events. For that to happen, however, the gravity and urgency of the current situation must be recognized not only by international mediators, but also the warring parties, whose actions, rather than words, are needed to end one catastrophe and blunt the impact of the next one coming.

Five Years Since Decisive Storm

On March 25, 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led a coalition of Arab states in a military intervention into the Yemen War. From its base in the northern highlands, the armed Houthi movement and its allies had deposed the internationally recognized Yemeni government in the capital, Sana'a, and pressed a military conquest southward to Aden on the coast of the Arabian Sea. The coalition operation, dubbed 'Operation Decisive Storm' was meant to quickly push the Houthis back and restore the Yemeni government to power. Half a decade later, the coalition's goals seem as distant as ever.

While in those five years the war has been a constant reality, the stakeholders involved and the dynamics at play have been constantly evolving, at times as part of a steady, gradual process, at others moments hitting dramatic – and often violent – inflection points that suddenly changed the rules of the game.

In seeking a deeper assessment of these developments, for the March 2020 edition of The Yemen Review the Sana'a Center asked experts in various Yemen-related fields to reflect on the five years that have passed since the coalition intervention. What has happened in that time? How have events brought us to where we are today? And what might this mean for the future? These commentaries come in addition to our regular insight and analysis of the month's local, regional and international developments related to Yemen.

The topics cover a wide spectrum: how Houthi rule in Sana'a has been a study in authoritarian oppression; the dismal performance of the Hadi government; why economic factors remain the heart of the conflict; five years of the UN Security Council toeing the Saudi line; how Riyadh needs regional help to exit the Yemen War; Washington's role in facilitating the conflict while dodging responsibility for the disaster it has become; and what the conflict has meant for Yemeni refugees who, five years on, have become strangers to their own country.

SANA'A FROM MARCH 2015 TO TODAY: A STUDY IN AUTHORITARIAN OPPRESSION

Commentary by Salam Al-Harbi

Five years following the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition into the conflict in Yemen, the manifestations of destruction and war in the Yemeni capital Sana'a are evident. Intensive bombing by coalition aircraft in 2015, and to a lesser extent, lighter shelling during the subsequent war years damaged governmental and private structures. The Republican Palace, the president's official residence, the army command headquarters and family homes of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh and some regime officials are no longer aesthetic attractions or formal landmarks, only ruins. In December 2017, Baghdad Street and the vicinity of Saleh's house in Al-Thania neighborhood became part of a tapestry showcasing the aftermath of the war between the Houthis and their former ally. Checkpoints still exist all over the city, with the civilian attire of those manning them early in the war replaced by official uniforms after the Houthis took over the army and security services. In addition, armed men in tribal attire can still be seen wherever one looks.

The streets of Sana'a since 2015 have gradually turned into an exhibition of images of Houthi fighters killed in the war against the coalition, the internationally recognized government and Saleh. Walls of governmental buildings, schools, hospitals and ministries are adorned with Houthi religious slogans. Al-Sabeen Square and the Monument to the Unknown Soldier have been transformed from national republican symbols into a shrine for Saleh al-Sammad, former president of the Houthi-run Supreme Political Council and the most senior Houthi leader to have been killed in the war so far. Meanwhile, the car park surrounding Al-Saleh Mosque (renamed The People's Mosque by the Houthis) has become an impound lot run by the Customs Authority, where owners must pay fees – in addition what was already paid when the vehicles crossed the border into Houthi-held territory – to release their vehicles.

Most public services, which were inadequate even before 2015, have almost completely disappeared under Houthi rule. Electricity and water were cut, and educational institutions were paralyzed after the suspension of public sector salaries in September 2016, with few exceptions. Hospitals now operate with budgets provided by international organizations. The rising price of fuel prices was one of the pretexts for the Houthi takeover of Sana'a; after years of intermittent fuel crises, the price has stabilized at double its cost in 2015, while the price of cooking gas has quadrupled since 2015. Obtaining gas also requires registering and queuing in front of the homes of the Aqel (Houthi neighborhood officials), who use this process to collect data on the population. Yemenis affiliated with the Houthis are rewarded with privileges in accessing services, while those who are not face obstacles – even if they do not explicitly oppose the movement.

On the other hand, Houthi affiliates have made large investments in these sectors, providing alternative services at double the price. Importing oil, distributing gas and generating electricity have become sources of obscene wealth for the group's leaders.

Meanwhile, private education has expanded due to lack of confidence in government educational institutions after most school principals were dismissed and replaced with followers of the Houthi movement. Moreover, unqualified Houthi volunteers were recruited to replace teachers who did not accept working without pay or those dismissed for anti-Houthi views.

After a halt to construction during the first year of the war, Sana'a has experienced a building boom. An unprecedented number of extremely lavish buildings have been constructed, especially on the outskirts of the city – mostly built by members of the Houthi movement as an outlet for their sudden wealth. Furthermore, currency exchange offices and money transfer companies have proliferated, mostly replacing banks whose activity has been constricted since the start of the war. The number of gas stations, freed from the complicated licensing requirements of the past, has also multiplied.

One of the reasons construction has flourished in Sana'a is the influx of displaced people from other regions of Yemen who fled armed clashes and frontlines, which increased demand for housing and, with it, rent prices. This is a reversal of the situation in 2015 when large waves of residents fled the city, leaving many houses and apartments empty. However, as frontlines and clashes shifted to other areas, Sana'a received hundreds of thousands of displaced people, particularly from Taiz, Hudaydah and Hajjah governorates. A senior source at the Ministry of Labor told the Sana'a Center that the city's population, estimated at 3 million in 2015, had since doubled as a result of displacement.

Sana'a Becomes a Prison as Freedoms are Quashed

Popular demonstrations, such an integral part of the 2011 revolution, have vanished from Sana'a; only mobilization by the Houthis is permitted. No one has considered starting a demonstration in protest or to demand human rights since an attempt in October 2018, when the men and women who organized it were arrested and tortured. However, the Houthi movement mobilizes when and as it likes, filling the squares on religious occasions or to affirm political positions adopted by the group. The last time a public event was held that was not organized by the Houthi group was when supporters of Saleh and the former ruling General People's Congress (GPC) gathered in August 2017.

Walking through the streets of Sana'a, one invariably sees the latest car models, but struggles to find a recent edition of a book in any library. Books are no longer imported into Yemen, and most bookstore owners have replaced their bookshops with other businesses. Newspapers have almost completely disappeared; instead of the dozens of daily or weekly newspapers that were published in Sana'a prior to the Houthi takeover, there are only about five newspapers today — all of which are affiliated with the Houthis, and people are not keen to buy them. Print and electronic media in Yemen have been massacred, with journalists arrested, pursued, persecuted and left unemployed. Local radio and satellite channels have been directed toward supporting the Houthi war effort, with the exception of two radio stations that have survived by not addressing public affairs.

There are no longer any political activities in Sana'a, with the exception of limited meetings of the remaining members of the GPC in Sana'a, who are subject to supervision and direction by the Houthis. This followed the Houthi takeover of the party's headquarters and its media in December of 2017 after disposing of its former ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh. A single doctrine has been imposed on the capital; anyone suspected of opposing Houthi policies is arrested and most political leaders have fled Houthi-held territory, either to areas outside the group's control in Yemen or abroad.

Absolute Domination Within State Institutions

Since 2015, the Houthis have gradually consolidated their control over the capital and the state institutions in it. This began when they formed the popular committees and imposed the informal authority of the group's supervisors (mushrif) over these institutions. They then worked to consolidate their partnership with the GPC to take advantage of its human resources, relationships and popularity. The Houthis stacked civil and military institutions with loyalists in parallel with the expulsion and exclusion of public servants affiliated with parties opposing the group and former president Saleh, such as the Islamist Islah party. Members of the GPC were next on the chopping block as a concerted effort was made by the Houthis to remove party affiliates from public institutions without disrupting their activity and to attract former GPC members to the movement. This continued until the Houthis' relationship with Saleh and his party reached the breaking point in December 2017, when direct clashes ended with Saleh's killing and the designation of all of his supporters and GPC members as targets for arrest, assassination or exclusion from the public service. Since consolidating unilateral power in Sana'a two years ago, Houthi commanders, particularly those closely affiliated with its leader, have dominated decision-making, from within these institutions and from outside. Those whose undivided loyalty comes into question are swiftly and quietly eliminated, often by accusing them of treason or collaboration with the coalition (the "aggressor" as they describe it), which was recently the case for a number of intelligence officers.

At the same time, because it is extremely difficult to maintain control over all of these public positions, especially those requiring specialized human resources, the group has sought to informally incorporate public sector employees through a systematic plan it calls "cultural courses". These sessions – exclusively for men – are held according to the status of the person and the nature of his work, in closed and isolated places whose locations are unknown even to those who attend them. Before departing to these courses, all of the person's belongings, even watches and phones, are confiscated, and they are transported in blacked-out cars to locations where they receive religious lectures from Houthi figures. These "courses" may last for several days or even weeks, during which time participants' responses are monitored and their loyalty is assessed. Attendees may come out of them with the trust of the group and win promotions within the public institutions, or they may have to repeat the courses several times and their workplace mandates are diminished.

In recent years, especially after breaking with Saleh and the GPC, the group has begun articulating and imposing its religiously-based ideology more forcefully. It has imposed gender segregation in public places, schools, universities and even

restaurants, and has begun harassing women on the basis of their clothing. Whenever the group finds that the public does not accept certain restrictions, the Houthis claim the policies are the actions of individuals and temporarily retract them, only to try to implement them again later, such as the attempts to impose the niqab on female students at the university and the ban women from wearing pants with belts.

Through the group's repressive policies, revenues to official institutions have multiplied. Merchants are targets for extortion on any occasion relevant to the group (such as religious holidays like the Prophet Mohammed's birthday), or according to the whims of Houthi leaders. The aggregation of illegitimate wealth by members of the Houthi movement has become one of the most prominent features of life in Sana'a since 2015. Conversely, the group has abandoned all its obligations toward citizens as a de facto authority. The salaries of public sector employees are not being paid, poverty rates and the suffering of vulnerable citizens are on the rise, and expressing an opinion has become the fastest route to detention centers. Schools, mosques, radio stations, television channels, newspapers and universities have all been rendered means of spreading the group's beliefs and combating all others. Propaganda and intimidation are the most important tools at the group's disposal, and are used to impose and maintain their grip on Sana'a and across northern Yemen.

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COVID-19 Response Planning

UN, WHO and Yemeni Authorities' Pandemic Preparations

At the end of March, Yemen was the last country in the region with no confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, but experts warned that the arrival of the pandemic in Yemen would devastate the war-ravaged country. Confirmed cases worldwide had surpassed 800,000, with more than 40,000 deaths, as of March 31, straining even advanced healthcare systems and economies.^[1]

The United Nations has developed a plan to help the World Health Organization and Yemeni authorities manage preparedness and response for the coronavirus in Yemen, the WHO has said. Thousands of tests to detect the coronavirus have been sent to all governorates of Yemen and more than 330 rapid response units deployed across the country are able to test patients with symptoms of COVID-19 who may have been in contact with the virus.^[2] These tests are being processed at two central laboratories in Sana'a and Aden.

The WHO and the Ministry of Health set up a quarantine facility in Aden and testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE) and other medical supplies were airlifted to Aden on March 23, facilitated by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom.^[3] The WHO said March 29 that PPE supplies were limited and efforts to secure more resources were ongoing.^[4] The WHO is working with Yemeni authorities to build the capacity of intensive care units at Yemeni hospitals and to train healthcare workers to manage COVID-19. Yemen has only 700 beds in intensive care units and 500 ventilators for a population of 28 million, according to Save the Children.^[5] The WHO announced on March 29 that screening facilities were being set up at 27 formal entry points – land, sea and air – and more than 10 informal crossings into Yemen to check the travel history, health and body temperature of arrivals to the country.

[1] "Coronavirus COVID-19 Global Cases by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering," John Hopkins University, accessed March 25, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

[2] World Health Organization, "Today was an update on cholera and COVID-19...", Facebook, March 29, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1403873126566958/videos/776061389588157>; World Health Organization, "A meeting with Dr. Saeed Al-Shaibani, laboratory expert at the World Health Organization...[AR]," Facebook, March 29, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=571159663749899>

[3] World Health Organization, "Information session for Covid-19," Facebook, March 24, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1403873126566958/videos/253816865637369>

[4] World Health Organization, "Today was an update on cholera and COVID-19...", Facebook, March 29, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/1403873126566958/videos/776061389588157>

[5] "More than 15 million children and their families in Yemen, Syria and Gaza set to face COVID-19 with fewer than 1,700 ventilators and beds," Save the Children, March 30, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/more-15-million-children-and-their-families-yemen-syria-and-gaza-set-face-covid-19>

Countries across the region imposed curfews and closed their borders to try and contain the virus in March. The internationally recognized Yemeni government shut land borders from March 17 and suspended flights to and from the country from Sayoun, Aden and Mukalla airports from March 18.^[6] Sana'a airport has been closed since 2016 by the Saudi-led military coalition, which controls Yemeni airspace, with the exception of UN flights; these were suspended by Houthi authorities on March 14.^[7] Mercy flights to evacuate Yemenis in need of lifesaving treatment abroad, which had begun in February from Sana'a airport, were also halted. Houthi authorities also closed land borders with parts of Yemen under government control. In addition, schools and universities across Yemen were closed in mid-March.^[8]

Measures to prepare for the arrival of the coronavirus varied between areas under Houthi control and those held by the Yemeni government. The fragmentation of control among competing authorities in nominally government-held parts of Yemen has meant that preparations also varied between governorates.

Houthi authorities ordered the closure of cafes and wedding halls in areas under their control, and said 18 hospitals would be equipped to receive COVID-19 patients, while qat markets would be moved to open areas.^[9] Houthi authorities said the workforce in public sector bodies would be reduced by 80 percent, except for the ministries of health, interior and defense and security and intelligence services.^[10] They also limited gatherings to eight people, restricted visits to patients in hospital and prison visits, and prepared plans to quarantine any areas where coronavirus infections were suspected. Telephone ringtones have been replaced with a message delivering advice to callers about the coronavirus, encouraging people to wash their hands and stay at home. Meanwhile, Houthi authorities in Rada'a city in Al-Bayda governorate held people returning from government-held areas in a makeshift quarantine – though with no medical services, bathrooms or washing facilities according to local media.^[11]

Local authorities in Marib, Taiz, Mukalla, Sayoun and Al-Mahra have formed emergency committees to prepare for the coronavirus.^[12] In Marib, the committee has prepared quarantine facilities and run awareness-raising campaigns, and approved

[6] "Yemen decides to close airports and ports in anticipation of coronavirus, starting next Wednesday [AR]," Al-Ayyam, March 14, 2020, <https://www.alayyam.info/news/84VJQSL8-3HYAU6-6411>; "Yemen suspends all flights for two weeks over coronavirus," Reuters, March 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen-flights/yemen-suspends-all-flights-for-two-weeks-over-coronavirus-idUSKBN21110A>

[7] "Yemen suspends all flights for two weeks over coronavirus," Reuters, March 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen-flights/yemen-suspends-all-flights-for-two-weeks-over-coronavirus-idUSKBN21110A>

[8] Naseh Shaker, "WHO warns Yemen of pending 'explosion' of COVID-19 cases," Al-Monitor, March 24, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/yemen-women-face-masks-coronavirus-houthi-measures.html>

[9] Naseh Shaker, "WHO warns Yemen of pending 'explosion' of COVID-19 cases," Al-Monitor, March 24, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/yemen-women-face-masks-coronavirus-houthi-measures.html>; "Health Minister declares public mobilization to face coronavirus," Yemen News Agency (SABA), March 21, 2020, <https://www.saba.ye/en/news3091572.htm>

[10] Ali Al Sakani, "Across Yemen, local authorities prepare for potential spread of coronavirus," Al-Masdar Online, March 26, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/531>

[11] "Houthis quarantine thousands of travelers in crowded quarters lacking basic necessities," Al-Masdar Online, March 21, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/501>

[12] Ali Al Sakani, "Across Yemen, local authorities prepare for potential spread of coronavirus," Al-Masdar Online, March 26, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/531>

the closure of public swimming pools and gardens to sterilize them. In Taiz, the committee approved the closure of parks, clubs and halls and placed restrictions on markets in government-held areas. The committee is planning to build quarantine facilities and equip hospitals, and to monitor the body temperature of people arriving in Taiz city. The emergency committee in Mukalla has formed a surveillance team to monitor citizens arriving in the city by air, land or sea, banned the entry of qat and closed stadiums and halls. The emergency committee in Sayoun reduced the administrative staff of public bodies by at least a quarter, except for essential services, and banned gatherings in parks, malls and qat markets or for weddings and religious or social events. It is also launching training and awareness-raising programs. In Al-Mahra, the emergency committee is monitoring hospital preparations and has instructed local authorities to send health professionals to border crossings and security checkpoints to examine people arriving to the governorate. Local authorities in Shabwa prepared a quarantine facility and are working to establish two more. Authorities in Aden banned qat markets, although sales of qat have continued either outside the city or with the help of armed groups in the city.^[13]

Local Healthcare System Already in Collapse

The pandemic has overwhelmed healthcare systems globally; Yemen's fragile healthcare system has largely collapsed after five years of war. Less than half of the health facilities in Yemen are functioning, while those that are still operational face shortages of specialists, medicine and equipment.^[14] Close to 20 million Yemenis lack access to basic health services. In a newly released report, Mwatana for Human Rights and Physicians for Human Rights documented 120 violent attacks on medical facilities between March 2015 and December 2018 by the Saudi-led military coalition, the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the armed Houthi movement, including airstrikes, ground attacks and military occupations of medical facilities.^[15]

The devastation of the health system contributed to a cholera epidemic in Yemen, with 860,000 suspected cases in 2019. A spike in cholera infections is expected in April, due to the approaching rainy seasons, threatening to strain the healthcare system further as the coronavirus pandemic looms.^[16] The lack of water and sanitation facilities contributed to the outbreak of cholera, a treatable and preventable disease. More than 17 million Yemenis struggle to access clean water.^[17] This may also make it difficult for some Yemenis to comply with health guidance to contain the coronavirus, such as frequent handwashing.

[13] Samya Kullab, "With virus, cherished Mideast traditions come to abrupt halt," March 28, 2020, <https://apnews.com/749449c851c673ef7a59a19aa9bd4fc5>

[14] "USAID Yemen health fact sheet," USAID, November 7, 2019, <https://www.usaid.gov/yemen/fact-sheets/health-fact-sheet>

[15] "Yemen's warring parties attacked at least 120 health facilities and personnel: PHR/Mwatana Report," Mwatana, March 18, 2020, <https://mwatana.org/en/health-care-attacks/>

[16] "Rainy season threatens huge cholera spike in Yemen as conflict hampers efforts to address forgotten crisis," Oxfam International, March 9, 2020, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/rainy-season-threatens-huge-cholera-spike-yemen-conflict-hampers-efforts-address>

[17] Ibid.

Yemeni Public Health Physician Advises on COVID-19 Preparations

Commentary by Dr. Sameh Al-Awlaqi

A Yemeni patient, recently returned from Egypt, presented in March to the emergency room of a hospital in Aden with flu-like symptoms — a fever and a cough. He was provisionally diagnosed with the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. All medical staff, as well as patients in the waiting area, fled the hospital in panic, leaving the patient perplexed and stigmatized. A screening test later administered by health authorities was negative, but what happened in the hospital was shocking — especially the response by healthcare workers. It is alarming that healthcare workers in Yemen still lack proper training and protection against COVID-19. Urgent measures must be taken including action on preparedness, training on identification of patients and case management, and equipping hospitals, both public and private, with testing sets, treatment protocols and protective tools... [To read the full commentary, see “Yemen and COVID-19: What Needs to be Done,” published March 25, 2020.^[18]]

[18] Sameh Al-Awlaqi, “Yemen and COVID-19: What Needs to be Done,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, March 25, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9435>

Developments in Yemen

Military and Security Developments

Cease-Fire Call to Face Coronavirus Threat Welcomed with Words, Not Actions

Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni government and the armed Houthi movement welcomed a UN call for an immediate cease-fire to focus on measures to combat the threat of coronavirus,^{[19][20][21]} although a truce failed to take hold by the end of the month and fighting escalated. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged both sides on March 25 to stop fighting and return to peace talks as part of the UN's call for a global cease-fire in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.^[22] "Too good to be true," is how a UN official described the parties' response to the call during a conversation with the Sana'a Center.^[23] In contravention of their words, the end of the month saw a ramp up in violence, including a dramatic escalation in airstrikes.

Government Troops on the Ropes as Houthis Take Al-Jawf, Push Into Marib

Houthi fighters captured Al-Hazm, capital of Al-Jawf, following weeks of fighting in the governorate, officials from the Yemeni government and the Houthi movement confirmed on March 1.^[24] With the capture of Al-Jawf, Houthi forces were positioned to further threaten neighboring Marib, including the governorate's oil facilities as well as key anti-Houthi coalition supply routes such as the Al-Wadeah border crossing, the last functioning official border crossing between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. On March 10, the Yemeni government announced that its troops – backed by Saudi airstrikes – had retaken several towns from the Houthi movement in the strategic Khub Walsha'af district, which borders Saudi Arabia.^[25]

[19] "Arab coalition supports Yemeni government acceptance of UN call for cease-fire," Arab News, March 26, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1647431/saudi-arabia>

[20] "The Yemeni government welcomes the United Nations Secretary-General's call for a cease-fire to counter the spread of the Coronavirus [AR]," Saba Net, March 25, 2020, <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/60547>

[21] "President Al-Mashat is delivering an important speech on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of steadfastness [AR]," Saba Net, March 25, 2020, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news3092062.htm>

[22] Mohammed Ghobari and Lisa Barrington, "Yemen warring parties back U.N. truce call, as U.S. starts aid reduction," Reuters, March 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemen-warring-parties-back-u-n-truce-call-as-u-s-starts-aid-reduction-idUSKBN21D0KN>

[23] Sana'a Center discussion with a UN official, March 30, 2020.

[24] Maggie Michael and Samy Magdy, "Officials say Yemen's rebels seize strategic northern city," The Associated Press, March 2, 2020, <https://apnews.com/c568bd815012b541e1e7d57eba8010d9>

[25] Ahmed al-Haj, "Yemeni army says sites near Saudi border wrested from rebels," The Associated Press, March 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/1a91d0d862ddfb4fdda7490108b6f93c>

In Marib, Houthi and government forces continued to clash in the flashpoint Serwah district, with the former capturing the town of Tabab al-Bara near the Hamra hills while the Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes to prevent Houthi forces from capturing the strategic Mount Heelan area.^[26] The Associated Press reported on March 18 that at least 38 fighters from both sides had been killed in just the last 24 hours of fighting in Serwah.^[27] Later in the month, only three days after the warring parties welcomed the UN's cease-fire call, the Houthi movement renewed its attacks on the Kofal military camp in Serwah district, the last Yemeni government defense position between Houthi forces and Marib city.^[28]

Saudi Intercepts Missiles Fired from Yemen, Renews Airstrikes on Sana'a

The tempo of air operations carried out by both sides also increased after the cease-fire announcement. Saudi media reported March 28 that air defenses had intercepted two ballistic missiles launched by the Houthi forces in Yemen – one toward Riyadh, the other toward the city of Jizan.^[29] On March 30, the Saudi-led coalition conducted a wave of airstrikes in Sana'a.^[30] This marked the first occasion that the capital was directly targeted in months, as the Houthi movement and Saudi Arabia had in agreed to a partial cease-fire in September 2019, with the former halting cross-border missile attacks and the latter ceasing airstrikes in multiple governorates, including around the capital Sana'a.^[31]

About 20 coalition air raids targeted Houthi sites in Sana'a, including a Houthi military academy and base, Al-Masdar reported. More sites were hit the same day in Hudaydah and Sa'ada, it said, adding that a military camp north of Sa'ada city was struck several times.^[32]

While the September 2019 truce was first broken at the end of January, the use of ballistic missiles and the targeting of Sana'a was a new escalation and a dramatic step away from an agreement that had spared both Yemeni and Saudi communities from aerial bombardment for several months.

[26] "Yemen Houthi control strategic areas in Marib governorate," Middle East Monitor, March 12, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200312-yemen-houthi-control-strategic-areas-in-marib-governorate/>

[27] Ahmed al-Haj, "Heavy fighting in central Yemen leaves at least 38 dead," The Associated Press, March 18, 2020, <https://apnews.com/8ced46ab9ca7fa2227ad4b4ac7869ae0>

[28] "While welcoming calls for a ceasefire, Houthis escalate attacks in Marib," Al-Masdar Online, March 28, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/543>

[29] "Saudi Arabia intercepts two missiles fired by Yemen's Houthis," Reuters, March 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-riyadh-rockets-coalition/saudi-arabia-intercepts-two-missiles-fired-by-yemens-houthis-idUSKBN21G00D>

[30] "Saudi-UAE coalition carries out air raids on Yemen's Sanaa," Al Jazeera, March 30, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/houthis-saudi-uae-coalition-carried-air-raids-sanaa-200330113705140.html>

[31] Dion Nissenbaum, "Saudi Arabia Agrees to Partial Cease-Fire in War-Shattered Yemen," The Wall Street Journal, September 27, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-agrees-partial-cessate-fire-in-war-shattered-yemen-11569580029>

[32] "More than 20 raids were carried out in several governorates...[AR]," Al-Masdar, March 30, 2020, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/179814>

Saudi Arabia Offers to Host Houthi-Yemeni Government Peace Talks

On March 30, the Wall Street Journal reported that the Saudi government had invited representatives of the Houthi movement and the internationally recognized government to peace talks in Riyadh. The Saudi offer to host peace talks came after a request from UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, according to Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber. The ambassador also said both the Yemeni government and the Houthis had agreed to deescalate and start confidence-building talks, and that Riyadh was committed to the cease-fire despite the recent escalation in violence. Al-Jaber characterized the airstrikes in Sana'a on March 30 as retaliation for the Houthis' launching of ballistic missiles toward Saudi cities.^[33]

The comments from Al-Jaber provide additional insight into the Saudi government's ongoing attempts to bring about a negotiated end to the war. The ambassador claimed there had been daily telephone calls between officials from the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi movement since their backchannel talks began in September 2019.

Coalition Targets Houthi Attempts to Disrupt Red Sea Shipping

The Saudi-led coalition announced March 8 it had carried out operations against Houthi sites in Hudaydah's Salif district used for storing marine mines and booby-trapped boats deployed to harass shipping in the Red Sea.^[34] The move came four days after its announcement that it had prevented an attack on an oil tanker in the Arabian Sea 90 kilometers south of Nishtun port in Al-Mahra governorate.^[35] While the coalition did not assign blame for the alleged attack, it has regularly accused the Houthi movement of staging attacks against international shipping with remotely controlled boats laden with explosives in the Red Sea off the coast of Hudaydah, as happened later in the month on March 17.^[36] The incident in the Arabian Sea, however, remains an outlier as Al-Mahra governorate is far from any Houthi areas of control.

[33] Warren P. Strobel, "Saudi Arabia Invites Houthi Rebels to Talks in Riyadh," The Wall Street Journal, March 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-invites-houthi-rebels-to-talks-in-riyadh-11585616096>

[34] "A specific targeting operation in Salif for gathering, booby-trapped, remote launching of booby-trapped and remote boats and naval mines belonging to the Iranian-backed Houthi terrorist militias [AR]," Saudi Press Agency, March 8, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=ar&newsid=2044077>

[35] "Saudi-led coalition says it foiled attack on oil tanker off Yemen," Reuters, March 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-tanker/saudi-led-coalition-says-it-foiled-attack-on-oil-tanker-off-yemen-idUSKBN20R206>

[36] "Thwarting a serious Houthi attack launched from Hudaydah and the coalition announces details of what happened [AR]," Marib Press, March 17, 2020, https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?lang=arabic&sid=161813

Military and Security Developments in Brief

- **March 11:** Clashes broke out in the Khiyami region of Taiz governorate between security forces loyal to the Yemeni government and the Emirati-backed Abu al-Abbas Brigades.^[37] Taiz, which was the site of intense fighting between Houthi and coalition forces early in the conflict, has seen a shift in recent years to mainly internal battles among nominal partners in the anti-Houthi coalition. For analysis of the situation in Taiz, see “Taiz at the Intersection of the Yemen War.”^[38]
- **March 20:** Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula broadcast a recording of its new leader, Khaled Batarfi, pledging loyalty to Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. The video was the first appearance by Batarfi since he was announced February 23 as successor to Qassim al-Raymi, who was killed in a US airstrike in January.^[39] Al-Qaeda central responded on March 30, calling on all AQAP members to back Batarfi.^[40]

[37] “UAE-backed forces attack Yemen forces’ camp,” Middle East Monitor, March 12, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200312-uae-backed-forces-attack-yemen-forces-camp/>

[38] Maged al-Madhaji, “Taiz at the Intersection of the Yemen War,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, March 26, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9450>

[39] “In his first appearance since his inauguration as Emir of the AQAP base, Batarfi pledges allegiance to al-Zawahiri and pledges revenge and revenge against America and its allies,” Al-Masdar Online, March 20, 2020, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/179292>

[40] Elisabeth Kendall Twitter account, “AlQaeda leadership finally laments death of #AQAP leader Raymi & throws full support behind Batarfi...,” March 30, 2020, https://twitter.com/Dr_E_Kendall/status/1244725544660488193

FIVE YEARS OF FAILURE: THE DISMAL PERFORMANCE OF THE HADI GOVERNMENT

Commentary by Abdulghani Al-Iryani

The most appropriate way to chronicle the performance of the internationally recognized Yemeni government since the outbreak of war in the country is by listing its failures. The five years since the Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen on behalf of the government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi has seen misstep after misstep. These failings have occurred on multiple fronts – militarily, politically and economically. Owing to these failures, the government – still operating largely in exile in Saudi Arabia – is no closer to returning to power in Sana’a than it was in 2015. Meanwhile, its vital claim of possessing domestic legitimacy is more tenuous than ever as the Houthi movement has entrenched its rule in the north and the government’s ostensible allies challenge its authority in nominally government-held areas.

As a student of Yemeni politics, I am not surprised by this: failure has been a persistent feature of government performance over the past four decades. While this can be partly attributed to institutional weakness, the main cause was the nature of the regime under late former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The ruling elites, composed of Saleh’s inner circle and family, in coalition with other tribal, military and business leaders, often acted outside the law and bypassed government institutions with impunity. The Saleh regime’s informal patronage networks usurped the authority of government institutions and turned institutional oversight into a political instrument used by the ruling elites to enhance their influence and maximize their profits. Lack of accountability paralyzed institutions and instilled a culture of indifference to the extent that major undertakings could not be done without the direct intervention of the president, turning governance into a one-man show. Saleh thrived in that environment and enjoyed micro-managing state affairs where he could pit one elite against another and maintain overall control.

When Hadi assumed the presidency in 2012, his only frame of reference for leadership was Saleh, but the new president lacked his predecessor’s tenacity and skills of political maneuvering. Yet Hadi attempted to copy the centralized one-man rule model, with the result that the key weakness of the Yemeni government, lack of accountability, got even worse. During the transitional period (2012-2014) this state of affairs was further exacerbated by elites affiliated with the Islah party – most notably prominent sheikh and businessman Hameed al-Ahmar – who used the government as an instrument to further their own commercial and political interests.

In the lead up to the Houthi movement’s takeover of Sana’a in 2014, the Yemeni government was paralyzed, and it failed to develop a strategy to deal with the group at a cost acceptable to the nation. The rebel group, after fighting a series of wars in Sa’ada against the central government during the 2000s, began expanding to other governorates during the transitional period. At the same time the Houthis were participants in the country’s National Dialogue Conference before pulling out in rejection of Hadi’s proposed federal division for Yemen, which would have left

the Azal region (which included Sa'ada governorate) deprived of natural resources and port access. The Houthis' capture of Amran in July 2014 left the road to Sana'a undefended, and after the group's arrival in the capital in September, the government was unable to negotiate a durable political agreement with the Houthis – which at the very least would have required adjustment of the regionalization scheme by expanding the Azal region to include Hajjah and possibly parts of Marib and Al-Jawf. As a result, the relationship remained adversarial and eventually devolved into a conflict that engulfed the country. The failure to come to some form of accommodation led the government to unleash a war that it could not control – particularly through the dubious authorization in 2015 to the Saudi-led coalition to wage a destructive military campaign against the Houthis.

Five years on, the Yemeni government's weakness vis-à-vis its coalition partners is especially noteworthy. When the coalition began its intervention by conducting a massive air campaign targeting vital infrastructure, hospitals, food processing plants and sites of cultural heritage, the Hadi government said nothing. Indeed, this silence would prove to be an enduring feature the conflict, with the government seemingly content to allow Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two main partners in the coalition, to pursue their own agenda in the country, even if that agenda went against the government's interests and those of the Yemeni population.

Following the collapse of the Kuwait peace talks in August 2016, Riyadh changed tack and began preventing government forces from advancing, preferring instead to rely on airstrikes and keep the level of fighting at an endurable level. Rather than trying to win the war, Saudi Arabia began using the Yemen conflict to agitate against Iran while waiting for the opportunity to execute its own strategic plans. For decades the Kingdom has harbored ambitions to control a land corridor to the Arabian Sea through either Hadramawt and/or Al-Mahra governorate so oil shipments could bypass the Strait of Hormuz choke point. While the Yemeni constitution does not give the president authority to grant territorial concessions, the deployment of Saudi forces in Al-Mahra since 2017 has given Riyadh de facto control over the governorate. For its part, the UAE has since the beginning of the conflict built and backed military units that do not recognize the authority of the Yemeni government. In both cases, the government has failed to prevent encroachments on Yemeni sovereignty by its allies.

Domestically, the government dramatically failed in building a unified political front against the Houthi movement, resulting in the fracture of government-held territory into rival spheres of influence. In the early stages of the war, the Yemeni government alienated the General People's Congress (GPC) and turned away military and political defectors from Sana'a. It acquiesced to the Islah party's fierce attempt at monopolizing power in Marib and Taiz. The UAE-supported faction of the GPC, led by Saleh's son Ahmed, having formed a significant military force on the Red Sea Coast led by Ahmed's cousin Tariq, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Yemeni government. Meanwhile, President Hadi spurred the creation of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which would become the government's chief rival in the south, through a combination of state neglect and personally targeting of southern leaders. The government's refusal to recognize the STC's legitimate right to represent its popular base in Al-Dhalea and Lahj eventually led it to insist on monopolizing representation for all of southern Yemen to the exclusion of Bedouin pro-Hadi

factions in Abyan and Shabwa. This conflict broke out into open violence in August 2019 and despite Saudi's efforts to patch over the differences, tensions between the parties remain simmering under the surface. In the meantime, Hadramawt quietly and astutely went about its business to lay the foundation of an autonomous Hadrami state, either within a federal Yemen or as an independent entity.

Perhaps the Yemeni government's biggest failure has been in terms of governance, with its decision to weaponize the economy during the war having devastating consequences for the country as a whole. The reckless decision in September 2016 to transfer the headquarters of the Central Bank of Yemen from Sana'a to Aden is a case in point. As part of the move, the government pledged to pay salaries for all government employees (a promise it has not kept) despite the fact that most state revenues remained under Houthi control. Freed from the responsibility for paying public servants, the Houthi movement has been able to use these revenues to finance the war and enrich themselves on the side. The decision to fracture one of Yemen's most vital institutions, which was still functioning across frontlines at the time, without the necessary planning and capacity to maintain its primary function – ensuring a coherent monetary policy – had immense negative repercussions on the economy and Yemenis as a whole.

The government did its utmost to weaken other Yemeni state institutions, thereby decreasing the resilience of the Yemeni state. In effect, because many of these bodies were based in Houthi-held Sana'a, the government was willing to kill them in order to "save" them from the Houthis. Its poor attempts at cloning institutions in Aden also failed to consider the fact that Aden was under the control of Hadi's opponents in the STC. Even if that were not the case, most government ministries comprise a minister, a briefcase and a handful of assistants. This is reflected in the disheartening level of service delivery to communities under government control. Consequently, a government that derives its legitimacy from UN Security Council resolutions has lost it in the eyes of most Yemenis and is now beholden to its coalition backers.

Government failures on nearly every front have been a boon to the Houthis. Youthful, disciplined and ideological, the group during the war has established full control over the state institutions in Sana'a. It placed loyalists in key positions and activated the sectors that it cares about most: revenue collection, police control, local governance structures and mass mobilization instruments.

All the while, various factions within the government appear content with its poor performance as long as they are profiting off the war. One notable example of graft during the conflict is the practice of inflating the government payroll with hundreds of thousands of 'ghost' soldiers and civil servants, allowing officials to pocket the salaries. Competition over non-existent jobs and other opportunities for profiteering among segments of the government appears to outweigh any focus on effective governance or even good war making.

When the government does act, its action is often driven by the divisions that have crippled it from the start. The recent resignations of the civil service and transport ministers are a case in point. No one in the government quit in protest after coalition aircraft bombed government forces in Nehm, Al-Jawf, Taiz, Shabwa or Abyan. But when pressure was brought upon Hadi to reconcile with the STC, multiple ministers resigned.

While the Yemeni government continues to lose its relevance among the majority of the country's population, it will nevertheless remain the legitimate representative of the people of Yemen in the eyes of the international community. Therefore, it will also remain the main negotiator across the table from the Houthi movement in reaching a final settlement of the conflict. However, for such negotiations to be successful, the government will have to be restructured to include representation from all Yemeni parties currently fighting under the umbrella of the anti-Houthi coalition. Failure to do so will unnecessarily prolong the conflict and cost more lives.

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Political Developments

Riyadh Agreement Hanging by a Thread After Tit-for-Tat Escalations

Implementation of the Riyadh Agreement remained frozen in March despite Saudi Arabia's call for the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) to adhere to the deal amid rising tension.^[41] The plea by Riyadh came a day after several STC leaders were blocked from boarding a flight in Amman, Jordan, to return to Aden. Among those stopped on March 12 were Aden's security chief Shalal Ali Shayea, Nasser Al-Khabji, head of the STC negotiating team and signatory of the Riyadh Agreement, and Abdulrahman Sheikh, a Salafi among the STC leadership whose troops played a key role in the August 2019 fighting that saw government forces pushed from the city.^[42] The STC demanded an explanation from the Saudi-led coalition, and on March 13 STC-aligned forces rejected an order by the Saudi-led coalition commander to change security staff at Aden airport and refused to hand over the airport to a Saudi-trained local force (the Riyadh Agreement stipulates that local forces under the command of the Ministry of Interior will protect all state institutions in Aden).^[43]

On March 17, STC-aligned Security Belt forces blocked a government delegation from entering the Presidential Palace in Aden to discuss coronavirus preparations, local media reported. An STC official denied the move, however, and said all government ministers were in Riyadh, but their secretaries in the palace were able to reach

[41] "Saudi Arabia calls on Yemen government, Stc to implement Riyadh Agreement," Middle East Monitor, March 13, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200313-saudi-arabia-calls-on-yemen-government-stc-to-implement-riyadh-agreement/>

[42] "Saudi coalition barred STC leaders from Aden as part of informal deal to revive Riyadh Agreement," Al-Masdar Online, March 13, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/464>

[43] "Aden ... violent confrontations between UAE-backed forces and others backed by Saudi Arabia [AR]," Anadolu Agency, March 20, 2020, www.aa.com.tr/ar/-تدعمها-وأخرى-مدعومة-إماراتيا-والعربية-عدن-مواجهات-عنفية-بين-قوات-مدعومة-إماراتيا-وأخرى-تدعمها-1772967

their offices freely.^[44] STC forces have increased their presence in Aden for security reasons, he added. On March 26, Security Belt forces seized nine ambulances from a shipment of medical equipment sent by the World Health Organization at Aden port. An official from the health ministry said gunmen had boarded the boat and taken the ambulances while government officials were also on board to receive the medical supplies, which included 81 ambulances for Aden and neighboring governorates.^[45]

Such tit-for-tat escalations spilled out into open violence on March 20 as rival forces clashed in the city's Crater district.^[46] Meanwhile, in neighboring Abyan governorate, the convoy of the commander of the pro-government Fourth Presidential Protection Brigade was ambushed on March 23 by unknown forces in Al-Mauhafid district, resulting in the death of one soldier.^[47]

Cabinet Squabbles Lead to Resignation of Two Ministers

Two Yemeni government ministers – Transportation Minister Saleh al-Jabwani and Civil Service Minister Nabil al-Faqih – submitted their resignations to President Hadi on March 28. Al-Jabwani's resignation followed a decision by Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed to suspend him for “a serious breach in the performance of his duties.” Al-Faqih cited a “total paralysis of the government, and government preoccupation with marginal matters” among his reasons for resigning.^[48]

Houthi Leader Offers Saudi Prisoner Exchange for Palestinians Detained by Riyadh

Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi, during a televised speech on March 26 marking the fifth anniversary of the Saudi-led coalition's entry in to the Yemen war, offered to free five Saudi captives – including a pilot whose plane was shot down over Al-Jawf in February – in exchange for the release of Palestinians detained in Saudi Arabia.^[49] The Palestinians are supporters of Hamas, and the Gaza-based group thanked the Houthis for their solidarity with the Palestinian people. The arrest of dozens of Hamas supporters and members in the kingdom since 2019 has been shrouded in secrecy, and secret trials have increased in frequency this year.^[50]

[44] “Military tension between gov't, separatist forces continues to escalate in Yemen's Aden,” Xinhua Net, March 15, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/15/c_138880681.htm

[45] “Ambulances arrive in Aden from World Health Organization, Ministry of Health complains about seizure of nine ambulances [AR],” Aden Al-Gad, March 29, 2020, <http://adengad.net/news/453965/>

[46] “Aden ... violent confrontations between UAE-backed forces and others backed by Saudi Arabia [AR],” Anadolu Agency, March 20, 2020, www.aa.com.tr/ar/-تدعمها-وأخرى-إماراتيا-ومدعومة-قوات-عنفية-بين-قوات-مدعومة-إماراتيا-وأخرى-تدعمها-السعودية/1772967

[47] “Commander of the Fourth Presidential Protection Brigades survives an armed ambush and the killing of his escort [AR],” Aden al-Ghad, March 24, 2020, <http://adengad.net/news/452755/>

[48] “Two ministers resign in protest of the prime minister's decision to suspend their work,” Al-Masdar Online, March 29, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/549>

[49] “Yemen rebel leader is ready to free Saudi captives for Hamas,” The Associated Press, March 27, 2020, <https://apnews.com/07ec017dc123f81e4d69b7f34f3013d7>

[50] “Militant Hamas criticizes Saudi trials of members, backers,” The Associated Press, March 10, 2020, <https://apnews.com/7703c77a70ab031caa496c87a916643e>

During his speech, Abdelmalek al-Houthi said “the regimes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have generally presented as worse than Israel.” By making the offer, the Houthi movement appears to be using the Palestinian cause in an attempt to embarrass Saudi Arabia in the Arab world. This tactic has been regularly employed by Iran, which depicts itself as the champion of the Palestinian cause and accuses its Saudi rivals of siding with Israel and the United States.

Tehran, along with its backing for the Houthi movement and Shia militias in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, also provides support to some Palestinian factions, including Hamas. However, Hamas-Iran relations at times have suffered due to disagreements over Iranian actions abroad, specifically related to Syria and Yemen. Hamas, for example, broke with Iran by not supporting Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria in 2011 and by siding with the Yemeni government in 2015. However, relations between Hamas and Iran have weathered these foreign policy disagreements, and the parties have mended ties in recent years.^[51]

35 Parliamentarians Sentenced to Death in Absentia by Houthi-run Court

A Sana’a court controlled by the armed Houthi movement sentenced 35 Yemeni lawmakers to death in absentia on March 3, accusing them of cooperating with the Saudi-led military coalition, then seizing their property and evicting their families. The moves against Parliament Speaker Sultan al-Barakani, Deputy Speaker Abdulaziz Jubari and 33 other pro-government lawmakers came after they participated in an April 2019 parliamentary session in Sayoun that was called by the Saudi and internationally recognized Yemeni president, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi (see ‘Game of Parliaments — The Yemen Review, April 2019’).^[52]

The United Nations’ human rights agency and Hadi’s government quickly condemned the sentences.^[53] All of the lawmakers, who were charged in September 2019, were outside Houthi-controlled territory when the sentences came down, but their properties were confiscated and their families threatened, according to a statement from Liz Throssell, spokesperson for the Geneva-based UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).^[54] Throssell, who described the trial as politically motivated and failing to comply with international norms, said the OHCHR received reports that lawmakers’ homes were ransacked and relatives told to vacate them within 24 hours. The agency called for the sentences to be nullified and for an end to the harassment of the lawmakers’ relatives.

[51] Adnan Abu Amer, “What is behind the Hamas-Iran rapprochement?” July 26, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/hamas-iran-rapprochement-180725150509789.html>

[52] “The Yemen Review, April 2019 – Hadi Government Holds Parliamentary Session Despite Falling Short of Quorum,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, May 7, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7357#Hadi-Government>

[53] “Embassy of Republic of Yemen Condemns Houthis for Sentencing 35 Yemen Parliamentarians to Death to Fund Their Brutal War,” Embassy of the Republic of Yemen, Washington, DC, March 4, 2020, <https://www.yemenembassy.org/news/030420/>

[54] Liz Throssell, “Yemen: Due Process,” UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva, March 6, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25670&LangID=E>

WHY ECONOMIC FACTORS REMAIN AT THE HEART OF THE YEMEN CONFLICT

Commentary by Anthony Biswell

High-level policymakers working on Yemen often resemble firefighters: moving from crisis to crisis, rarely affording themselves time to take stock of the bigger picture. Five years on from the launch of Operation Decisive Storm stakeholders remain transfixed by short-term political and military developments in Yemen, such as the recent Houthi advances in Al-Jawf governorate or the stagnant political process. The catastrophic impact that the prolonged violence has had on Yemeni society is clear, in terms of the loss of life, displacement and mental turmoil; this in addition to the destruction of property and vital infrastructure, chief among which include a healthcare system that is now effectively paralyzed. While the focus on immediate crises is understandable, this approach can, however, distract from the disturbing long-term trends that in many cases predate the war. The most important of these overlooked issues, given its profound impact on the daily lives of Yemenis, is the economy.

The slow-motion atrophy of Yemen's economy has been occurring for years and has deepened the impoverishment of the country, with some 24 million Yemenis now requiring some form of humanitarian assistance. Despite persistent efforts by various Yemenis in the public and private sectors to make economic issues more of a priority, there remains little concerted effort to address the principal factors behind the country's general economic collapse, and a lack of awareness regarding the financial interests that various parties to the conflict have in continuing the war. There is also a lack of acknowledgment of the nature and extent of the Yemeni economy's fragility. Spoiler alert: the situation is pretty bleak and likely to get worse, no matter how resilient Yemeni society and people's social support networks are in the face of the crisis.

Yemen's economic decline continues to shape the extreme humanitarian suffering felt nationwide. This is manifested in reduced purchasing power tied to the decline in value of the Yemeni rial, rising unemployment and poverty levels, the major collapse in the public service delivery system and infrequent public sector employee salary payments, among other symptoms. Fleeting international attention on Yemen's economic decline often focuses on the public sector and tends to overlook the huge challenges that Yemen's private sector has also faced, even though the latter provides more jobs to Yemenis. While even basic data collection to quantify trends with statistics is scant, the indicators that do exist still fail to give the full perspective on the humanitarian cost.

A political settlement is urgently needed. The problem though is that any agreement will remain elusive as long as battles over access and control of key economic facilities and sources of revenue continue to drive the conflict. Actors dotted all over the country are personally and collectively profiting from the conflict, whether from extracting rents from fuel imports, liquified petroleum gas (LPG), humanitarian aid, taxation or

the plentiful options of foreign patronage on offer. There are a lot of potential spoilers who have a vested interest in a continuation of the status quo.

And no matter what the main warring parties may present publicly – trading accusations over who is to blame for Yemen’s humanitarian crisis – underlying economic objectives ultimately override concerns they might have over the suffering of the Yemeni people. Diplomatic efforts to bring about change through a short-term humanitarian solution (i.e. the Stockholm Agreement) that view the humanitarian angle as a springboard to a more comprehensive political breakthrough have proven to be misguided at best, and have added another layer of complexity when it comes to trying to mediate between the main warring parties. This approach has also left UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations and humanitarian actors vulnerable to being targeted by warring parties in pursuit of broader political and economic objectives.

More serious discussions need to be held in regard to the economy, and fast. If for nothing else, these talks should heed the warning signs and prepare for the worst case scenario – the total collapse of the Yemen economy – with the goal of protecting the public at large and the most vulnerable members of society in particular.

Looking ahead, the scope of international policy discussions related to the Yemen economy must go much deeper than the usual topics of conversation – which are often limited to the current status of imports, commodity prices and public sector salary payments, or briefly highlighting the daunting task of reconstruction that awaits, rather than exploring potential avenues for development and investment in Yemen’s human capital that could begin in earnest. A good place to start when broadening discussions on the Yemeni economy would be examining different ways to balance pressing economic concerns versus longer-term planning on crucial matters such as the eventual need for economic diversification to reduce the reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and external financial aid.

Although a number of crude oil production blocks have come back online and crude oil exports have increased in recent years, the fact remains that economic dependency on hydrocarbons offers short-term relief as opposed to long-term stability. Yemen’s crude oil production notably peaked in 2001 and the country became a net fuel importer in 2013. Liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports have yet to resume and are unlikely to do so in the absence of an extended period of relative security from the point of production in Marib to the point of export at Shabwa’s Balhaf terminal, where despite the government’s protestations, a small contingent of Emirati soldiers remain. Government revenues from crude oil exports have dropped in accordance with the decline in global oil prices in recent years. These returns look set to take a significant hit this year following Saudi Arabia’s decision earlier this month to slash prices and boost production, which resulted in the biggest drop in Brent crude since 1991 during the first Gulf War.

Discussions and planning on Yemen must acknowledge realities on the ground, including the political, regional and economic fragmentation of the country. The increased levels of autonomy achieved in certain governorates, such as Marib, Hadramawt and Al-Mahra, will need to be considered – not only because of their relative economic importance to the country but also as part of a broader exploration of how best to reconfigure the economic relationship between the central and local

government under a new form of governance. Such discussions must broach the complex issue of a fairer distribution of revenue from the center to the periphery – including to governorates that generate much less revenue than others due to the absence of hydrocarbon production and/or export facilities, land or sea ports, and industry.

Yemen's economy was teetering years prior to the escalation and regionalization of the conflict in March 2015 due to elite capture of resources, weak state legitimacy and capacity, structural economic imbalances, social inequalities and political exclusion. Five years on, despite a patchwork of bailouts and internal measures to stay afloat, the Yemen economy is in a worse state than ever before. Contributing factors include: the reduced hydrocarbon export capacity and the depletion of country foreign currency reserves; a growing trade deficit and deteriorated investment climate; the fragmentation of the Central Bank of Yemen and the unraveling of Yemen's formal banking system; and escalating economic warfare between the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthi movement, which has manifested itself in the form of conflicting monetary, fiscal and economic policies as well as competing efforts to regulate and monetize essential imports, trade and other commercial activities. The end result of the economic warfare has been the creation of parallel and competing economic institutions and the narrowing of the space in which banks, businesses, money exchangers and ordinary citizens can operate and carry out essential, everyday transactions free of political interference. The added costs of doing business and transferring money in Yemen are ultimately passed on to the consumer who is also faced with cyclical fuel shortages, price hikes on essential goods, electricity power outages and poor public service delivery.

Yemen's economy is only being held together by money from abroad. The primary source of foreign currency during the conflict comes from remittances sent home by Yemeni workers. The second biggest source is humanitarian aid that has been either channeled through the UN humanitarian response plan or delivered independently. One of the biggest donors is Saudi Arabia. While critics will rightly argue that Riyadh has a moral obligation to provide continued financial support to Yemen given its active role in a conflict that has pushed Yemen's economy closer to the brink, it is also a fact that without Saudi financial support the Yemen economy may have already collapsed.

All three sources of external financial aid are under threat and will probably be reduced in 2020. This month Saudi Arabia told state agencies to plan for wide budget cuts in reaction to the sharp drop in oil prices as a result of its decision to increase production while the United States Agency for International Development announced that it would be suspending activities in northern Yemen in reaction to Houthi restrictions. In addition, the ominous economic repercussions of COVID-19 has resulted in a massive reduction in economic activity worldwide and forced countries to become more inward looking. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, measures to combat the spread of the virus have led to more Yemeni workers staying home, unable to make money that a lot of people back in Yemen are dependent on.

In the short term, neither the government nor the Houthis are likely to countenance abandoning the economic warfare that both are engaged in, and the stark reality is that neither is in a position to avert Yemen's economic decline on their own. Still,

deescalation remains essential. Moving forward, Yemen certainly cannot afford to hang all its hopes of economic recovery on hydrocarbon revenues or the potentially misplaced assumption that Saudi Arabia will continue to bail it out in perpetuity. International policymakers, for their part, need to read the macroeconomic warning signs that have been present for years and take note of the origins of what was and arguably still is a conflict driven by local dynamics – at the heart of which is a battle over access and control over different sources of revenue.

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Healthcare workers wear personal protective equipment at a facility being readied for COVID-19 patients at Zayed Hospital in Sana'a on March 15, 2020 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

YEMEN, FIVE YEARS ON AND NOW A STRANGER TO MY COUNTRY

Commentary by Rim Mugahed

My work developing hotel profiles for online bookings brings me in direct contact with hotel owners and managers. The work is good, not boring, and I am friendly with our partners. Still, each time a hotel asks to charge for internet access in its rooms, I feel a rage stirred by the reminder of hotels where I stayed in Casablanca when war in Yemen erupted. I received the news about Yemen's war on the morning of March 26, 2015, while walking out of the elevator toward the hotel reception, where internet service was free. In another hotel lobby that day, I received news that my cousin had been found dead in his room in Aden, which was bracing for Houthi forces that were approaching the city. Because of this, his body had not been discovered for days.

*“I left on that day, which I remember well
As if it was just an hour ago (Saad), no more”*

— Abdullah al-Baradouni, “Two Strangers, and They Were the Country”

I knew at the time a real war was brewing, but did not expect at all how the situation unfolded. On March 21, I left Yemen with my cousin and friend; I ate a piece of my birthday cake in the airport. We were smiling timidly because Sana'a's land and sky were still stained with the blood of the victims of suicide bombings just the day before at Al-Badr and Al-Hashoosh mosques, which claimed 140 lives and wounded hundreds more, and Aden was preparing for the rebel attack. It was supposed to be a short trip that would last for four days. Like millions of others, I did not expect the turn of events that has kept me abroad ever since. And now, five years on, I ask myself: Would you have traveled if you had known the war would erupt? Or would you have stayed to share the same fate as those you love and to attend all the funerals that followed? Would you have taken more clothes, photo albums and perhaps something that reminds you of your mother? Would you have sought refuge abroad if you had known your soul would remain plagued by guilt, nostalgia and shame on the fifth anniversary, which still feels like the first day of war?

At this time every year, I remember with a laugh how I confidently tried to convince the man who rented us an apartment in Casablanca that the war in Yemen would last only a few days, so there was no need to pay an entire month's rent. He refused because Ahmed al-Asiri, then-spokesman for the Saudi-led Coalition, hadn't fooled him like he fooled us. We thus paid an entire month's rent, and became officially known as those “stuck.” Our landlord counted the spoons and knives and listed the contents of the house in a little notebook. Before he left, he said he would come by later to check on the house and affirm that we were honest. We passed a month of the earlier days and nights of the war in that dirty apartment, watching on television news of the April 20 coalition airstrike that set off a huge explosion near an air base in the Faj Attan area of Sana'a, killing at least 25 people. We were at this same house when Moroccan security forces knocked on our door and ordered us to dress and accompany them to an unknown

destination and in a cab for which we paid the fare. We do not know to this day why they interrogated us, why they took the names of our family members and their dates of birth, why they inquired about their political affiliations, why they took our Facebook and email accounts or why they needed our mugshots.

War is war. It's the unarranged funerals and the hope of rescuers to find someone alive under the rubble. It's the interruption of communication and loss of words. It's that guilt and indignation. It's the despair that uproots life from every soul, the tears ready to be shed when a new tragedy strikes – and aren't they many! It sucks the life out of you with the deep, never-ending anxieties and the tears that only war can bring about.

These days, I try to look at the war from an objective perspective that's not based on my personal experience. After five years of war, I tell myself it is time to believe that Yemen is just like any other country, it can engage in a civil war and others may launch a war against it. I would like to convince myself that, like others throughout human history, I have been displaced by war, but unlike millions of people, the war has not killed me or starved me. I must, therefore, believe that I am luckier. I, like many others who forcibly left their loved ones behind, must accept the idea that after years of war, grief and loss, my loved ones are no longer the same as when I last saw them – their faces are now streaked by wrinkles, their souls have withered. And like the case with many in exile, I must accept that despite this painful longing to see my loved ones, it will not be easy for me to return home to embrace them and kiss them. I must accept that for some of them, death came faster than me, and it's too late to show them my love and affection. After these five years of war, I want to be able to talk about my experience without my words suffocating me and bringing tears to my eyes – tears I realize are tears of self-pity.

After five years of war, I now live in a safe country. I work from home where the internet never disconnects. I ask myself: how come, no matter where I go and no matter how my life changes for the best, war is branded on my heart and soul? Is it because I did not properly say "goodbye" to my family before leaving quietly at night so I wouldn't wake them up? Sometimes I think the answer is what a Cuban girl once told me in the Czech language class when our teacher asked us why we chose the Czech Republic to seek refuge. Despite the lighthearted atmosphere, I broke down in tears when it was my turn to speak because I revisit this truth with the exact same pain every time. The Cuban girl patted me on the shoulder and said confidently: nostalgia.

On this fifth anniversary, and as all humanity braces for a horrendous test, I receive funny messages that coronavirus does not scare Yemenis because death is nothing new to us. We are inevitably survivors. We survived malaria, typhoid, dengue fever, cholera and swine flu. We survived stray bullets fired at weddings, we survived battles and abductions in cities. We survived compulsory recruitment and our calamitous roads. We survived medical errors and the lack of available beds at intensive care units. We survived dying from anguish, and most importantly, we survived war! We survived the airstrikes, which did not spare our museums and history, the bullets of the snipers who are entertained by targeting children in alleys, the siege, the treachery of brothers from the same blood and land, the mercenaries, the ready-made accusations, the polarization, the rumors and a biased press. After five years of struggle, it would be a shame if we "survivors" were to die of the novel coronavirus!

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Humanitarian and Human Rights Developments

US Cuts Aid to Yemen

Washington partially suspended its humanitarian aid to Yemen, effective March 28, a move planned since February in response to Houthi interference in aid distribution.^[55] USAID officials told The New York Times that some critical activities in Yemen would continue to be funded, but humanitarian officials said basic healthcare programs would not, including efforts to provide hand soap and medicine as well as to staff clinics as Yemen tries to prepare for COVID-19. The United States was among the biggest donors to the humanitarian response in Yemen, providing \$700 million in 2019.

US officials told The Washington Post the move was intended to prompt Houthi authorities to lift obstacles to aid operations in Houthi-controlled areas.^[56] Houthi authorities have so far not made enough progress in ending “unacceptable interference,” a USAID spokesperson said. At least \$73 million in aid to NGOs in Houthi-controlled areas would be suspended, although some aid to the UN would continue, the spokesperson said. Oxfam America had called for a delay in the suspension in light of the coronavirus pandemic. Some US lawmakers also urged the Trump administration to pause the reduction in aid.

UN: 40,000 Newly Displaced by Fighting in Al-Jawf, Marib

Escalating fighting since mid-January in Sana’a, Al-Jawf and Marib governorates has displaced some 40,000 people over two months, according to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).^[57] More than 12,000 people were displaced in a single day on March 1 as Houthi forces captured Al-Hazm, the capital of Al-Jawf governorate, the UNFPA reported. Most of them fled to Marib city and its outskirts, where they were staying in public buildings, informal settlements and with the local community, while some 5,000 people were sheltering in Nehm and Bani Hushaysh districts in Sana’a governorate. UNFPA warned the actual number of people displaced by the fighting could be higher, as those who took shelter with host families may not have been counted in estimates. Others fled to the desert, out of reach of humanitarian

[55] Michael LaForgia, “US cuts health care aid to Yemen despite worries about coronavirus,” The New York Times, March 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/27/world/middleeast/yemen-health-care-aid-coronavirus.html>; Maggie Michael, “US to stop aid in Yemen’s Houthi areas if rebels don’t budge,” The Associated Press, February 26, 2020, <https://apnews.com/ceb0f8389621044cb636437205e636e3>

[56] Missy Ryan, “As coronavirus looms, US proceeding with major reduction of aid to Yemen,” The Washington Post, March 27, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/as-coronavirus-looms-us-proceeds-with-dramatic-reduction-of-aid-to-yemen/2020/03/26/61c15a00-6f77-11ea-96a0-df4c5d9284af_story.html?utm_campaign=20200327&utm_medium=email&utm_source=sailthru

[57] “Flash update: Escalation and response in Marib,” UN Population Fund, March 22, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Flash%20Update%20-%20Escalation%20and%20Response%20in%20Marib%20Al%20Jawf%20and%20Sana%27a%20Governorates%20-%20Issue%204%20-%2022%20March%202020-.pdf>

assistance, ACAPS reported, adding that most of those displaced had already been displaced at least once.^[58] (For more on the fighting, see ‘Government Troops on the Ropes as Houthis take Al-Jawf, Push into Marib’)

Marib city and the surrounding district was already hosting more than 750,000 displaced people before the recent influx.^[59] Deputy governor of Marib, Abdo Rabbu Moftah, said on March 1 that the local authority had identified new sites to house people fleeing the fighting, and had formed an emergency center to coordinate relief efforts.^[60] In a joint statement, Yemeni civil society organizations criticized the humanitarian response on the national and local levels as too slow and failing to meet the needs of displaced people.^[61]

Emirates Red Crescent Employees Abducted and Killed Execution-Style in Aden

Two Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) employees were kidnapped by gunmen March 18 in Al-Dareen district of Aden, and then shot dead, their bodies found a short time later northwest of the city. Ahmed Fouad al-Yousifi, coordinator of ERC relief operations, and a colleague, Mohammed Tariq, were working in the Aden area when they were killed, according to the ERC.^[62] Crime scene photographs showed the men, both Yemenis, had been shot in the head. There were no claims of responsibility.

The United Arab Emirates has been Saudi Arabia’s key partner in the military coalition fighting the Houthis, and it supports various Yemeni forces on the ground even though it has scaled down its direct military role in the past year. However, each state player has its own affiliated Yemeni forces, which lately have been engaged in provocative violent and non-violent exchanges (see ‘Riyadh Agreement Hanging by a Thread After Tit-for-Tat Escalations’). Islamic militant groups also have been active in Aden.

Beyond its military role, the UAE is a major humanitarian aid donor to Yemen, funding projects through the Emirates Red Crescent. It funds infrastructure, water and food- and shelter-related projects. Al-Yousifi was responsible for supervising many of these projects, and often visited sites in the Aden area. From April 2015 through February 2020, the UAE has provided humanitarian aid valued at US\$6 billion, according to ERC figures cited by the Emirates’ official WAM news agency.^[63]

[58] “Escalation of conflict in Al-Jawf and Marib governorates,” ACAPS, March 24, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200324_acaps_yah_briefing_note_escalation_of_conflict_in_marib_yemen.pdf

[59] “Escalation of conflict in Al-Jawf and Marib governorates,” ACAPS, March 24, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200324_acaps_yah_briefing_note_escalation_of_conflict_in_marib_yemen.pdf

[60] “Authorities in the Yemeni governorate of Marib discuss with international organizations mechanisms for rapid interventions to house and assist the displaced [AR],” Saudi Press Agency, March 1, 2020, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?lang=ru&newsid=2041379>

[61] “Local NGOs: Slow relief for newly displaced Yemenis in Marib and Al-Jawf,” Al-Masdar Online, March 6, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/431>

[62] Emirates Red Crescent, Twitter post, “The UAE Red Crescent Society expresses its condemnation...[AR]”, March 20, 2020, <https://twitter.com/emiratesrc/status/1241029090968317954>

[63] “AED22bn in assistance provided by UAE to Yemen from April 2015 through 2020,” WAM, February 9, 2020, <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302822587>

Child Casualties of War Increasing; Signs of Mental Health Crisis Among Children

Civilian casualties in Yemen fell by one-third in 2019, but children accounted for one in four civilian deaths, up from one in five in 2018, the Security Council heard on March 12.^[64] More than half of all civilian casualties occurred in family homes in 2019, up from 40 percent in 2018, Acting Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Rajesh Rajasingham said, noting that 90 percent of these incidents led to psychosocial trauma.

Separately, a survey released in March by Save the Children found that sadness, depression, fear and grief were prevalent among Yemeni children after five years of war.^[65] Interviews with more than 1,250 children, parents and caregivers about children's mental well-being indicated that a generation of Yemeni children is facing a mental health crisis. More than half the children surveyed said they felt sad and depressed, while about one in five reported feeling constant grief and unrelenting fear. More than a third of children interviewed felt unable to talk to anyone when they felt sad. Caregivers reported increases in nightmares and bedwetting, while some children reported symptoms of anxiety such as stomach pains and sweaty palms.

More than 10 million Yemeni children are food insecure, including 2.1 million who are acutely malnourished, and two million children are displaced. Only two child psychiatrists are available in the whole of Yemen, Save the Children noted.^[66]

Houthi to Release Baha'i Prisoners

Houthi authorities will release Baha'i prisoners and pardon a Baha'i leader sentenced to death, president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat said in a televised speech on March 25.^[67]

The decision was announced three days after a Houthi-run appeals court had upheld the death sentence issued in 2018 to Hamed Bin Haydara, who has been imprisoned since 2013. Five other members of the Baha'i minority are also set to be released.

The Baha'i International Community, which represents the religious minority, called on Houthi authorities to drop the charges against more than 20 members of the Baha'i community, who are being tried in absentia for apostasy and espionage, and to return property and assets seized by Houthi authorities.

[64] 8745th meeting – UN Security Council, March 12, 2020, New York, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_PV.8745.pdf

[65] Yousra Semmache, Clare Mason & Dan Skallman, "Five years of fear and loss: The devastating impact of war on the mental health of Yemen's children," Save the Children, March 24, 2020, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/five-years-fear-and-loss-devastating-impact-war-mental-health-yemens-children>

[66] "Five years of war in Yemen: More than half of children feel sad and depressed," Save the Children, March 24, 2020, <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/five-years-war-yemen-more-half-children-feel-sad-and-depressed>

[67] "Houthi authorities order the release of all Baha'i prisoners," Baha'i International Community, March 25, 2020, <https://www.bic.org/news/houthi-authorities-order-release-all-bahai-prisoners-yemen>

Houthi forces have arbitrarily detained journalists, activists and academics in areas under their control, with dozens of them sentenced to death by Houthi-run courts. In its report released earlier this year, a UN-appointed panel of experts said it was investigating 53 cases involving detention-related human rights violations, including torture and a lack of due process.^[68]

Humanitarian and Human Rights in Brief:

- **March 8:** The International Organization for Migration opened the first health center in Al-Jufainah camp in Marib, featuring examination rooms, a small laboratory, a pharmacy and in-patient beds.^[69] Al-Jufainah is the largest displacement camp in Yemen, housing 5,000 families. The health center is expected to see 100 patients daily.
- **March 13:** Missiles damaged two buildings at a Taiz city hospital, the second attack on Al-Thawra General Hospital in less than 10 days, according to Lise Grande, the UN humanitarian coordinator in Yemen. There was no word on casualties or who was responsible for the strikes.^[70]
- **March 15:** A motorbike struck a landmine, killing a 35-year-old man and two teenage boys near Bani Fayed village in the Medi district of Hajjah governorate.^[71] Separately, a 60-year-old Medi area farmer died the same day when a mine exploded while he was feeding his livestock.^[72] Houthi forces frequently use landmines to slow government-allied troops, resulting in civilian as well as military casualties. A Saudi-run program to clear mines said it had removed 1,781 of them during the last week of March.^[73]
- **March 25:** At least three people died after torrential rain caused floods in Aden city, damaging houses and roads, local media reported.^[74]

[68] Dakshinie Ruwanthika Gunaratne, Ahmed Himmiche, Henry Thompson, Marie-Louise Tougas, Wolf-Christian Paes, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen," UN Security Council, New York, January 27, 2020, p. 42, <https://undocs.org/s/2020/70>

[69] "First health centre opens in Yemen's largest displacement camp," March 10, 2020, International Organization for Migration, <https://www.iom.int/news/first-health-centre-opens-yemens-largest-displacement-camp>

[70] "Second attack on Al Thawra Hospital in 10 days threatens health services for hundreds of thousands of people in Taizz City," UN Office of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, March 18, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HC%20statement-18%20March%202020-final.pdf>

[71] "Hajjah: 4 civilians were killed and another was wounded by a mine explosion planted by the Houthi militia in Medi," Khabar Agency, March 15, 2020, <https://khabaragency.net/news123852.html>

[72] Ibid.

[73] "Masam extracted 156,000 mines laid by the Houthis in Yemen, including 1,781 this week," Al-Masdar, March 30, 2020, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/179795>

[74] "Aden's death toll rises in ongoing floods," Al-Masdar Online, March 27, 2020, <https://al-masdaronline.net/local/533>

International Developments

FIVE YEARS OF THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL TOEING THE SAUDI LINE

Commentary by Waleed Alhariri and Nickolas Ask

When the United Nations Security Council took a position on the Yemen war five years ago, it quite naturally supported the interests of some of its member states over the armed Houthi movement which had, after all, swept into Sana'a, chased out the internationally recognized government and marched on Aden. In early 2015, Saudi Arabia was confident it could quickly restore order, having – along with the United Arab Emirates – assembled an Arab military coalition to intervene and secured backing from the United States and Britain. The UN Security Council (UNSC) merely had to provide political and moral cover, which it did in April 2015 in the form of a strongly worded resolution that assumed all would go according to the Saudi plan.

In Resolution 2216, the council demanded the Houthis surrender all territory seized, including Sana'a, fully disarm and allow President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government to resume its responsibilities.^{[75][76]} In essence, it insisted on surrender. That failed, but the same reasons that allowed the UNSC to make clear, forceful demands in 2015 have kept it from trying anything new in the five years since: The most powerful nations on the council hold common political, economic and security interests with Saudi Arabia, giving the state leading one warring side in the conflict a huge say in deciding when and how international diplomatic efforts are advanced to resolve it.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia had the full support of its key allies and arms suppliers, the US, the UK and France – three permanent, veto-wielding UNSC members. Even Russia, whose ability to veto often has historically acted as a counterbalance to US dominance in the council, had enough geostrategic interests that benefited from building on and improving its relations with the kingdom to merely abstain. Beyond Saudi Arabia's influence with those permanent members, its Security Council clout has been bolstered throughout the war by rotating members of the council who are part of the Saudi-led military coalition.

[75] Resolution 2216 (2015), S/RES/2216 (2015), United Nations Security Council, April 14, 2015, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2216%20\(2015\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/2216%20(2015))

[76] "Security Council Demands End to Yemen Violence, Adopting Resolution 2216 (2015), with Russian Federation Abstaining," United Nations press office, April 14, 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm>

Every resolution on Yemen in the past five years has been considered by a council overshadowed by Saudi Arabia's influence and willingness to strategically spend money. The Saudis have in the past two decades purchased political buy-in from the US, UK and France in its regional affairs through intelligence exchanges, joint military training operations, billions of US dollars in arms purchases, oil deals and investments in each country's economies and media. The US, UK and France are the largest defense suppliers to Saudi Arabia.^[77] The United States is Saudi Arabia's second-largest trading partner, with Riyadh supplying close to a million barrels per day of oil to the American market.^[78] The Saudis have also invested billions of dollars in tech companies, the steel industry, hotels and real estate and media organizations.^[79]

Saudi Arabia also has a growing economic relationship with China,^[80] the fifth and final veto-wielding member of the UNSC; Russia also has sought to do more business with Saudi Arabia.^[81] Riyadh is wary of Russia and China, however, because both countries have stood against Western powers' efforts to pressure the kingdom's regional rival Iran, which supports the Houthi movement in Yemen. While Russia has threatened to use its veto power to oppose council resolutions that single out Iran, Moscow's more traditional ally, or efforts to broaden past resolutions in ways reflecting US foreign policy interests, it has been willing to accept the status quo since 2015. Russia insists both sides in the war be criticized equally in what one diplomat at the UN describes as Moscow's attempt to "not rock the boat" with Saudi Arabia.^[82] While the United Arab Emirates lobbies in various UN forums on the coalition's behalf and has its own significant economic ties to the five key UNSC powers, UN member states need only look to what Saudi Arabia will accept, aware the Emirates will defer to Riyadh on Yemen issues.

Non-permanent members allied with Saudi Arabia have also shaped the council's positions. Jordan (2014-2015), Egypt (2016-2017) and Kuwait (2018-2019) – all of

[77] Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2019, p. 6, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/fs_1903_at_2018.pdf

[78] "U.S. Relations With Saudi Arabia, Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs of the US State Department, November 26, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-saudi-arabia/>

[79] See, for example, Ivana Kottasova, "Here's where Saudi Arabia has invested around the world," CNN Business, October 17, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/15/investing/saudi-arabia-global-investments/index.html>; Scott Lanman, "Saudi Arabia Held \$52.4 Billion of U.S. Stocks as of June 2015," Bloomberg Business, May 31, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-05-31/saudi-arabia-held-52-4-billion-of-u-s-stocks-as-of-june-2015>; Jim Waterson, "Saudi state part-owns Evening Standard and Independent, court told," The Guardian, July 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/jul/23/evening-standard-and-independent-unable-to-rebut-concerns-over-saudi-ownership>; "UK Companies to Benefit from UK-Saudi Trade," HM Treasury July 8, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-companies-to-benefit-from-uk-saudi-trade>; "Visit of Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Concludes," Foreign & Commonwealth Office, March 10, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/visit-of-crown-prince-of-saudi-arabia-concludes>; and Sam Bridge, "Middle East Investors Target \$5.3 bn London Commercial Property Spend in 2020," Arabian Business, February 5, 2020, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/banking-finance/439383-middle-east-investors-target-53bn-london-commercial-property-spend-in-2020>

[80] Muyu Xu & Chen Aizhu, "China oil imports from top supplier Saudi Arabia rise 47% in 2019: customs," Reuters, January 31, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-trade-oil/china-oil-imports-from-top-supplier-saudi-arabia-rise-47-in-2019-customs-idUSKBN1ZU0EH>

[81] Mustafa Naji, "Yemen's Role in Moscow's Mideast Comeback," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 28, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7576>

[82] Sana'a Center diplomatic source in New York, August 18, 2016.

which are members of the Saudi-led military coalition — have acted as proxies for Saudi Arabia during their rotations in the council.^[83] Each of these countries has advocated for coalition interests within the UNSC, and each has objected to any criticism raised of the coalition's performance in Yemen, including condemnations of international human rights violations, obstruction of aid and commercial shipments to sea ports as well as the enforced closure of Sana'a International Airport to commercial and civilian traffic.

These coalition members and the permanent members of the UNSC have effectively shut down many impartial initiatives by other rotating members, generally those having minimal relations with Saudi Arabia and that regard human rights as essential components of their countries' foreign policy. Such countries have proposed texts addressing many Yemeni issues, including a New Zealand attempt in 2016 to circulate points that could be included in a resolution to replace Resolution 2216; this initiative was quashed in a backlash from Saudi-allied council members.^[84] Similarly, in October 2019, when Peru, Germany and Belgium invited the UN-appointed Group of International and Regional Eminent Experts (GEE) tasked with investigating human rights violations in Yemen to brief the council, Saudi allies at the council prevented the briefing from going forward.^[85] Other initiatives proposed by rotating members and blocked by Saudi allies included joint calls for a halt on military moves toward Hudaydah port by Saudi and UAE-backed forces (Poland, Netherlands and Peru, 2018),^[86] condemnation of Saudi airstrikes that targeted civilians (Bolivia, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, 2018),^[87] paying public sector workers' salaries and opening Sana'a International Airport for humanitarian and commercial use (Netherlands, Sweden, Poland, Peru, 2018).^[88] These non-permanent members have also voiced concern about the lack of progress in UN-led peace efforts, and have strongly rebuked the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition and Hadi's government as well as the Houthi rebels for humanitarian and human rights violations.

Saudi Arabia also managed to pressure UNSC members who were seen not to be toeing the line. For example, Malaysia was more outspoken about the Arab military coalition intervention in Yemen during the first year of its UNSC rotation. However, pressure from Riyadh ensued, including letters of complaint to the Malaysian foreign minister at the time, leading Malaysia to be far more restrained for the rest of its term.^[89] Meanwhile, perhaps the most successful country pushing for independent

[83] Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE were closely involved in drafting Resolution 2216, with Jordan leading Council negotiations on the draft. See , "The Rule of Law: Retreat from Accountability," Security Council Report, December 23, 2019, p. 21, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/research_report_3_rule_of_law_2019.pdf

[84] Sana'a Center interview with a diplomatic source in New York, November 21, 2016.

[85] "November 2019 Monthly Forecast: Middle East – Yemen," Security Council Report, October 31, 2019,

[86] Julian Borger, "Yemen ceasefire resolution blocked at UN after Saudi and UAE 'blackmail'," The Guardian, November 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/29/un-yemen-ceasefire-resolution-blocked-saudi-uae-blackmail>.

[87] "September 2018 Monthly Forecast: Status Update," Security Council Report, August 31, 2018,

[88] UN Security Council Press Release, "Security Council Press Statement on Yemen," March 28, 2018, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13270.doc.htm>

[89] Sana'a Center interviews with diplomatic sources in New York, November 6, 2015

actions during its UNSC rotation was Sweden, which was able to push for the Stockholm Agreement in 2018, aided by the UN's special envoy to Yemen and global pressure on Riyadh following the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Notably irrelevant to Security Council decisions on Yemen is the position of the Hadi government. Yemen is considerably less strategically important to the permanent members' individual regional interests than Saudi Arabia, and the Yemeni government is widely viewed as incompetent and weak. The UNSC also tends to leave diplomatic initiatives for Yemen to the UN envoy, currently Martin Griffiths, and then offer its support through council statements of endorsement. Two sources who have been involved with Yemen issues at the UN said Griffiths, a former British diplomat, had received suggestions for a fresh course from member state representatives following his appointment, including one to strengthen his efforts with a new UN Security Council mandate to supersede resolution 2216; they said the envoy turned them down, citing a lack of need.^[90]

Since its direct military involvement in the Yemen War, Saudi Arabia generally has been quite effective in ensuring the UNSC views the Yemen file through its interests. This has limited the council's output to what the five permanent members can agree on that would not upset their individual interests with Riyadh. Combined with a UNSC desire not to "rock the boat," this has led to a great deal of consensus, but very little movement.

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***Nickolas Ask** is a New York-based fellow at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.*

[90] Sana'a Center interviews on March 18, 2018, and July 25, 2018.

Developments at the United Nations in Brief

- **March 7:** UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths warned it is critical to avoid allowing Marib, which has been relatively stable and calm, to become “the next epicenter of the fighting and of the war.”^[91] His remarks came during a visit to Marib to meet with local officials, tribes and civil society to discuss fresh fighting in neighboring Al-Jawf governorate. Griffiths briefed the UNSC on his visit, noting a “real risk” that the escalation in fighting will last and spread.^[92]
- **March 11:** Representatives of Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Djibouti, along with four members of the Saudi-led military coalition urged the UNSC to pressure the Houthis to allow the UN inspection and maintenance of the FSO Safer oil platform in the Red Sea. In their letter, the representatives cited several concerns in the event of a massive oil spill or explosion aboard the decrepit converted tanker, including the release of toxic gases, a devastating impact on aquifers and agriculture, the extended closure of Hudaydah port resulting in fuel and goods price increases, disruption of some humanitarian operations and long-term damage to the fishing industry.^[93]
- **March 12:** Civilian war casualties are rising, with 187 civilians killed or wounded across Yemen in February, up 20 percent since January, Ramesh Rajasingham of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported. Much of the rise, he said, is due to fighting in Al-Jawf and Marib.^[94]
- **March 16:** Yemeni Ambassador to the UN Abdullah Ali Fadhel Al-Saadi informed the UNSC the government would no longer participate in a committee tasked with implementing the Hudaydah port agreement, blaming Houthi violations of the agreement for its decision.^[95] The government pullout from the Redeployment Coordination Committee in Hudaydah came after a government liaison officer was shot in the governorate.^[96] The RCC was established as part of the Stockholm Agreement to negotiate the mutual redeployment of forces in Hudaydah and had established five joint observation posts in the city in October 2019 to monitor the cease-fire. On March 24, the Houthis blocked the UN-chartered ship that had played host to committee discussions from leaving Hudaydah port.^[97] The ship, carrying representatives of the internationally backed government, was allowed to leave four days later and dropped the government officials off in Mokha.^[98]

[91] Martin Griffiths, “The UN Special Envoy for Yemen Addresses the Media during his Visit to Ma’rib,” UN OSESGY, March 7, 2020, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/un-special-envoy-yemen-addresses-media-during-his-visit-marib>

[92] Martin Griffiths, “Briefing to the United Nations Security Council UN Special Envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths,” UN OSESGY, March 12, 2020, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-united-nations-security-council-un-special-envoy-yemen-%E2%80%93-mr-martin-griffiths>

[93] “Letter dated 11 March 2020 from the Permanent Representatives of Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan and Yemen to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council,” Security Council Report, March 12, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_200.pdf

[94] “The Situation in the Middle East,” Security Council meeting transcript, S/PV.8745, Security Council Report, March 12, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_PV.8745.pdf

[95] “Letter dated 16 March 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Yemen to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council,” Security Council Report, March 16, 2020, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_207.pdf

[96] Ali Mahmood, “Yemen government halts participation in Hodeidah truce process,” The National, March 13, 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/yemen-government-halts-participation-in-hodeidah-truce-process-1.992164>

[97] “Yemen’s Houthis block U.N. ship from leaving Hodeidah: government,” Reuters, March 24, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-hodeidah/yemens-houthis-block-u-n-ship-from-leaving-hodeidah-government-idUSKBN21B2G0>

[98] “The UN mission’s ship leaves the port of Hudaydah, heading toward Mocha [AR],” Al-Motamar Press, March 28, 2020, <https://www.almotamarpress.com/news14158.html>

THE US IN YEMEN: FACILITATING DISASTER, DODGING CULPABILITY

Commentary by Holly Topham and Ziad Al-Eryani

In March 2015, then-US President Barack Obama signed off on measures to support the newly formed Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.^[99] Five years on, this ill-defined support remains as murky as ever, despite domestic pressure to review its scope and nature. What is clear, however, is that Washington is not in the driver's seat when it comes to its policy concerning the war in Yemen – if it can even be conceived as having one.^[100]

Outsourcing to its regional allies may have made sense five years ago; Yemen has never been a strategic priority for the US and has generally been consigned to Riyadh's domain. For many in Washington policy circles, Yemen does not come into view except when certain strategic lenses are applied – be it the threat of Al-Qaeda or regional tensions with Iran. The course of the Yemen conflict points to the risks of outsourcing policy in this way. What was supposed to be a quickly won Saudi-led intervention has descended into a multi-faceted war upon which America's allies have long lost their grip.

As we mark this grim anniversary, America's role in sustaining the war deserves acknowledgment. Washington has trodden a fine line during the Yemen conflict; maintaining enough distance to avoid direct implication in many of the atrocities being unleashed on the country while providing the material and logistical support – and above all, the political cover – indispensable for such operations. It has proven a politically astute but morally dubious strategy and a common thread running through both the Obama and Trump administrations. Military support has remained largely unchanged throughout both administrations, and political input into the UN-led peace process has been lackluster. The US will hold presidential elections later this year. The two remaining Democrat candidates have said they support a sea-change in policy regarding the Yemen war and a reorienting of relations with Saudi Arabia. The experience of the past five years, however, betrays an entrenched policy that may prove difficult to veer from its current course.

Opaque Support for the Coalition

When the Saudi-led coalition began its intervention in Yemen, then-President Obama agreed to provide “logistical and intelligence support” for military operations

[99] “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen,” The White House, March 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen>

[100] Gregory Johnsen, “Seen Only in a Saudi Shadow: Why the US Misunderstands and Missteps in Yemen,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, October 1, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/8135>

and to establish a “joint planning cell” to coordinate with Saudi Arabia.^[101] It quickly appeared that this support was instrumental to the most controversial aspect of the intervention: the coalition air war. The US has provided surveillance images and targeting intelligence used to drop US-made bombs on Yemeni soil.^{[102][103]} Until recently, the US military provided mid-air refueling to help keep coalition warplanes in the sky.^[104] As of the beginning of March, the Yemen Data Project estimates that coalition airstrikes have killed more than 8,000 civilians.^[105]

In a report published in late 2019, a UN-appointed group of experts concluded that assistance provided to the coalition could make America complicit in war crimes in Yemen.^[106] However, there appears to have been a concerted effort to shroud support for the coalition in enough mystery to avoid direct implication in military operations. The US may provide “targeting assistance” for coalition airstrikes, but says it is not responsible for the “selection and final vetting of targets.”^[107] While the US does not consider itself at war with the Houthis, it has in the past deployed Special Forces personnel to the Saudi-Yemen border to support coalition operations.^[108] Meanwhile, counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have remained as opaque as ever; the Trump administration authorized an ill-fated commando raid on Yemeni soil during its inaugural months and later revoked reporting requirements on civilian deaths resulting from drone strikes outside areas of active hostilities.^{[109][110]}

There have been indications of deliberate attempts to counter efforts for greater transparency. Sources told the Sana’a Center that the Trump administration’s decision to end mid-air refueling was due to new reporting requirements from

[101] “Statement by NSC Spokesperson Bernadette Meehan on the Situation in Yemen,” The White House, March 25, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/25/statement-nsc-spokesperson-bernadette-meehan-situation-yemen>

[102] Mark Hosenball, Phil Stewart, Warren Strobel, “Exclusive: U.S. expands intelligence sharing with Saudis in Yemen operation,” Reuters, April 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-yemen-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-expands-intelligence-sharing-with-saudis-in-yemen-operation-idUSKBN0N129W20150410>

[103] Declan Walsh and Eric Schmitt, “Arms Sales to Saudis Leave American Fingerprints on Yemen’s Carnage,” The New York Times, December 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/25/world/middleeast/yemen-us-saudi-civilian-war.html>

[104] Oriana Pawlyk, “2 Years Into Yemen War, US Ramps Up Refueling of Saudi Jets,” *Military.com*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/02/15/2-years-yemen-war-us-ramps-up-refueling-saudi-jets.html>

[105] Yemen Data Project, last updated February 29, <https://www.yemendataproject.org/data.html>

[106] Mohamad Bazzi, “America is likely complicit in war crimes in Yemen. It’s time to hold the US to account,” The Guardian, October 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/03/yemen-airstrikes-saudi-arabia-mbs-us>

[107] Sharif Abdel Kouddous, “With US help, Saudi Arabia is obliterating Yemen,” Globalpost, November 30, 2015, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-11-30/us-help-saudi-arabia-obliterating-yemen>

[108] Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, “Army Special Forces Secretly Help Saudis Combat Threat From Yemen Rebels,” The New York Times, May 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/03/us/politics/green-berets-saudi-yemen-border-houthi.html>

[109] Cynthia McFadden, William M. Arkin and Tim Uehlinger, “How the Trump Team’s First Military Raid in Yemen Went Wrong,” NBC News, October 1, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/how-trump-team-s-first-military-raid-went-wrong-n806246>

[110] “White House Revokes US Military’s Drone Strike Reporting Requirement: The Yemen Review, March 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, April 8, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7269#White-House-Revokes-US-Military-Drone-Strike-Reporting-Requirement>

Congress that placed conditionality on such operations.^{[111][112]} Washington, however, let the coalition take credit for the decision publicly – enabling Saudi Arabia to save face while disguising a flagrant attempt to deflect the spotlight from the Pentagon’s role in the airstrike campaign.

Such attempts to distance itself from coalition actions may have increased the risk of civilian harm in some instances. In late 2016, after a strike on a funeral hall in Sana’a killed more than 150 people, President Obama blocked a sale of precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia.^[113] Less publicized was the administration’s dialing down of efforts to establish civilian-protection mechanisms with the Saudi-led coalition that year.^[114] While those involved were confident these efforts could improve targeting and reduce civilian harm, they said that their presence became too much of a reputational risk and that they were actively blocked from returning to this advisory role following the funeral hall bombing. There has been no attempt since to establish any oversight, protection or accountability measures in concert with US military support for the air war. Such instances discredit the oft-repeated argument from Washington that it is better placed to work as an influence for good behavior from the inside.

Outsourced Policy

From the beginning of the Saudi-led coalition intervention, US involvement in the Yemen conflict has been dictated by power struggles in the Gulf. The Obama administration offered assistance to placate Riyadh after signing the nuclear deal with its arch-foe Iran – reassured that this would be a swift military operation to restore the internationally recognized government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Even as the conflict wore on and civilian casualties mounted, in its early stages the course of the war ran parallel to America’s strategic priorities in the region: supporting its Gulf allies, proclaiming a stand against Iran and conducting counterterrorism operations, the latter in close partnership with Emirati forces in southern Yemen.

But the war soon mutated, with separatist demands by UAE-backed militias against the Saudi-backed Hadi government riling tensions in the south while the Houthis eliminated their onetime ally former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and tightened their grip on power in the north. The emerging picture in Yemen looks far from in line with US national interests: one American ally bombing forces backed by another ally; non-state actors – including Al-Qaeda-linked groups – wielding US-made weapons sold to coalition member states; and the growing prowess of Emirati-funded Salafi militias – some of which subscribe to the same extremist dogma as groups the US is actively fighting on Yemeni soil. Should factionalism in the south persist, conditions

[111] “US to Stop Refuelling Coalition Aircraft: The Yemen Review, November 2018,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, http://sanaacenter.org/files/TYR_Nov_2018_en.pdf

[112] Rebecca Kheel, “Final defense bill would limit US support to Saudi campaign in Yemen,” The Hill, July 23, 2018, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/398457-final-defense-bill-includes-limit-on-us-support-to-saudi-campaign-in-yemen>

[113] Bel Trew, “Obama blocks sale of arms to Saudis,” The Times, December 14, 2016, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/us-halts-precision-arms-sales-to-saudi-over-yemen-fears-bhgjqntrb>

[114] Samuel Oakford, “One American’s Failed Quest to Protect Civilians in Yemen,” The Atlantic, August 17, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/08/yemen-saudi-airstrike-school-bus/567799/>

may once again be ripe for a resurgence of AQAP – long considered by the US to be the most dangerous Al-Qaeda affiliate. Ironically, deference to its Gulf allies and the more fervent anti-Iran stance of the Trump administration has pushed the Houthis closer to Tehran. The US has essentially found itself in the backseat of a disastrous and increasingly intractable military campaign which has strayed far from the one it initially lent it support to.

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In Europe

Further Arms Embargoes on Saudi Arabia

Belgium suspended dozens of licenses for arms sales to Saudi Arabia in March, while Germany extended its arms embargo on the kingdom. Despite such embargoes, Saudi Arabia was the top arms importer in the world in the past five years, increasing its arms imports by 130 percent compared to the preceding five-year period, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).^[115] Some 73 percent of Saudi arms imports came from the United States and 13 percent from the United Kingdom.

On March 9, Belgium's administrative supreme court, the Council of State, suspended 27 licenses for arms sales to Saudi Arabia, which had been granted by the leader of the Walloon region, Elio Di Rupo, in December 2019.^[116] Several Belgian NGOs had filed a suit with the Council of State, which suspended the licenses due to the risk of the technology or military equipment being used in violation of international humanitarian law in Yemen. In May 2019, Belgian journalists revealed that arms and weapon components manufactured in Belgium had been used in the Yemen conflict.^[117] That equipment had been exported to Saudi Arabia based on Walloon licenses.

Meanwhile, Germany extended its arms embargo against Saudi Arabia to the end of 2020 because of Riyadh's participation in the Yemen war.^[118] Germany's ruling parties had agreed to the ban in March 2018, but only fully implemented it after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. The ban was renewed twice in 2019.

UK Foreign Secretary Discusses Yemen During First Gulf Visit

UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab called for political will from all sides to deescalate fighting in Yemen^[119] during his first official visit to the Gulf, where he met in early March with Saudi, Yemeni, and Omani officials. Raab held talks with the new Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tarik, Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi, Saudi King Salman, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Yemeni President Abdo

[115] Pieter D. Wezeman, Dr Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Dr Diego Lopes da Silva, Dr Nan Tian & Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in international arms transfers, 2019," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2020/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-international-arms-transfers-2019>

[116] "Suspension of Walloon arms export licenses to Saudi Arabia [FR]," L'Avenir, March 9, 2020, https://www.lavenir.net/cnt/dmf20200309_01454429/suspension-des-licences-d-exportation-d-armes-wallonnes-vers-l-arabie-saoudite

[117] "Weapons made in Wallonia kill in Yemen [FR]," Le Soir, May 8, 2019, <https://www.lesoir.be/222899/article/2019-05-08/des-armes-fabriquees-en-wallonie-tuent-au-yemen>

[118] "Federal government extends arms export ban for Saudi Arabia [GR]," Zeit Online, March 23, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2020-03/saudi-arabien-ruestungsexportstopp-verlaengerung-bundesregierung>

[119] Stephen Kalin, "UK's Raab hopeful for Yemen war de-escalation this year," Reuters, March 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-diplomacy/uks-raab-hopeful-for-yemen-war-de-escalation-this-year-idUSKBN20S2QS>

Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Ahead of his visit, the Foreign Office explained Raab's intention to discuss the recent escalation in fighting and constraints on humanitarian access.^[120] Other subjects, according to The Guardian, were Oman's mediating role and follow-up on the Riyadh Agreement.^[121] Raab assumed the position of foreign secretary in July 2019 and has been viewed as less interested in pushing for diplomacy and action related to Yemen than his predecessor Jeremy Hunt.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR: SAUDI ARABIA NEEDS REGIONAL HELP TO END THE WAR

Commentary by Elana DeLozier

A lot can change in five years. At the outset of the war, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was ostensibly intact, even as the first Qatar rift in 2014 had shown cracks in its unity. As a result, when Saudi Arabia decided to intervene in Yemen, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Qatar followed suit. Meanwhile, Kuwait positioned itself as a mediator and Oman stayed on the sidelines. Now, five years on, with the exception of small Bahraini and Emirati contingents, the GCC has left the war in Yemen to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia

From the outset, Saudi Arabia could envision only a military victory in Yemen, persisting with this objective well beyond when most military analysts thought they could achieve one. In an abrupt shift in the fall of 2019 after the attack on its Aramco facilities, Saudi Arabia entered direct talks with the Houthis. Those talks have been slow-going as each party has different points of leverage over the other. The Saudi desire for a face-saving exit has given leverage to the Houthis who may not want to grant such an exit without something major in return. The Saudis conversely have economic leverage, with the ability to provide reconstruction, jobs for northern Yemenis and border trade opportunities near Sa'ada, the home base of the Houthi movement. The Houthis' increasing economic strain enhances the value of this leverage. Finally, the Saudis and the Houthis both understand that the latter will be hard-pressed to get international legitimacy as part of some future Yemeni government without Riyadh on board.

[120] "Foreign Secretary's first Gulf visit to showcase Britain's strengths," Foreign & Commonwealth Office, UK.Gov, March 2, 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretarys-first-gulf-visit-to-showcase-britains-strengths>

[121] Patrick Wintour, "Dominic Raab heads off to the Gulf with a full agenda," The Guardian, March 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/02/dominic-raab-heads-off-to-the-gulf-with-a-full-agenda>

Yet the Saudi bargaining position may be becoming precarious. The Saudi-instigated oil war with Russia, coronavirus and a generally gloomy economic outlook may corrode Riyadh's ability to deliver economically if a deal is not reached soon. Most worryingly, the Houthis are pushing hard on the frontlines in Yemen with some success, undermining Riyadh's ability to drive things to a political solution and raising the possibility that the end of the war may not result in a transitional government after all.

In addition to talks with the Houthis, Saudi Arabia took on responsibility for turbulent southern Yemen after the UAE largely withdrew its forces last year. Although the kingdom brokered the Riyadh Agreement between the Hadi government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), it has not been able to get the parties to implement it. All eyes were on Saudi at the end of 2019 to use talks with the Houthis and the southerners as a gateway to comprehensive UN-brokered peace talks; unable to demonstrate even small wins, Saudi Arabia's political maneuverability is steadily shrinking.

UAE

Abu Dhabi's experience has vastly differed from that of Saudi Arabia. By running ground operations in the south independently of the Saudis, the UAE was able to demonstrate its military superiority. Most notably, the Emiratis take credit for helping push the Houthis out of Aden and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula out of Mukalla. They also set up a logistics and training hub in Assab, Eritrea, to develop southern so-called "Elite Forces," following the American 'By-With-Through' doctrine of enabling local forces to do the brunt of fighting. Yemen was, in some ways, a proof of concept; UAE forces had spent two decades training alongside US forces in several major international deployments. Yet, the war came with a terrible cost as well. Within six months, the UAE had suffered the shock of losing nearly 60 Emirati soldiers in a single incident – a heavy toll the country had never before paid. Moreover, the UAE's reputation in Washington was tainted by its role in Yemen, where coalition airstrikes too often resulted in significant and avoidable civilian casualties. These factors — along with a coalition decision not to push into Houthi-held Hudaydah city in 2018 — catalyzed the UAE decision to draw down in Yemen last year, leaving a very messy bit of southern politics for the Saudis to sort out.

Oman

Oman, meanwhile, has played a fundamentally different role — that of facilitator and host to the warring factions. In keeping with its traditional neutralist foreign policy, Oman stayed out of the war and opened its borders to any Yemenis that sought political refuge. This put Oman at odds with its neighbors. The groups that have taken up the offer tend toward an anti-Saudi or anti-UAE persuasion; those who are pro-UAE or pro-Saudi tend to live in their patron country.

The Houthi negotiating team, unable to easily get into and out of Sana'a due to airspace restrictions, has based itself in Muscat. This allows the team to more regularly meet with diplomats, the UN special envoy and other international parties. Oman often facilitates these meetings, and in the early days of the war, the Omanis helped parse the then-alien ways of the international community for the Houthis. Members of Islah, the fragmented Islamist political party in Yemen, are also based in Muscat as are a few key members of the once-dominant General People's Congress (GPC). Oman also plays host to protestors who oppose the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra, Yemen's easternmost governorate that shares a long land border with the sultanate.

Saudi Arabia, long frustrated with Oman's hosting of the Houthis and its friendly relations with Iran, claims Tehran has been sending the Houthis weapons – including advanced missile components – over the Omani border that were then used to attack Saudi territory. Oman has vehemently denied these allegations, but regardless, the Saudis sent a major anti-smuggling force to Al-Mahra in 2017, where it has continually expanded.

The Way Forward

Five years on, the strains of the conflict on several Gulf relationships are obvious. The Yemen conflict alone did not split the Gulf states from one another, but it has been the lens through which the splits are clearly visible. To start, the Qatar rift of 2017 led to the expulsion of Qatari soldiers from Yemen. While the joint effort initially brought the Saudis and Emiratis closer together, over time the Yemen conflict made clear the two were never entirely in lockstep. They did not operate in tandem militarily, and they prioritized the Iran and Muslim Brotherhood threats differently, with Saudi Arabia focused on the Iran-backed Houthis and the Emiratis focused on supporting groups that opposed the Muslim Brotherhood. The Emirati drawdown in Yemen in 2019 was done with little coordination with Riyadh and left the Saudis responsible for solving the Houthi threat in the north and for triaging the government-STC relationship in the south. Meanwhile, the Saudi and Emirati missions in Al-Mahra unquestionably raised anxiety in Oman.

To end the Yemen war, the Gulf states will need to band together just like they did in 2011, when they worked in common with the international community to effectuate Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation and Yemen's transition. Already, it seems some version of this is underway, with senior Saudis and Omanis meeting several times recently. The United States and United Kingdom should support these efforts, as they appear to be doing with recent visits to Oman and Saudi Arabia. The UAE should be brought in as necessary. Kuwait may have a mediator role to play. After five years of war, Saudi Arabia may be left largely alone with the conflict in Yemen, but it will almost certainly need its neighbors' help to bring it to an end.

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Regional Developments in Brief:

- **March 8:** Saudi Arabia declared its intention to ramp up oil production and slash prices in a move that led to the biggest drop in global oil prices in 24 hours since the 1991 Gulf War.^[122] Bloomberg News reported that Riyadh intends to increase crude oil production to more than 10 million barrels a day in April 2020.^[123] The move has been interpreted as the start of a price war with Russia following Moscow's earlier refusal to decrease production in line with the OPEC + alliance.^[124] Saudi Arabia has urged state agencies to plan for significant budget cuts in order to accommodate the drop in oil prices.^[125]

[122] Anjali Raval and David Sheppard, "Oil crash: why Saudi Arabia has started a global crude price war," Financial Times, March 09, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/59dcba56-61a2-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

[123] Filipe Pacheco, "Aramco's Drop Below IPO Price Deals Blow to Saudi Economic Plan," Bloomberg, March 8, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-08/aramco-slumps-below-ipo-price-as-kingdom-starts-oil-price-war>

[124] Anjali Raval and David Sheppard, "Oil crash: why Saudi Arabia has started a global crude price war," Financial Times, March 09, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/59dcba56-61a2-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

[125] Marwa Rashad, Saeed Azhar, Stephen Kalin, "Saudi Arabia asked state agencies to implement big budget cuts: sources," Reuters, March 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-economy-budget/saudi-arabia-asked-state-agencies-to-implement-big-budget-cuts-sources-idUSKBN20Y0QA>

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