

The Yemen Review

MARCH-APRIL 2021



**A DECADE AFTER
THE UPRISING**



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:

Protester in the streets of Sana'a, February 3, 2011 // Photo by Sallam, licensed under CC BY 2.0

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

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

CONTENTS

The Sana'a Center Editorial	4
Diplomacy May Pause the Fighting; It Cannot Impose the Peace	4
March & April at a Glance	7
Eye on Yemen	7
The Political Arena	9
• Developments in Government-Controlled Territory	9
• Developments in Houthi-Controlled Territory	13
• International Developments	15
State of the War	17
• Government Offensive Pressures Houthis in Taiz	17
• Intense Fighting but Few Advances in Marib	18
• Fighting Escalates in Hudaydah; New Government Offensive in Hajjah	19
• Houthis Pepper Saudi Arabia with Cross-Border Attacks	19
• Escalation in AQAP-linked Attacks in Abyan	20
• Government – STC clashes in Abyan Threaten Stability in the South	20
Economic Developments	21
• Update on Local Exchange Rates	21
• Government Presents Fuel Data in Defense of Reduced Fuel Import Activity at Hudaydah	21
• Saudi Arabia Pledges US\$422 million Fuel Grant for Govt Areas	22
• Panel of Experts Revise Analysis of CBY-Aden	23
• Shabwa Local Authority Cancels Agreement for Qana Port Development	23
• Houthis Temporarily Open YPC Fuel Stations in Sana'a	23
• Sana'a Chamber of Commerce and Industry Denounces Houthi Zakat Authority	24
Features	25
Reflections on the 2011 Yemeni Uprising a Decade On	25
• January 15: The Day I Wore a Revolution – <i>by Bilqis Lahabi</i>	25
• The Other Side of the Wall – <i>by Salah Ali Salah</i>	27
• The Yemen Uprising: The View from Turtle Bay – <i>by Casey Coombs</i>	29
• How the Fractious Elite Hijacked the Yemeni Uprising – <i>by Abdulghani al-Iryani</i>	31
• A Decade of Shattered and Betrayed Dreams – <i>by Mohammed Al-Qadhi</i>	34
• Dignity is in Aspirations, Not in a Wall – <i>by Bilqis Lahabi</i>	37
The Kingpin of Sana'a – A Profile of Ahmed Hamid – <i>by Gregory Johnsen and Sana'a Center Staff</i>	38
A View From the Frontlines: Taiz – <i>by Khaled Farouq</i>	42
'The Battle of All Yemenis Against the Houthi Coup' – <i>A Q&A with Tareq Saleh</i>	48
Commentaries	53
The Corruption is Real – UN Panel Should Not Have Retracted Embezzlement Accusations – <i>by Khaled Monassar</i>	53
Toward a Wise US Policy in Yemen – <i>by Alexandra Stark</i>	57
In Focus	60
Socotra Faces COVID-19's Rising Tide Unprepared – <i>by Quentin Müller</i>	60



A demonstration in Sana'a, February 2011 // Sana'a Center photo by Rahman Taha

The Sana'a Center Editorial

Diplomacy May Pause the Fighting; It Cannot Impose the Peace

International stakeholders to the Yemen conflict have pursued a rush of diplomatic initiatives in recent months that are unprecedented in the war to date. Consensus among regional and international actors to achieve a cease-fire appears closer now than ever before – with the right efforts made to gain buy-in, this could help create a framework for talks among Yemeni parties focused on ending the ongoing war. Simultaneously, events in Yemen itself, specifically the ongoing battle for Marib, threaten to derail prospects for peace for years to come should the armed Houthi movement seize this northern stronghold of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.

Underlying the international moves of late have been the shifting dynamics between Washington, Riyadh and Tehran. Washington's political and military support for the Saudi-led military coalition intervention in Yemen – during both the Obama and Trump administrations – has been instrumental in sustaining the protracted conflict, now in its seventh year. Also instrumental has been Iranian support for the armed Houthi movement – politically, strategically and militarily, with the latter in direct violation of UN arms sanctions.

It was largely Saudi fears that Iran would establish a foothold in Yemen through the Houthis that drove Riyadh to launch its military intervention in Yemen in 2015. At the time, the US backed the intervention in large part to limit Saudi opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) Washington was then finalizing with Tehran to limit the latter's nuclear program. While in the first years of the Yemen conflict the Houthi forces benefited domestically from their alliance with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, as the conflict escalated the group also sought more outside assistance from the sole sources willing to offer it – Tehran and its regional proxy forces. Over the subsequent years, Iranian assistance has helped Houthi forces attain increasing battlefield sophistication, gain the upper hand on Yemeni rivals, impose increasingly higher costs on Saudi Arabia and establish its unrivalled dominance across most of northern Yemen. For Tehran, supporting the Houthis began as a relatively low-cost, high-impact avenue by which to harass its arch-rival Saudi Arabia. As the Houthis' position on the ground has strengthened, so too have Iranian interests and investments in the group.

It has become among the war's tragic ironies that today, thanks to Saudi Arabia, the Houthis and Iran have never been closer. Meanwhile, Riyadh has become trapped in a military quagmire and is paying dearly in riches, reputation and clout. It has been clear for some time that the kingdom wants out of Yemen. And Washington, after the Trump administration tore up the Iran nuclear deal, has been left paying the cost of the deal – being a primary backer of an unwinnable war that has unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe – without any of the payoffs the Obama administration had sought.

Among the factors driving the new international dynamics regarding the conflict is the about-turn in the US approach since the Biden administration took office. The new US president has explicitly called for an end to the Yemen war, appointed an envoy to lead this diplomatic charge and halted some US arms sales to Saudi Arabia – importantly, the latter comes after billions upon billions of dollars worth of previous US arms sales have left the kingdom already armed to the teeth. Also important to note is that neither the US, nor any of the other five permanent members of the UN Security Council, have yet brought forward a new framework for negotiations beyond Resolution 2216, which the US and United Kingdom pushed through the security council in 2015 to give international legitimacy to the Saudi-led intervention.

The fate of the Yemen conflict now appears to be increasingly linked with larger efforts toward regional deescalation. The US, Iran and other world powers met in Vienna in March and April for talks on bringing Washington and Tehran back into compliance with the JCPOA. In recent months, Oman has been hosting a flurry of diplomatic meetings, with representatives of the United States, Saudi Arabia, the armed Houthi movement, Iran, the United Nations and others brushing shoulders in Muscat with increased frequency. In April, Baghdad then played host to a discreet meeting between Saudi and Iranian security officials, at which they discussed regional flashpoints between them, including Yemen. This was followed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman giving a television interview in which he said the kingdom sought to build a “positive relationship” with Iran. Officials from Oman, the UN, the US and others have also been gathering for talks in Riyadh in recent weeks. For Saudi Arabia, however, a precondition for any agreement to end the Yemen conflict is security along its southern border, particularly in the face of regular Houthi drone and missile attacks into the kingdom.

In any conceivable future, the Houthis' ties with Tehran, with whom the group has exchanged ambassadors, will remain prized – which should worry every stakeholder who cares about peace in Yemen. As international dynamics have been realigning toward peace, Houthi forces on the ground in Yemen have continued to press an assault on Marib city. For the Yemeni government to maintain relevance in the country and in any future peace negotiations, it must not lose this stronghold. The dynamics at play among the various stakeholders inside and outside Yemen would change dramatically if the city falls into Houthi hands, with the prospects for a UN-mediated peace likely to vanish and not return for years. With Marib, the Houthis would consolidate control over northern Yemen, as well as oil and gas fields that could offer an economic base for a new Houthi state; the group's leaders would feel little compulsion to make concessions. Rather, Houthi demands for ending their military conquest would likely grow astronomically and entail terms that neither Saudi Arabia nor any other Yemenis could stomach.

Even if the emerging international and domestic dynamics end up bringing the parties to the table, peace will continue to face many challenges. A durable cease-fire and post-conflict environment will depend on finding a stable balance among the domestic forces in Yemen, with regional and international actors providing mechanisms to guarantee the arrangement. The danger here, however, would be if international priorities came to dominate those of Yemenis; we have already seen how the results of such played out in Yemen's post-2011 failed "transition process" – dubbed the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative, aptly reflecting its priorities – that helped bring on current conflict. As well, hardliners within the Houthi movement will almost certainly push to keep an inordinate share of power during negotiations – which would be unacceptable to any other portion of Yemeni society – and seek to usurp any agreement the group's more moderate and pragmatic negotiators might make. Similarly, divisions within the anti-Houthi coalition could easily undermine its side in the negotiations.

It would be dangerous for international actors to push for an immediate, comprehensive cease-fire prior to the basic prerequisites of a post-conflict state being agreed. Such an arrangement would create an incentive for armed groups that are currently reaping handsome profits from the populations under their control to maintain the status quo by obstructing a power-sharing deal. Rather than giving Yemen the best chance to find a path toward sustainable peace, a more likely scenario would be a relapse into war and a slow and final disintegration of the Yemeni state into warlord-run fiefdoms. Instead, a conditional, limited cease-fire, focused on freezing frontlines in place, should be sought to allow the opportunity for negotiations on the basic prerequisites of a post-conflict arrangement. This should entail identifying basic end goals for political power sharing, social equality and revenue sharing under a unified Republic of Yemen.

March & April at a Glance

Eye on Yemen

Intensified Seasonal Flooding

Torrential rains struck much of Yemen in mid-April and lasted through the end of the month, causing widespread flooding that destroyed homes and infrastructure. Spring typically heralds the beginning of the rainy season in Yemen, however extreme weather events have become more frequent and more intense in recent decades, with their impacts magnified by the country's already weak infrastructure and urban planning.

As of the beginning of May, deaths and injuries were reported along with the displacement of more than 20,000 people, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which reported large-scale damage in Aden, Abyan, Al-Dhalea, Lahj, Hadramawt, Marib and Taiz governorates. In Tarim district, Hadramawt governorate, four people were reported killed and 167 homes destroyed as of May 2. Photographer Mohammed Haian documented the scene there the following day for the Sana'a Center.



Sana'a Center photo by Mohammed Haian



Sana'a Center photo by Mohammed Haian



Sana'a Center photo by Mohammed Haian

THE POLITICAL ARENA

By Casey Coombs

Developments in Government-Controlled Territory

Local Authorities Call for Canceling Stockholm Agreement

March 1: In a letter, former heads of local councils in eight Houthi-controlled governorates – Amanat al-Asimah, Ibb, Hudaydah, Al-Mahwit, Dhamar, Raymah, Sa'ada and Amran – called on President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi to cancel the Stockholm Agreement. The letter also requested that the internationally recognized government make regular payments of military salaries and reactivate all battlefronts to implement UN Security Council resolution 2216 by force.

STC President Tells The Guardian, CNN of Secessionist Plans

March 1: In an interview published in the UK-based newspaper The Guardian, Southern Transitional Council (STC) President Aiderous al-Zubaidi said the secessionist group seeks a referendum for an independent south Yemen despite the formation of a power-sharing cabinet with the internationally recognized government in December, as part of the Riyadh Agreement. The interview was a continuation of the STC leader's high-profile appearances in international media since the start of the year. Al-Zubaidi also told The Guardian that a Houthi takeover of the government stronghold of Marib could position the STC for direct talks with the Sana'a-based Houthi authorities: "It could lead to a situation where the STC are largely in control of the South and the Houthis control most of the North. In that case, it would make sense to have direct talks between the parties that are in control," he said.

Al-Zubaidi, however, seemed to walk back that statement in a March 15 interview with CNN International in Abu Dhabi, when he said that such negotiations would only take place under the umbrella of the UN and international organizations, adding that coexistence with the Houthis is not possible. In January and February, Al-Zubaidi spoke with UAE-based SkyNews Arabia and Russia Today, during which he reiterated the STC's plans to form an independent state in southern Yemen.

On March 14, Al-Zubaidi appointed Amr al-Beidh as his representative for foreign affairs. Prior to the appointment, Al-Beidh was responsible for external communications for the STC's presidential council and previously worked in the office of his father, former President of South Yemen Ali Salim al-Beidh. In early April, Al-Beidh explained the STC's role in the peace process in a series of tweets.

STC's European Union Representative Pushes Two-state Solution

March 3: In an interview with Spanish news outlet Descifrando la Guerra (Deciphering War), the STC's representative in the European Union, Ahmed bin Fareed, said he believes in a two-state solution. Bin Fareed highlighted the north-south divide as the dominant factor in the push for South Yemen's independence. "We in the south think that all the northern forces have the same intention toward our land whether they are the Houthis, Islah Party or other political or military forces," he said, adding that the EU was not supportive enough of the STC.

Protestors Call for Dismissal of Abyan Governor

Early March: The local authority in southern Abyan governorate sent a food convoy to Marib in support of the pro-government forces defending against Houthi incursions in the governorate. In response, protesters affiliated with the STC in Abyan's capital, Zinjibar, demanded the departure of Abyan Governor Abu Bakr Hussein Salem. The protesters criticized Salem for sending aid to Marib while failing to provide adequate public services, such as fuel for the electricity plants in Zinjibar and Khanfar, districts of Abyan.

Taiz Governor Rallies Troops to Liberate Capital

March 11: Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan ordered the mobilization of troops to force Houthi fighters from the governorate and end the siege on Taiz city which has been in place since 2015. In the televised speech, Shamsan offered a general amnesty to Houthi fighters who surrender to the internationally recognized government's forces.

Protests Simmer Across Southern Yemen

Mid-March: Demonstrators in several cities across southern Yemen took to the streets to protest the deterioration of basic services including electricity and to demand payment of government salaries amid sharp rises in food and fuel prices. On March 15, in the city of Sayoun, in the central part of Hadramawt governorate, soldiers fired on a group of protesters who stormed the offices of the local authority, injuring at least six people. The headquarters of the internationally recognized government's First Military Region is located in Sayoun. The next day, protesters in Abyan's capital, Zinjibar, reiterated the calls of protesters earlier in the month for the dismissal of Governor Abu Bakr Hussein Salem. At the same time, about 65 kilometers to the west, in the interim capital Aden, protesters breached the perimeter of Al-Maashiq presidential palace, the internationally recognized government's headquarters in the interim capital.

Second Wave of COVID-19 Reaches Southern Yemen

March 21: The Supreme National Emergency Committee for Coronavirus reported 140 new infections and 14 deaths, marking the largest officially recorded coronavirus-related cases and casualties since the outbreak reached Yemen. Importantly, scant levels of testing mean it is widely believed that the number of positive cases of COVID-19 is actually much higher. Two days later, the internationally recognized government's COVID-19-monitoring body declared a health emergency. A UN graphic shows that the latest wave of reported infections started in late February. On March 31, 360,000 doses of the COVID-19 AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in Aden, where hospital workers overwhelmed by the latest outbreak complained of the lack of medical supplies to treat patients.

West Coast Commander Tareq Saleh Launches Political Platform

March 25: The National Resistance Forces led by Tareq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, the nephew of the late former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, announced the establishment of the Political Bureau for the National Resistance at a ceremony in the port city of Mokha, where his forces are based. The declaration comes amid US-led efforts to revive peace talks among Yemen's warring parties to end the war. In this context, the new political body can be seen as an attempt by Saleh to secure a seat at the negotiating table. (See 'The Battle of All Yemenis Against the Houthi coup – An Interview with Tareq Saleh')

Socotra Sit-In Ends in Arrests

March 28: STC forces broke up a meeting of the Peaceful Sit-In Committee of the Archipelago of Socotra. The group opposes both the Saudi-led coalition and the UAE-backed STC. Several of the protesters were arrested, including the head of the committee, Mohammed Saeed Issa.

Hadramawt Governor Declares State of Emergency After Bloody Protests

March 30: Hadramawt Governor Faraj Al-Bahsani declared a governorate-wide state of emergency after a demonstrator was killed and several others were wounded during protests in the Mayfa'a area in the district of Brom Mayfa. Al-Bahsani also ordered the detention and suspension of coastal Hadramawt's director of security, Major General Saeed Ali al-Ameri. A tribal negotiator intervened and Al-Ameri was released and resumed his work. Al-Bahsani reportedly flew to the UAE and then to Riyadh to discuss the situation with Saudi-led coalition leaders.

Hadi Government Claims Majority of Yemenis Live in Govt-Held Territory

April 4: The Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation released an infographic claiming to show updated figures on the geographical distribution of Yemen's 2020 estimated population of 30.4 million. According to MOPIC, 48 percent of the population live in areas nominally under the control of the internationally recognized government, 46 percent of the population live in areas under Houthi control and the remaining 6 percent live outside the country as refugees. The infographic, which includes no methodology on how census data was gathered and analyzed, was published following criticism by some government officials of the widely-cited figure that Houthi-controlled areas contain about 70 percent of Yemen's population. A footnote on the infographic states, "The continuation of war enhances the movement of more IDPs to legitimate areas."

Iranian University Officials Announce Plans for Yemen Campus

April 5: In an interview with Iranian news outlet Mehr News Agency, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, head of international affairs at Islamic Azad University, said that the university is planning to open a branch in Yemen. It would be the first Iranian university in Yemen and reflects the strong ties between the Sana'a-based Houthis and Tehran. Boroujerdi said that the university had hit obstacles trying to obtain licenses to open branches in Iraq and Syria. "Syrian law does not allow a foreign university to be set up there, and Iraq has special rules, including the fact that the university's founding board must be made up of Iraqis. But we are negotiating to get the necessary permits by agreement (there)," he said.

Swedish Diplomat Visits Marib

April 8: Sweden's special envoy to Yemen, Peter Semneby, met with Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah and visited IDP camps around Marib city during a visit to the governorate.

STC Swaps Government Officials for Soldiers in Prisoner Exchange

April 9: A prisoner exchange took place in Abyan governorate's coastal city of Shoqra between forces loyal to the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the internationally recognized government's army. The STC released the director of Marib governor's office, Mohammad al-Bazli, and four administrative staff, who were arrested while traveling to meet officials in Aden in March. In exchange, 15 STC-affiliated soldiers captured while fighting army forces in Abyan late last year were released.

Yemen's Third-Largest Airport Reopens in Hadramawt

April 9: Yemen's Civil Aviation Authority announced the reopening of Al-Rayyan Airport in Hadramawt's capital city of Mukalla. Closed since Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants captured Mukalla in 2015, the country's third-largest airport will operate domestic flights. An official in Hadramawt's local government told Chinese news outlet Xinhua that the airport reopened with the help of the United Arab Emirates, whose military forces used Al-Rayyan's facilities as a command center and as a prison after ejecting AQAP from the city in 2016. Yemeni officials announced the reopening of Al-Rayyan in late November 2019, but were forced to re-close the airport days later because they had reportedly not obtained licenses from the Saudi-led coalition to operate commercial flights.

Developments in Houthi-Controlled Territory

African Migrants Burned Alive in Houthi-Run Detention Facility

March 7: Scores of African migrants were burned to death in a Houthi-run detention center in Sana'a, after Houthi forces fired projectiles into a locked, overcrowded hangar. Houthi officials initially attempted to blame the fire on the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM), but later took responsibility. Testimony from survivors indicated that the chain of events leading to the fire was sparked when detained migrants protested conditions in the facility, including Houthi attempts to extort money from the migrants for their release and forcibly recruit migrants to fight on the frontlines. In response, a group of prisoners went on hunger strike, which Houthi forces tried to end by force. When the migrants fought back, the Houthi forces locked them in the hangar and fired projectiles thought to be smoke bombs, tear gas canisters and/or flash-bangs inside, igniting the fire.

Houthi Transportation Minister and Former Army Chief of Staff Reported Dead

March 21: News of the death of Houthi Transportation Minister and former deputy army chief of staff Zakaria al-Shami surfaced on social media. The cause of death remains contested. Two unnamed Yemeni officials told Reuters that Al-Shami died from coronavirus-related complications in a hospital in Sana'a, where other Houthi officials, including the group's prime minister, Abdulaziz bin Habtour, were treated recently for COVID-19. An unidentified Yemeni military official told Arab News that Al-Shami was killed a week earlier in a Saudi-led coalition airstrike while leading fighters in an offensive in Marib.

Houthi Security Head, Accused of Disappearances, Rape and Torture, Dead from COVID-19

April 6: Sultan Zabin, the director of the Houthi-run Criminal Investigation Department (CID) who oversaw the disappearances, rape and torture of dissidents and minorities in police custody, was reported to have died from COVID-19. The US Treasury Department and the United Nations Security Council had designated Zabin for sanctions in recent months. Zabin had “direct involvement in acts of rape, physical abuse, and arbitrary arrest and detention of women as part of a policy to inhibit or otherwise prevent political activities by women who have opposed the policies of the Houthis,” according to the Treasury designation.

Houthi religious authority rolls out new Ramadan rules

April 13: The Houthi-controlled General Authority for Endowments in Sana’a issued a circular outlining new religious guidelines during Ramadan. The document called for synchronizing the daily calls to prayer from loudspeakers in mosques throughout Sana’a and broadcasting speeches by Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi and religious awareness broadcasts from mosques’ loudspeakers. The General Authority for Endowments was created on January 30, 2021, taking over duties from the Ministry for Religious Endowments and Guidance. A day later, Abdulmajeed Abdulrahman Hassan al-Houthi, a member of the ruling Al-Houthi family, was appointed chairman of the new body.

Houthi Authorities’ Arrest of Fashion Model Highlights Women’s Rights Restrictions

April 11: The disappearance of Yemeni model and actress Entisar al-Hammadi in Sana’a became public after activists accused Houthi authorities of kidnapping her and two other women about a month earlier. On April 24, Al-Hammadi’s lawyer told Agence France-Presse that 19-year-old Al-Hammadi was arrested without a warrant on February 20 and public prosecutors had recently opened an investigation into the case. He said that the prosecution asked her questions related to “prostitution and immorality” in an attempt to frame the case as an “outrageous act,” based on the fact that “she did not wear the veil” in public places. The conservative Houthi government in Sana’a has greatly restricted women’s rights since coming to power in a coup in late 2014.

Houthi Forces Raid Shops Seeking Accounting Records and Religious Taxes

April 19: Houthi authorities launched an aggressive campaign to collect taxes in Sana’a and other areas under their control starting in mid-April. Shortly after Ramadan began, armed forces and intelligence officials raided businesses, demanding merchants hand over accounting records and increased amounts of zakat religious

taxes. The seizure of accounting records is thought to be in preparation for imposing new taxes and royalties on merchants. The raids were carried out on behalf of the Houthi-run General Authority of Zakat, a quasi-state body established in 2018.

April 19: The president of the Houthi-run Supreme Political Council issued a decree changing the name of the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC) to the Ministry of Planning and Development and redefining its functions. The changes to MOPIC's organizational structure were not spelled out, but Houthi authorities had stripped the body of its authority to deal with international aid donors and transferred those functions to the Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (SCMCHA) in 2019.

International Developments

Donor Pledges Fall Short of Humanitarian Demands

March 1: International donors pledged US\$1.67 billion for humanitarian assistance in Yemen for 2021, falling well short of the requested US\$3.85 billion. Expressing disappointment at the fundraising effort, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that the amount raised was “less than we received for the humanitarian response plan in 2020 and a billion dollars less than was pledged at the conference we held in 2019.” The drop in aid pledges stems from a combination of the global economic downturn during the pandemic and donor skepticism that the aid will reach intended beneficiaries in Houthi-controlled areas. Major donors, UN agencies and other international NGOs held an extraordinary summit in Brussels in February 2020 to highlight Houthi aid obstruction and demand an end to the practices.

Internationally Recognized Government Renews Qatar Ties

March 6: Yemen and Qatar marked their first diplomatic meeting since severing ties in June 2017, with Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed bin Mubarak meeting in Doha with Qatari Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani. While it remains unclear how the renewed ties with Qatar will affect the war in Yemen, Al-Thani stressed the importance of preserving Yemen's unity and implementing UN Security Council resolution 2216. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt reconciled with Qatar in January, ending a blockade they had imposed in 2017.

Houthis, Iran Reject Saudi Peace Initiative to End War

March 22: Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan announced an initiative to take the first step toward political negotiations to end the war. Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam quickly rejected the offer, stating there was nothing new in the Saudi initiative. On March 23, Iran's ambassador to Sana'a, Hasan Irlu, rejected the peace initiative, saying on Twitter that a true peace initiative would stop the war, lift the coalition blockade, withdraw all Saudi military forces and support for

“mercenaries and takfiris,” (referring to Yemeni forces) and start a Yemeni political dialogue without any external interference. A week later, Abdelmalek al-Ajri, a senior Houthi leader and member of the Houthis’ negotiating team in Muscat, Oman, rejected the Saudi initiative on the same grounds and called the cease-fire proposal an attempt to halt Houthi progress toward Marib.

Iran’s Military, Diplomatic Arms Spar Over Policy in Yemen

April 21: An assistant commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, General Rostam Ghasemi, told Russia Today in an interview that the IRGC had provided weapons to the Houthis early on in the war and trained Houthi forces to manufacture weapons, noting that there remains a small number of IRGC advisors in Yemen. It was the first public admission of Iran’s military support for the Houthis. On April 23, Iran’s Foreign Ministry refuted Ghasemi’s claims in a news release, stating that Iran’s support for Yemen is political in nature. The same day, Russian news outlet Sputnik published statements from an interview with Houthi political leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, who echoed the Iranian foreign ministry’s position and said Ghasemi’s comments may have been designed to provoke the Gulf states. Ghasemi himself responded to these counterclaims by stating that he meant what he said.

Throughout Yemen’s war, the UN has documented numerous instances of Iran violating a UN Security Council arms embargo that bans the shipment of weapons to the Houthis.

Casey Coombs is an independent journalist focused on Yemen and a researcher at the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies. He tweets @Macoombs



A member of the National Demining Program team works on the Al-Bireen – Al-Kadha road west of Taiz, by the village of Al-Afirah, on March 12, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

STATE OF THE WAR

By Abubakr al-Shamahi

Government Offensive Pressures Houthis in Taiz

Yemeni government forces began an offensive in Taiz on March 3, leading to some of the biggest advances in the governorate since 2016. Frontlines that were previously stagnant, such as those in Al-Ma'afer district west of Taiz city, and Hayfan district in southeastern Taiz, witnessed significant advances by pro-government forces. The Yemeni government's offensive came partly as a response to the Houthi offensive in Marib, and attempted to take advantage of the reduced number of Houthi forces on frontlines in Taiz. The renewed fighting in Taiz has also further empowered the pro-Islah Taiz Military Axis, which officially leads all Yemeni government military forces in the governorate. There are indications that the Taiz Military Axis is also seeking to impose its authority over areas on Taiz's Red Sea Coast, currently controlled by the Saudi-led coalition-backed Joint Forces, led by Tareq Saleh.

While some fighting occurred within the city of Taiz, much of the fighting took place in areas west of the city, on the borders between the districts of Al-Ma'afer, Jabal Habashy and Maqbanah.

On March 9, Yemeni government forces took much of Al-Kadahah, northwest Al-Ma'afer, which gave them control over the road connecting the Red Sea Coast and the city of Taiz. Use of this road shortens the travel time between the port city of Mokha and Taiz city, and allows travelers to avoid treacherous unpaved roads they had previously been forced to take.

In Hayfan district, in the southeast of the governorate, Yemeni government forces, alongside 'Popular Resistance' local militias associated with Islah, attacked the Houthis on March 17, forcing them to withdraw from Al-Akboush and Al-Akawish. The areas sit near a mountain range that overlooks the Aden-Taiz road, as well as the Fourth Military Zone headquarters in Ma'abaq (Lahij), which the Houthis have been attempting to reach.

However, following these early successes, Yemeni government advances stalled. Initially, it appeared as though Yemeni government forces would attempt to consolidate their gains in Al-Kadahah and push further into Maqbanah district to the north. But throughout the second half of March and April a stalemate developed. This was partly a result of a lack of planning from the Yemeni government military, and partly the result of a Houthi decision to counterattack in certain areas they consider strategically important, rather than attempting to recapture all lost territory.

For example, on March 20, the Houthis sent heavy reinforcements into Bilad Al-Wafi, in the Jabal Habashy district, reversing recent gains by government forces in the area, most notably in Al-Sarahim and Sharaf Al-Aneen. Al-Sarahim overlooks the main road between Taiz and Hudaydah, a main supply route for the Houthis that they could not afford to allow to stay in government hands. Houthi forces also sent reinforcements to Al-Tuwayr, in southeastern Maqbanah, where they lost territory at the start of the offensive. The fighting in Al-Tuwayr was ongoing as of this writing. (For more, See 'From the Frontlines in Taiz')

Intense Fighting but Few Advances in Marib

The Houthi offensive in Marib continued in March, with the majority of the fighting in the governorate taking place west of Marib city in Sirwah district, specifically in the areas of Al-Mashjah, Al-Kassarrah, Al-Zour and Al-Tala'ah Al-Hamraa. While fighting between the Houthis and Yemeni government forces has been intense, with heavy casualties regularly reported by both local media outlets and international media – including the death of the Yemeni government's commander of the 6th Military Zone, General Ameen Al-Wa'ili on March 26 – there were few advances by either side. By the end of April, fighting assumed a back and forth nature as, despite frequent attacks, Houthi forces were unable to hold onto seized territory, as airstrikes from Saudi-led coalition forced them to retreat. The Houthis, however, continue to send waves of fighters forward for new attacks, and casualty numbers have been high in April, with international media outlets regularly reporting death tolls in the dozens. The dead

include Muhammed Mashli Al-Harmali, the chief of staff of the government's 7th Military Zone, whose death was announced on April 7, and the government's Military Attorney General, Abdullah Al-Hadhiri, who was killed on April 24 in Al-Mashjah.

Houthi forces also continued to shell Marib city and its surrounding areas. The majority of these attacks have targeted the Yemeni government's Third Military Zone headquarters in Marib city, but some have hit residential areas, resulting in civilian casualties.

Fighting between the two sides also continued in Jawf governorate, to the north of Marib. The Houthis made small advances in Al-Alam, southeast of the governorate capital Al-Hazm, on March 5, while the Yemeni government's military claimed to have advanced in the Al-Madabiq mountains, in western Jawf's Bart Al-Anan district, on March 26.

Fighting Escalates in Hudaydah; New Government Offensive in Hajjah

After a relatively quiet February, fighting escalated in and around the city of Hudaydah in March, with battles between the Houthis and the Joint Forces taking place primarily in the city's eastern frontlines. Neither side made any advances, but casualties were high – in the last week of March over 100 fighters died on both sides, according to medical sources. The Houthis called up reserve forces and police officers to fight on the city's frontlines in an effort to bolster their numbers.

The Saudi-led coalition conducted airstrikes throughout the month on Houthi targets in Hudaydah, primarily focused coastal areas in an apparent effort to damage the Houthis' naval capabilities. Some airstrikes also hit civilian facilities, including a strike on March 22 that hit the Al-Saleef grains port, north of Hudaydah city. A warehouse and the living quarters of a food production company were hit, and the UN observer mission in Hudaydah said that six injured workers were transferred to local medical facilities for treatment.

Further north along the Red Sea Coast, in Hajjah governorate, the Yemeni government launched an offensive on March 12. Fighting in Abs district on the border with Saudi Arabia had some initial successes, with the Yemeni government claiming on March 14 that its forces had taken a dozen villages, including Al-Manjourah, Al-Hamraa, Al-Jaraf, Al-Shabakah and Barman. There were no reports of further advances in the second half of the month or in April.

Houthis Pepper Saudi Arabia with Cross-Border Attacks

The Houthis claimed a number of aerial attacks on Saudi territory in March, a continuation of the group's escalation of cross-border operations since the beginning of 2021. Although the majority of the projectiles fired by the Houthis were intercepted by Saudi Arabia, the Houthis continue to demonstrate the ability to strike Saudi territory. On March 7, a Houthi missile and drone attack targeted a Saudi Aramco

oil storage yard at Ras Tanura, on Saudi Arabia's Gulf coast. The Saudi defense ministry said it intercepted the armed drone before it hit the storage yard, adding that shrapnel from a ballistic missile fell near a residential compound used by Saudi Aramco in Dhahran. Additionally, a Houthi attack on March 19 started a fire at a Saudi Aramco oil refinery in Riyadh, and a March 25 attack led to a fire at an oil facility in southern Saudi Arabia's Jizan province. On April 12, the Houthis once again showed their capability to hit targets deep into Saudi territory, when they fired projectiles at Saudi Aramco facilities in Jubail, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, and Jeddah. The attacks were part of a salvo that included 17 armored drones and two ballistic missiles, and also hit targets in Khamis Mushait and Jizan, according to the Houthis.

For its part, the Saudi-led coalition also stepped up its airstrikes in Sana'a, hitting Houthi targets across the capital, such as the Al-Siyanah base in northern Sana'a, and the Al-Haffa base in the east of the city. Airstrikes on Sana'a on March 21 and March 22 bookended the Saudi announcement of a cease-fire proposal. More than 400 Saudi-led coalition airstrikes were reported in April, with the majority targeting Houthi forces in Marib governorate.

Escalation in AQAP-linked Attacks in Abyan

March saw an escalation in the number of suspected Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) attacks in southern Yemen's Abyan governorate. The attacks primarily targeted current and former members of the Southern Transitional Council's Security Belt forces, which actively fought against AQAP in Abyan prior to 2018. Five separate AQAP-linked attacks were reported in March, killing at least 11 Security Belt fighters. The deadliest attack, on March 18, saw a group of gunmen believed to be AQAP members attack a Security Belt checkpoint in Dahoumah, eastern Ahwar district, in Abyan's southeast. The attack killed five civilians and seven Security Belt fighters.

Government – STC clashes in Abyan Threaten Stability in the South

Intermittent clashes broke out in eastern Abyan in April between Yemeni government and STC forces. The Yemeni government's Special Forces and the STC's Security Belt forces had agreed to jointly patrol Ahwar district after the rise in AQAP attacks, as well as criminal activity, in February and March. However the presence of rival forces led to clashes, initially sparked on April 5 after Security Belt forces raised the flag of the former South Yemen over a checkpoint in Khabar Al-Maraqishah area, Khanfar district, eastern Abyan. One Yemeni government soldier was killed in that fighting, which, despite local mediation efforts, resumed on April 9 and continued until the next day.

Fighting also broke out on April 16 in western Ahwar district, before local mediators intervened and stopped the fighting on the same day. No clashes were reported during the rest of the month.

Abubakr Al-Shamahi is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

By the Sana'a Center Economic Unit

Update on Local Exchange Rates

During the months of March and April, the exchange rate in Houthi-controlled territories remained around the 600 Yemeni rial (YR) per US dollar. Houthi authorities continue to prioritize the maintenance of exchange rate stability, aided by the continued enforcement of a ban on new Yemeni rial banknotes (i.e. those issued by the Central Bank in Aden after September 2016) in Houthi-controlled territories.

In sharp contrast, the value of the Yemeni rial in areas outside of Houthi control fluctuated during March and April. On March 2, the value of the rial stood at YR884 per US\$1 dollars, and on March 9 depreciated to YR913. At the end of March, the rial stood at YR830 per US\$1 dollar, following an appreciation on the back of news that Saudi Arabia pledged a US\$422 fuel grant to Yemen, and that the Panel of Experts on UN had withdrawn corruption accusations lodged against the Central Bank in Aden in its annual report. As has proven to be the case in the past, the appreciation of the Yemeni rial in non-Houthi areas in response to certain political or economic announcements/developments was short lived. On April 1, the rial dropped to YR861 per US\$1. By April 23, the value of rial fell further to YR900 per US\$1.

Government Presents Fuel Data in Defense of Reduced Fuel Import Activity at Hudaydah

On April 2, the Supreme Economic Council for the internationally recognized Yemeni government published fuel data that examined nationwide fuel import activity between January and March 2021 and compared this data with fuel import data recorded in 2020 and 2019 for the same period.

Yemen Fuel Import Activity Between January and March 2019, 2020, and 2021 (in metric tons)

Port	2019	2020	2021
Hudaydah	459,422.64	710,803.62	84,517.86
Aden	289,773.87	318,833.89	590,235.87
Mukalla	110,964.13	182,918.03	291,750.65
Nishtun	23,400.00	16,353.30	86,873.41
Total:	883,560.64	1,228,908.84	1,053,377.79

Source: Supreme Economic Council for Internationally Recognized Government

The government released this data in a briefing note in an apparent attempt to allay fears over remaining fuel supplies in Yemen, particularly in the more densely populated Houthi-controlled territories where up to 70 percent of Yemen's 31 million people reside. From January until the end of February 2021, only one shipment of cooking gas entered Houthi-run Hudaydah port, with no other fuel import activity recorded. In March, however, the government issued clearances for five fuel shipments to enter and unload at Hudaydah, but only one of the shipments that arrived was for general sale to consumers.

Similar to the last period of reduced fuel import activity at Hudaydah (June-September 2020), the government has sought to mitigate the impact of reduced fuel imports at the Red Sea port by authorizing additional fuel imports via Aden, Mukalla, and Nishtun ports in government-held areas, with the expectation that fuel would then be transported overland to Houthi-held areas. In the briefing note published on April 2, the government claimed that from January to March 6,000 metric tons (MT) of fuel was transported overland daily from areas outside Houthi control to Houthi-held areas. Using the government's own estimates, this would mean that from January to March a total of 540,000 (MT) was transported overland to Houthi-held areas, equivalent to 51 percent of the total 1,053,377.78 MT the government said was imported into Yemen.

Fuel has and continues to be transported overland from areas outside Houthi control to Houthi-controlled territories. There are frequent upticks in overland fuel transfers during repeated periods of prolonged standoff between the government and the Houthis over Hudaydah. It is, however, difficult to quantify and confirm daily overland transportation activity. Doing so would require greater insight into the amount of fuel traffic that passes through Houthi inland customs checkpoints as well as knowledge of other, more irregular, routes that truck drivers take.

The government is eager to play down concerns over available fuel supplies in Yemen. In addition to highlighting fuel import activity, it also accuses the Houthis of withholding fuel from the local market in areas they control. It is almost certain that there are fuel shortages in different areas of the country, including government areas as fuel traders look to transport supplies to Houthi-held governorates, given the potential for greater profits due to the higher fuel prices there. The extent and severity of these shortages remains unclear, with both the Houthis and the government looking to either play up or conversely play down resultant humanitarian concerns.

Saudi Arabia Pledges US\$422 million Fuel Grant for Govt Areas

On March 30, Saudi Arabia announced that it would provide Yemen with a US\$422 million fuel grant via the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen (SDRPY). Riyadh stated that the fuel would be for electricity power generation, but did not initially specify in which exact areas the fuel would be sent, distributed and subsequently used. On April 13, the Saudi Press Agency reported that the fund would purchase 1,260,850 metric tons (MT) to power "more than 80 power stations" in areas that fall under the government's administrative control. Saudi Arabia previously

provided Yemen with a US\$180 million fuel for electricity grant, spread out over a six month period from October 2018 till the end of March 2019. The fuel was delivered via three separate shipments in October and December 2018 and January 2019, which were then distributed and used in areas nominally under the government's control.

Panel of Experts Revise Analysis of CBY-Aden

At the end of March the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen withdrew its earlier accusations lodged against the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden related to its handling of the US\$2 billion deposit provided by Saudi Arabia in March 2018. The economic section of the latest UN Panel of Experts report circulated at the end of January 2021 included accusations that the central bank in Aden had engaged in “money-laundering and corruption practices.” In addition to the Panel of Experts telling the UN Security Council to disregard this particular section, pending a final review, the author of the economic section, Mourad Baly, also withdrew his name from consideration for re-nomination. (For commentary, see “The Corruption is Real: UN Panel Should Not Have Retracted Embezzlement Accusations”)

Shabwa Local Authority Cancels Agreement for Qana Port Development

On April 11, the local authority in Shabwa announced the cancellation of a standing agreement with QZY Trading LLC over the development of Qana port. Ahmed al-Essi, one of Yemen's most prominent businessmen and deputy director of the President's Office, is a shareholder of QZY Trading LLC. The first shipment of fuel (17,000 MT of diesel) unloaded at Qana in mid-January. The reasons behind the cancellation of the agreement between the local authority and QZY Trading LLC has been subject to a lot of local media speculation, with the Shabwa local authority accusing Al-Essi and QZY Trading LLC of refusing to sell 35 percent of any fuel shipment via Qana to the local Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC) branch at cost (the price at which they purchased the fuel plus the cost of shipping it to Qana). For its part, QZY Trading LLC stated that this condition was not part of the original agreement with the local governing authority.

Houthis Temporarily Open YPC Fuel Stations in Sana'a

On April 20, the Houthi-run Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC) temporarily reopened a number of fuel stations in Sana'a and sold petrol and diesel at a rate of YR11,000 per 20 liters. This was a marked increase from the previous 'official' rate of YR5,900 per 20 liters at YPC stations, but was, however, YR2,000 less than the price at privately-owned fuel stations. The YPC fuel stations remained open for roughly 48 hours before closing again, with fuel once again being only available on the 'parallel' or 'black' market at a price of YR13,000 per 20 liters. The temporary reopening of YPC stations and the sudden increased availability of fuel at those stations raised

suspensions over potential fuel stockpiling and the validity over claims of fuel shortages due to decreased fuel imports via Hudaydah port from January through April.

Sana'a Chamber of Commerce and Industry Denounces Houthi Zakat Authority

On April 18, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Amanat al-Asimah issued a statement denouncing 'harsh' and 'extreme' measures adopted by the Houthi-run Zakat Authority in April, namely the deployment of armed security and intelligence officials at different commercial stores and private sector enterprises to demand access to their internal data. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry – Amanat al Asimah also expressed its opposition to the damage caused by the fact that a number of stores were forced to close at the behest of the security and intelligence officials. The moves are seen as part of an attempt to increase zakat and general tax revenues, with taxation serving as a reliable source of funding for the Houthi movement.



A man holds a Yemeni flag at a demonstration in Sana'a, February 2011 // Sana'a Center photo by Rahman Taha

Features

Reflections on the 2011 Yemeni Uprising a Decade On

JANUARY 15: THE DAY I WORE A REVOLUTION

By Bilqis Lahabi

I was in Tunisia on December 17, 2010. The workshop I was attending in Tunis was in a frenzy, everyone worriedly whispering about the young Tunisian man in Sidi Bouzid who had set himself on fire, kicking off a wave of protests in the city.

I returned to Sana'a, but my thoughts, along with those of the world, remained focused on Tunisia and the growing protests. I was watching them at a friend's house when on January 13, 2011, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali said "I have understood you" to the people, and left for exile. It was a moment that awakened emotions of hope and revolution: an urge to cry, a sense of joy, awe and amazement. The exclamations were in throats and in our hearts, as we recited the Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's words: "If, one day, the people will to live..." Who among us did not will what was happening?

That night, we ended our gathering and everyone silently went home. Later, I got a message from a friend, Fatimah Mutahar, suggesting that we make a public gesture to express our joy and solidarity with Tunisia.

On January 14, I sent an open invitation on Facebook to gather the next morning in front of the Tunisian Embassy in Sana'a. I'd never done anything like this before, so I asked for help. Eventually, a colleague, Abdulrasheed Al Faqih, helped me draft and send the invitation:

A call for a celebratory gathering in front of the Tunisian Embassy at 10 a.m. on Saturday, January 15, 2011.

The invitation soon found its way to Fakhriah Hujairah, an activist who sent it to her network of university students, youth political party members, activists and journalists. I may have written the invitation, but Fakhriah made it an event.

The night before our event, I could hear my heart beating in my chest, I could feel tears running down my face. Tears I couldn't bother to dry as I imagined the moment of liberation from a corrupt regime. I was at home, alone, unable to sleep, like a child the night before Eid. What should I wear? What color do you wear to a revolution? I decided on orange, the color of the revolution in Ukraine. Orange would be a welcome change from the uniform black abayas.

The next morning, I arrived well ahead of time. There were a few media outlets covering the event. I told the Al Jazeera correspondent, Hamdi al-Bukari, that I wanted to send a message to President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Standing in front of the door to the Tunisian Embassy, with the Tunisian flag behind me, I said: "If he has been threatening us with Iraqization, Afghanistization, or Somalization, we are now threatening him with Tunisization!" It was a moment in my life that I had never expected, yet once I said those words it felt right.

In a nearby street, university students were marching and chanting the first line of what was quickly becoming the poem of the revolution: "If, one day, the people will to live, then fate must obey."

In that small space in front of the Tunisian Embassy, there were roughly 15 activists and journalists, arguing with the security forces sent in to detain them. The marching students were blocked from joining us, but the chanting did not stop.

Bilqis Lahabi is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies where she focuses on Yemen's political and social developments.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

By: Salah Ali Salah

“Shame, Shame; Peace is met with violence.” Despite hearing these chants hundreds of times, it was a very different experience that Friday because I was not inside the square. I was on the other side of the wall, with the perpetrators.

March 18, 2011, the Friday of Dignity, is a day that cannot be forgotten in Yemen. I was at home in Sana’a, near the Change Square, south of the old university campus. I was shocked when my wife told me they burned the square. I went to the window, and saw smoke rising from the direction of the protests, a TV channel news team in the building across the street, filming in the direction of the square, and a helicopter flying over the square.

Neighborhood chiefs and regime supporters had warned us: “If the protests expand, they will search your women before allowing them to come home! They will not let you sleep at night! They will turn the street outside your homes into public bathrooms! If your children go out into the street, they will harass them!”

Cement walls were erected around the square, with funding from the regime and protection by security forces. They separated the surrounding neighborhoods from the protesters in the square. Some of these walls had doors built into them, and they were guarded by men in civilian clothing from the neighborhoods, who would harass the protestors and sometimes not allow them to enter the square.

I left my home, heading toward the square. We were used to the Central Security Forces officers at the entrance, searching everyone going in for weapons. But on that day, they weren’t there. Instead, at each intersection, there were men in civilian clothes forming human chains to stop people from reaching the square.

The largest group of these men was near the first line of contact with the square, behind the wall that had been built across Ring Road. A number of tires had been placed on the wall and burnt by regime supporters. This was the source of the heavy black smoke that I had seen from my window.

Some of the men were carrying clubs, others were carrying automatic rifles. There were also signs demanding that the protesters leave the street and explaining the problems that they were causing for the residents of the areas surrounding the protests. One of the signs had a saying by the Prophet: “Avoid sitting on roadsides.”

On my way to the square, I was called over by one of the masked gunmen. I recognized him and asked: “Where are you going with a weapon? It would be horrible for you to be involved in bloodshed.” He showed me the ammunition in his gun, saying: “Don’t worry, these are all blanks, we just want to scare them.” As I continued walking near the wall, both sides began throwing rocks.

A few minutes later, a transport truck arrived, carrying soldiers wearing the uniforms of Thunderbolt Forces. They were young, and their shaved heads suggested they were new recruits. They were only carrying clubs, no other weapons, helmets, or protective vests. These were the victims, the sacrificial lambs the regime sent to antagonize the protesters.

The protestors responded with rocks, and the soldiers were bloodied. The regime had the images it wanted. It wanted to show that the protestors struck first.

Some of the regime supporters defending the wall grabbed one of the retreating soldiers, yelling: “Where are you going! Go back and defend the country!” The soldier responded: “Those sons of dogs sent us here with just sticks, as if we came to play golf.”

On the other side of the wall, I heard someone on a megaphone yelling, encouraging the protestors to break through the wall. “Heaven awaits you on the other side.” But I was on the other side, and I was not in heaven.

Some of the upper parts of the wall started to collapse, and the sounds of gunfire towards the protestors were getting louder. There were masked regime gunmen on top of a number of buildings, some of whom were snipers, in addition to the gunmen on the ground, including my friend with the ‘blanks’.

Outside the walls, we were not afraid of the bullets, because all the shooting was all coming from our side.

At that time, we did not know what was happening inside the square. One of the residents of the neighborhood came to talk to the “non-participants” who had gathered, including myself. He said: “Look how much these people in the square lie. They just said on television that there have been more than 30 people martyred!” It seemed many people believed the story that only blanks would be used to scare the protestors.

The situation continued to escalate. After a while, well-equipped security forces arrived, along with a water cannon truck and tear gas. The soldiers started to spray the protestors with water and tear gas as the wall broke apart.

I went back home because of the tear gas and to see the news on the other side. What I saw was shocking. There were more than 54 martyrs from these clashes.

Ali Abdullah Saleh said in a statement that the killings were carried out by neighborhood residents negatively affected by the protests. A group of snipers accused of killing the protestors were taken to the headquarters of the First Armored Division, commanded by Ali Mohsen al-Amhar. There are no accurate reports about their identities or what happened to them, but it is likely that they were released. Certainly, they never faced any trial. There are still many secrets surrounding the Friday of Dignity and the 2011 Revolution.

A few days before that Friday, Khalid al-Hazmi had visited me at my home. An enthusiastic and cultured young man, he passionately told me about the importance of change and establishing an organized youth bloc to save Yemen. He was one of the martyrs inside the square that day.

Was his blood and that of his fellow protestors shed for nothing? Will Yemen one day be able to achieve the change that they dreamed of and sacrificed for? Who knows. There are no answers to these questions. Just as there are no answers to as to when this war will end or when peace will come to Yemen.

Salah Ali Salah is a researcher at the Sana’a Center. He previously served as director general of the monitoring and technical inspection unit at the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption.



*A protester atop scaffolding at demonstration in Sana'a, February 2011 // Sana'a Center
photo by Rahman Taha*

THE YEMEN UPRISING: THE VIEW FROM TURTLE BAY

By: Casey Coombs

In January 2011, as Yemen's Arab Spring-inspired protests were taking root, I was just starting out as a journalist at UN headquarters in New York. The revolutions spreading across the Middle East and North Africa had breathed new life into the UN Security Council (UNSC), whose responsibility to tackle threats to international peace and security had taken a back seat during the US-led war in Iraq.

But Yemen's uprisings didn't make it onto the agenda of the 15-nation UNSC until October 2011, when Tawakkol Karman, a 32-year-old pro-democracy activist and member of Yemen's main opposition party, Islah, visited UN headquarters to lobby for action against the latest violent crackdown on peaceful protestors. Karman had just been awarded the Nobel Peace prize for her role in the youth-led uprising against 33-year ruler President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had survived an assassination attempt in June 2011 after loyalists shot and killed at least 50 protestors in March. In late September, Saleh resurfaced in Yemen's capital Sana'a after several months recovering in a hospital in Saudi Arabia. His unexpected return coincided with yet

another bloody crackdown on peaceful protestors and open street battles between Saleh's Republican Guard and forces loyal to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who had defected months earlier.

While Yemen's revolution was taking a turn for the worse, UNSC work back in New York had ground to a halt over fallout from the council's authorization of a NATO-enforced no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians against forces loyal to President Muammar Qadhafi. The no-fly zone quickly morphed into a bombing campaign aimed at regime change in the eyes of Russia and China, whose UN ambassadors accused their counterparts from the United States, France and the United Kingdom of taking advantage of the humanitarian intervention. Together, they represented the five permanent members of the council and the only ones with veto power, meaning any one of them could block interventions in similar contexts, like Syria. Indeed, Russia and China both vetoed Western-drafted UNSC resolutions aimed at curbing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's nascent crackdown, which had killed an estimated 2,600 people by mid-September. The UN estimates that the death toll from the conflict in Syria now stands at least 400,000.

The ensuing diplomatic deadlock among the permanent five members limited the chances that the UNSC would heed Karman's demands to reject a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) plan to offer President Saleh immunity in return for his resignation. Karman also asked the council to freeze the assets of Saleh and his inner circle and refer them to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Three days after Karman's arrival, the UNSC unanimously passed Resolution 2014, which endorsed the GCC initiative and mapped out the political transition that UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's recently dispatched special advisor to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, would promote.

"The importance of this resolution is that it's unanimous," U.K. Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant, the "penholder" of the Yemen file at the UNSC, said at the time. "It's a very strong condemnation, a very strong call from the united international community. And I think that's what gives the power to this resolution."

Of course, that resolution along with the UN-backed political transition ultimately collapsed three years later when Saleh allied with the armed Houthi movement and overtook the capital in a military coup on September 21, 2014. The Security Council sanctioned Saleh and Houthi leaders within a few months of the coup and imposed an arms embargo in April 2015, but the measures did little to stop the alliance. Today, Yemen has a third UN Special Envoy and the Security Council continues to reiterate condemnations and calls to end the war and rebuild Yemen as a functioning state.

Casey Coombs is an independent journalist focused on Yemen and a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. He tweets @Maccoombs

HOW THE FRACTIOUS ELITE HIJACKED THE YEMENI UPRISING

By Abdulghani Al-Iryani

The Yemen Youth Uprising of 2011 lasted for just a few weeks until it was taken over by traditional political forces. Leading these forces was the Islah party, whose leaders were partners with the regime, sharing economic benefits with then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh through most of his tenure. A large faction of Saleh's own camp, led by General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, also defected to the side of Islah. From that moment – March 18, 2011 – the uprising became a power play between two factions of Yemen's ruling elite. Their tense confrontation deteriorated into military conflict and an assassination attempt on Saleh, before wisdom prevailed and a deal for a transfer of power from Saleh to his vice president was reached.

A national dialogue conference sponsored by the UN stipulated an ambitious progressive power and wealth-sharing arrangement, but failed in three key areas. It lost credibility by violating its own bylaws, it lost relevance to the general public by omitting meaningful outreach, and most important of all, it tried to take from the ruling elite more than what was really needed to carry out a successful transition, triggering strong resistance.

The power-sharing arrangement that followed was dominated by members of the ruling elite who had defected from Saleh, namely the wealthy businessman and politician Hameed Al-Ahmar and army General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, ensuring the continuation of the same corrupt system but with fewer people to share the benefits. Disaffected parties such as Al-Hirak, or the Southern Movement, gave up on the political transition and demanded outright secession for the South. The two confessional components of the Yemeni body politic, the armed Houthi movement and the Islah party, seeing that the central state had weakened, raced to take over military camps in Sa'ada and Al-Jawf, giving us a glimpse of what was to follow: violent conflict and polarization along identity lines.

Yemen has five main identity blocks. They are geographically and economically defined, and each has developed its own distinct social, cultural and linguistic features. These identity blocks, each of which has deep historical roots, have been vehicles for mobilization and conflict through the ages. Starting from the east, they are defined geographically as follows:

- Hadramawt
- The Mashreq (Bedouins of the desert region from the Saudi border to the Arabian Sea, including Al-Jawf, Marib, Shabwa and eastern Abyan governorates)
- The Northern Highlands
- Middle Yemen (the region historically called Yamnat or Yemen, includes a mix of tribes and peasants in Ibb, Taiz, Lahj, Aden, Al-Dhalea and western Abyan);
- The Tehama, the western coastal plain that historically extended deep into current Saudi Arabia).

These identities competed throughout history, as great dynasties rose and fell in each one, sometimes controlling all the territory historically defined as Yemen. During the past century, the Northern Zaidi tribes of the highlands dominated North Yemen. In the South, protection treaties with Great Britain helped maintain 23 autonomous entities until independence in 1967.

Since independence, the Bedouins of Abyan-Lahj have clashed with the tribes of the western governorates, culminating in the bloody 1986 civil war. The 1994 civil war followed a similar course, with the Bedouins of Abyan-Shabwa fighting on the side of the central government (Northern) forces against the Yemen Socialist Party's (Southern) forces.

The events of 2011 and subsequent war followed the historical pattern of political movements that attempted to break the monopoly of power held by the Northern-Tribal-Zaidi (NTZ) elite. Previous examples of such attempts include the 1948 Constitutional Revolution and the 1962 Republican Revolution.

But the 2011 popular uprising, and the international support it received, was the greatest challenge to NTZ elite dominance in modern history. This was not because of the strength of the opposition, but rather because of the divisions within the NTZ elite that paralyzed it and made it possible for other political components to claim a share of power.

Saleh is often lauded for surrendering power peacefully. It is time to dispel this myth. According to Dr. Abdul Karim Al-Eryani, a former prime minister and leading political figure in Yemen (full disclosure: he is also my uncle), Saleh met with his generals for three consecutive days prior to signing the GCC initiative in November 2011, asking them to study military options for breaking the youth sit-in in Sana'a's Change Square. At the end of each meeting, their assessment was that the military option was not viable and only the political option was acceptable. In a sense, Saleh was asking them if they would stay loyal if he resorted to force. They were saying no. On the third day, the meeting ended mid-day, and by 4 p.m. Saleh was already in Riyadh, ready to sign the GCC initiative.

The NTZ elite was so fractured after defections to the opposition that it was not possible for Saleh to convince his loyalists to fight. He resigned, and while he left office, as first promised in a public speech during the 2006 presidential election campaign, he also kept the transitional government dizzy with all manner of political sabotage.

The NTZ elite defectors dominated the two-year transition. Hameed al-Ahmar in particular acted as heir-apparent to the transitional president. The new president, Saleh's former deputy Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, made feckless and failed attempts to assume control by removing powerful figures of the old regime, succeeding only in convincing the NTZ elite to close ranks to defend their privileges.

However, Saleh was not ready to forgive the defectors. Saleh also believed he did not need them. He had a better alternative — allying with the NTZ elite faction that had never been part of the republican state: the Houthis. (Sa'adah was the royalists' base during the 1960s. After the 1970 peace agreement that ended the North Yemen Civil War, the royalist tribes surrounding Sana'a were fully incorporated into the

republican state while others further north were left out of the deal.) According to an eyewitness, Saleh gathered a large number of NTZ tribal sheikhs in November 2011 and told them that if they wanted to stay in power, they must go to the “Sayyed”, meaning Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi.

Saleh’s alliance with the Houthis reversed the changes of 2011-12, but his hope to control the Houthi movement and become the leading partner was quickly dashed by the Houthis’ organizational strength, their ideological commitment and their unconditional loyalty to their temporal and religious leader, the ‘Sayyed’.

Eighty years of trying to break that dominance model should be enough for Yemenis to realize that the problem is not in the nature of the NTZ demographic. It is in the concentration of power in Sana’a (or, in the case of southern Yemen, in Aden). There is no conceivable way to achieve stable and meaningful power-sharing in a centralized state. The power and economic benefits it reaps need to be diffused to prevent a power monopoly from emerging again.

The determined fists and the bare chests of the protesters of 2011 did much to dismantle the old regime that was decaying and leading the country to economic and political breakdown. But the disastrous mistakes and failures that followed have brought the Yemeni state to the brink of destruction. The two factions of the elite, the one that resisted change and the one that hijacked Change Square, bear the responsibility for that.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani is Senior Researcher at Sana’a Center. He has served as senior Advisor to UNDP Yemen and to the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General to Yemen.



A demonstration in Sana'a, February 2011 // Sana'a Center photo by Rahman Taha

A DECADE OF SHATTERED AND BETRAYED DREAMS

By Mohammed Al-Qadhi

Like most things, Yemen's 2011 uprisings can be divided into a before and an after: The world that existed before March 18, 2011, and the one that remained after. Before that Friday, anything – no matter how big or outlandish – seemed possible. That January we watched as Tunisian president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, fled his country for exile. Days later, on February 11, lightning struck again. Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for nearly 30 years, resigned the presidency. Could Yemen be next? Would Ali Abdullah Saleh follow his fellow presidents-for-life in stepping down?

I remember those early days in Sana'a, watching the vanguard of the uprising – young students and activists – take to the streets in front of Sana'a University. They believed in miracles. What started as a protest of solidarity and support for the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt quickly took on a local flavor.

The small nucleus of students and activists attracted more protesters, who in turn attracted others, all of whom chanted: "Leave, Leave." That refrain echoed down Ring Road, spreading throughout the city.

Soon, people had pitched tents of different shapes, sizes, and colors, as diverse as the protestors themselves. Everyone wanted a change, a new beginning. There was momentum, hopes and dreams, and the belief that what had happened in Tunisia and Egypt might happen in Yemen as well.

Then came that Friday, March 18, 2011. The protestors called it Juma'at al-Karamah, the Friday of Dignity, but the Saleh regime had other ideas. Shortly after noon prayers, snipers stationed around the square opened fire on the protestors, gunning down dozens in a politically motivated massacre.

That was the day everything changed. The snipers succeeded in killing the peaceful protest that day, but they also sowed the seeds of the regime's destruction. Shortly after the massacre, as the wounded were still being attended to, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the most powerful military commander in the country and one of Saleh's closest allies, announced that he was breaking with the president to stand with the protestors. Ali Mohsen's defection opened the floodgates. Within the hour, dozens of government officials, ambassadors abroad, military commanders and tribal sheikhs publicly declared their support for Yemen's uprising.

For a moment, it looked like the end of Saleh's regime and victory for the peaceful protests. But the defections from the army militarized the peaceful uprising. Eventually, the protests were co-opted by the opposition – the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) – and Change Square was turned into one more piece of political leverage. The JMP went to negotiations as if they represented all the protestors across the country. Ali Mohsen's men in the 1st Armored Division moved in to protect the protestors at Change Square. I remember wondering at the time why peaceful protestors needed to be protected by armed units. That was the trap. When you militarize a peaceful uprising you don't get victory; you get conflict.

The fighting started in Al-Hasabah neighborhood and around the protestors then spread within Sana'a, eventually culminating in the blast at the presidential palace mosque, which nearly killed Saleh, who was airlifted to Saudi Arabia for surgery.

It took months of negotiations to implement the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative for a transfer of power and for Saleh to agree to step down. Finally, in February 2012, Saleh resigned in favor of Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who was supposed to serve as interim president for two years. The National Dialogue Conference was held, plans were discussed, and the future began to take shape. Then, the entire project blew up. There is plenty of blame to go around, but much of it was the fault of the Houthis.

The JMP, which depended on the support of the international community, was so busy competing over portfolios and positions that they forgot Saleh had not gone into exile or to prison. He was at home, waiting and plotting. Saleh's revenge would eventually embroil the country in a civil war and lead to its collapse.

In late 2014, Saleh allied with his former enemies, the Houthis, to take Sana'a and as they placed Hadi and his cabinet under house arrest. Hadi eventually managed to escape to Aden and then Saudi Arabia, but the Houthi-Saleh forces were on the warpath, storming into Aden and bombing the presidential palace with fighter jets. Days later, in March 2015, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm. The operation, which was supposed to last a few weeks and restore Hadi to power, has dragged on and on. We are in the seventh year of this conflict, which has destroyed Yemen and made it the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

A decade on, Yemen's 2011 generation has mostly either been killed, wounded, displaced, made homeless or helpless. The students and activists lost and war won. As soon as the peaceful protests were hijacked by influential political, military and tribal groups, it was over.

I've spoken to many of these young activists, most of whom do not regret what they did, only that the revolution was betrayed and manipulated. And the same parties that hijacked the revolution have also hijacked the armed resistance against the Houthis. The result is the current catastrophe.

After six years of suffering and this ill-fated war, the issues that the peaceful protesters brought up a decade ago still need to be addressed, primarily building a state based on the rule of law and equal citizenship. If they are not, all attempts at peace will fail. There is still hope a decade after the Friday of Dignity. One day this conflict will end and a state will be built again, rising from the ashes. When that day comes perhaps then the protesters will emerge victorious.

Mohammed Al-Qadhi is a Yemeni journalist and analyst. He has reported for Yemen for more than two decades. He is currently a reporter for Bloomberg News and a political advisor at the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. His twitter account is @mohammedalqadhi.

DIGNITY IS IN ASPIRATIONS, NOT IN A WALL

By Bilqis Lahabi

Years have passed since March 18, 2011. Yemenis continue to shed their blood against a wall that they believe represents their dignity, a wall that will never be satisfied. It is a wall built by decades of repressive regimes that institutionalized ignorance and corruption in the societies they ruled. Yemen, as a land and as a people, is being destroyed as it attempts to bring down this wall. Anyone that confronts this wall either wastes away, disappears, or becomes a part of the wall and its system.

The strength of the wall is not the problem; the issue is the tools used by those fighting for liberation and attempting to bring it down. The bare chested young men facing down bullets and water cannons in Change Square in 2011 did not bring down the wall. Neither has six years of war nor the dozens of armed groups that have emerged during the conflict. Yemen needs tools that are more powerful than courage; we need open minds that understand what has to be done and are capable of carrying it out. Minds that are armed with knowledge of what constitutes this wall, so that they can defeat it.

They must also have complete belief that our dignity is not a wall, but rather the principles, values, abilities, and knowledge that we carry in our hearts and adhere to with our actions. Some people tried to do this in 2011, but shallow rhetoric and divided loyalties prevented a real revolution. We didn't take down a wall in 2011. We only traded one wall for another.

Bilqis Lahabi is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies where she focuses on Yemen's political and social developments.



The Old City of Sana'a, July 24, 2019 // Photo Credit: Asem Alposi

THE KINGPIN OF SANA'A – A PROFILE OF AHMED HAMID

By Gregory Johnsen and Sana'a Center Staff

In early February, Mahdi Al-Mashat, the youthful 35-year-old Houthi president, called a private meeting of senior government officials in Sana'a. Al-Mashat, who became head of the Houthi-run Supreme Political Council in April 2018, wanted to dispel a rumor that had been gaining traction in recent months. Some on social media and in qat chews around the city were suggesting Al-Mashat was little more than a figurehead. "That's bullshit," Al-Mashat said, according to a source aware of the proceedings who spoke to the Sana'a Center on condition of anonymity. The president glanced across the room at his 49-year-old office director and the subject of the rumors, Ahmad Hamed. "Ahmad is a dear brother," Al-Mashat informed the room. "No decision is taken by him until there have been intensive consultations."

Few in the room believed what Al-Mashat was saying. Al-Mashat is the official head of the Houthi government, the president, or al-ra'is in Arabic. But in Sana'a, Hamed, a slightly overweight, slightly balding figure, is known as ra'is al-ra'is, the president of the president. The most recent report from the UN's Panel of Experts on Yemen describes him as "possibly the most powerful Houthi civilian leader not bearing the name Al-Houthi."

Much of Hamed's power is the result of his long and close relationship to Abdelmalek al-Houthi, the head of the Houthi movement. Like Abdelmalek's brother and the founder of the Houthi movement, the late Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, Hamed was born in the village of Marran in 1972.

Hamed was one of Hussein's earliest and most devoted followers, but he also spent significant time with another follower and childhood friend, Hussein's younger half-brother Abdelmalek. During the first Houthi war, in 2004, Hamed spent weeks besieged in a cave with Abdelmalek in the rugged mountains of Sa'ada. That war ended in September 2004, when Hussein al-Houthi was killed by government fighters.

At the time, it looked as though the Houthi movement might die out with Hussein. Abdullah al-Razzami, a tribal leader and former member of parliament who had been close to Hussein, made a play to take over what his friend had built. But Hamed and a few others lobbied for Abdelmalek to succeed his late brother, arguing that the movement needed a sayyid, or descendent of the Prophet Mohammed, as its leader. Eventually, Al-Razzami's takeover bid was beaten back, and Hussein's father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, took temporary control of the movement until leadership passed to Abdelmalek in 2010.

Abdelmalek never forgot Hamed's early support. The two were often together during the six successive Houthi wars from 2004-2010, deepening their childhood bond. When the Houthis took control of Sana'a in late 2014, Hamed was placed in charge of the group's media, a role he eventually turned into a position as the Houthi Minister of Information. But like Abdelmalek himself, Hamed now functions outside contemporary governing structures. Abdelmalek, of course, remains at an undisclosed location in northern Yemen, but Hamed is his man in Sana'a.

Initially, the Houthis governed Sana'a and the north in partnership with their one-time enemy, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Together, the Houthis and Saleh formed the Supreme Political Council (SPC) in July 2016, a grouping of 10 individuals – five nominated by the Houthis and five by Saleh – that would rule. But the alliance, which was largely one of convenience and common enemies, was doomed from the start. There was simply too much blood between the two sides. After all, it was Saleh's troops that had killed Hussein in 2004.

In December 2017, the two sides fell out and Saleh was killed, some say executed, by the Houthis. With Saleh gone, the Houthis were able to further cement their control over Sana'a and the government in the north. That meant the Houthi head of the SPC, Saleh al-Sammad, was now president and unopposed by Saleh's hand-picked figures on the council.

In January 2018, immediately after Saleh's death, Abdelmalek installed Hamed as Al-Sammad's office director. When Al-Sammad was killed in an airstrike a few months later, Hamed stayed on as office director to the new president, Mahdi Al-Mashat. Hamed's presence as office director provided Abdelmalek with a potential check on the president should he grow too strong, and Hamed has used that authority to increase his own power in Sana'a, even coming into conflict with members of the Al-Houthi family.

The Houthi takeover of governance in the north has proceeded in stages. Initially, the Houthis focused on the heads of government ministries, replacing ministers and top officials with Houthi loyalists, but leaving much of the bureaucracy in place. Later, amid growing concerns over the loyalty of much of the Saleh-era bureaucracy, the Houthis implemented a “supervisor” system, installing trusted Houthi figures in most departments. These mushrifin (supervisors) are not officially part of the government bureaucracy but they determine what a ministry can and cannot do, effectively steering each department. Hamed, along with another top Houthi official, Mohammed al-Houthi, has been instrumental in appointing many of these supervisors and, in the world of Houthi politics where informal relationships matter more than official titles, many of them report back to, and take direction from, Hamed.

But Hamed’s biggest – and most controversial – moves have been on the financial front. Hamed diverted funds from the accounts of both the Youth Welfare Fund, a fund within the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and that of the General Insurance and Pensions Authority, according to a former official with one of the funds and a parliamentary official aware of the transactions. In May 2018, he transferred the Zakat Authority, which collects the alms tax in areas under Houthi control, to his office, according to the same sources. A few months later, he tried to take over the account of the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Guidance, which also brings in significant revenue. Hamed was unable to take direct control of the ministry’s accounts, so the parliamentary source said he eventually created a parallel department – known as the General Authority of Endowments – and then linked the department to the presidential office, giving him backdoor access.

Outside of Yemen, Hamed is best known for control over the Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA), and its similarly wordy predecessor, NAMCHA. Hamed is chairman of the board for SCMCHA, which oversees the import and distribution of all humanitarian aid into Houthi-controlled territory. “Not even a simple project can be carried out in northern Yemen without the consent and supervision of this body,” a Yemeni head of a local aid organization told The Associated Press.

Hamed did not respond to a Sana’a Center interview request sent to SCMCHA.

In many ways, Hamed has, through SCMCHA, weaponized food aid in Houthi controlled territory, using it as a tool to reward allies and punish opponents. SCMCHA’s board includes the head of the Houthi intelligence apparatus, which as the UN Panel of Experts dryly notes, is “an unlikely candidate for an entity devoted to coordinating humanitarian and development assistance.” Hamed’s position atop SCMCHA allows him to directly influence all aid flowing into northern Yemen, which is the most populous area with the greatest amount of need in a country the UN calls the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

An AP investigation in 2020 showed that for a time three different UN agencies were paying monthly salaries totalling \$10,000 to the top officials in SCMCHA, which presumably included Hamed. “The U.N. refugee agency also gave SCMCHA \$1 million every three months for office rental and administrative costs, while the U.N. migration agency gave the office another \$200,000 for furniture and fiber optics.”

At one point, in 2019, Hamed proposed that SCMCHA would be funded by a 2 percent tax – based on operating budgets – of each humanitarian organization operating in Houthi-controlled territory. The UN and the international community pushed against the obvious shakedown attempt, and in March 2020 the US pulled humanitarian funding from Houthi-controlled areas, citing concerns that the Houthis were manipulating aid to fund their war efforts.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has accused SCMCHA of diverting and selling aid worth millions of dollars. The Houthi leadership responded with counter-accusations, claiming that WFP was corrupt and often sent expired food to Yemen. The Houthis later said they ordered a number of internal investigations, although none of the results have been made public. Through it all, Abdelmalek has continued to back and support Hamed. In a 2019 interview, in the midst of the debate over Houthi aid diversion, Abdelmalek stressed that all international aid needed to be coordinated through SCMCHA, demonstrating his support for a process in which precious food baskets and other aid resources go exactly where Hamed wants them to go.

For the UN Panel of Experts, there is little doubt that Hamed is calling the shots. The Panel's latest report states that Hamed is directly responsible for SCMCHA's activities "when it impedes the flow of humanitarian assistance and obstructs humanitarian movements."

Only a few people in Sana'a have attempted to challenge Hamed. At least three Houthi-appointed ministers – health, tourism and water – resigned after public clashes with Hamed since 2018. Another official, who publicly criticized Hamed, had his house seized and a relative detained. Hamed has frozen the bank accounts of other domestic rivals, and the UN Panel believes he heads one of the three competing power bases within the Houthi movement. The other two, according to the UN Panel, are headed by Mohammed al-Houthi, the head of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, and Abdelkarim al-Houthi, the Minister of the Interior.

Hamed's influence has only grown since Al-Mashat became president in 2018. One source in Sana'a told the Sana'a Center that Al-Mashat is uninvolved in the bureaucratic paperwork of his office, allowing Hamed, who is a reputed workaholic, to acquire even more power. At the meeting in February, Mashat told the roomful of senior officials that he and Hamed made decisions together. "Both of us, regardless of our positions, are acting on the orders of the sayyed," he said, referring to Abdelmalek by his honorific title.

Across the room, Hamed nodded and smiled.

Gregory D. Johnsen is the editor of the Yemen Review and a non-resident fellow at The Sana'a Center. From 2016-18, he served on the Yemen Panel of Experts at the UN Security Council.



Pro-government troops battle against Houthi movement forces in Al-Kweiha region, Maqabnah district, western Taiz governorate, on March 8, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha

A VIEW FROM THE FRONTLINES: TAIZ

*By Khaled Farouq**

In March, as the Houthis threw wave after wave of fighters at Marib, government forces in Taiz pressed on the newly depleted frontlines, pushing back Houthi forces in several areas of the governorate. The government's initial success, however, was short lived. The Houthis regrouped, as a lack of trust, weapons, and support within the anti-Houthi coalition spelled failure for the offensive. By the end of the month, government forces managed to hold on to some territorial gains, but Houthi forces had largely reasserted control over most strategic areas lost earlier in the month. There were a number of civilian casualties and IDPs caused by inconclusive back-and-forth fighting.

*Editor's note: The author, a Yemeni researcher based in Taiz, is writing under a pseudonym for security reasons. The following is an excerpt from a recent Sana'a Center report.

Taiz has been a divided city since 2015, when Houthi forces, after being pushed out of Aden and other parts of southern Yemen, took control of the northern suburbs of the city of Taiz as well as much of the northern part of the governorate. This means that the Houthis control both Taiz's industrial zone, gaining hundreds of millions of rials every year through taxes on factory owners, as well as the governorate's three main roads. It also means that for much of the past six years residents of Taiz city have lived under siege. Houthi snipers are a constant presence, making some roads and alleyways impassable. Food and supplies into government-held portions of the city are forced to make the long journey up from Aden, entering Taiz through the sole government-held road, more dirt track than paved road. A trip across town that once took 15 minutes now stretches to 5-6 hours, as travelers are forced to navigate around front lines and a myriad of checkpoints held by competing militias and military units.

The conflict in Taiz has proceeded in stages. The initial conflict between the Houthis and a loose anti-Houthi coalition eventually gave way in 2018 and 2019 to a conflict within the anti-Houthi coalition. Islah and its affiliated military units largely won that war, pushing rival forces such as the 35th Armored Brigade and the Abu al-Abbas group out of Taiz and into the countryside south of the city.

In early 2021, as the Houthis renewed their offensive in Marib, the war in Taiz shifted yet again. Islah is the dominant government force in both Taiz and Marib. As the Houthis increasingly threw wave after wave of fighters into the offensive in Marib, pro-government forces in Taiz launched their own offensive in Taiz in an effort to take advantage of weakened frontlines.

A Lot of Fighting, Little Change

The fighting in Taiz began on March 2, when government forces clashed with Houthi fighters east of the city. Over the past six years, the Houthis have laid extensive minefields across eastern Taiz, extending from the Salah district to the Republican Palace Intersection and 40th Street. Along with the minefields, the mountainous terrain of eastern Taiz has also given the Houthis a tactical military advantage, allowing them to hold these areas with relatively few fighters.

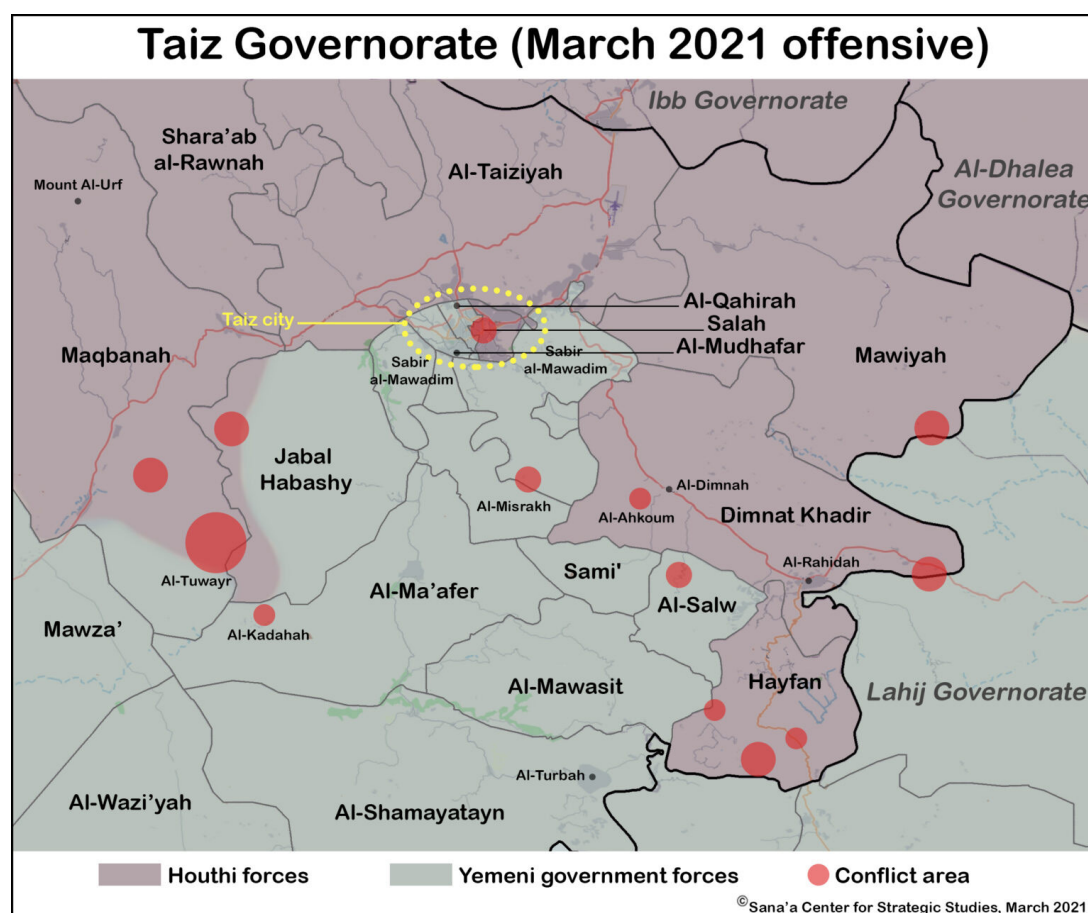
The next day – Wednesday, March 3 – government forces expanded the fighting to the western area of Taiz in the district of Jabal Habashy. Much like in eastern Taiz, the Houthis had relatively few fighters along the frontlines, which allowed the government forces to take control of almost all of Jabal Habashy as well as the Al-Kadahah front in Al-Ma'afer district.

The unexpected and quick victories in the west impressed government officials – particularly Vice President Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar and Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed – whose primary aim was to reduce pressure on fronts in Marib by forcing the Houthis to redirect resources to Taiz. On March 11, Taiz governor Nabeel Shamsan announced that instead of merely pressuring the Houthis in Taiz, the new goal was to end the siege on Taiz city and push the group completely out of the governorate. The governor, who has generally been seen as a weak figure locally, named himself the head of the Backup and Support Committee for the Battle for Liberation, which was established in March to oversee the offensive, and ordered a general mobilization of resources to support pro-government forces.

Within days, however, the offensive started to run out of steam. Government forces were disorganized and seemed unable to agree on a coherent strategy to retake Houthi positions. Along the Al-Kadahah front, the battles stopped on the border with the Mawza' district, while in Maqbanah district, in the western part of the governorate, they stopped in the Upper Al-Tweer area, with both sides shifting to hit-and-run tactics. In early April, the Houthis announced the deaths of several fighters in Maqbanah, including the head of security for the district, Abdulhakim al-Ashmali.

The frontline in Al-Ahkoum was a defining test of the government's capacities, as controlling it would mean gaining control of the main road between Al-Dimnah and Al-Rahidah, allowing pro-government forces to partially break the siege on Taiz city. However, the morale of government forces suffered a setback after the killing of a prominent commander in the Hujariah Resistance, the commander of the First Battalion of the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade, Abdo Noman al-Zuraiqi. Recovering his body, an effort that took three days, became the main objective for the fighters, after which the fighting almost completely stopped.

By March 28, the fighting had largely ceased and the Houthis had managed to reassert control over much of the territory they had lost in early March.



The Anti-Houthi Coalition: Rivals One Day, Allies the Next

On the surface, the anti-Houthi coalition faces a number of challenges in its effort to push the Houthis out of Taiz and lift the siege. But all of these challenges are, at heart, the same issue: a lack of trust within the coalition. Saudi Arabia doesn't trust Islah, which doesn't trust the 35th Armored Brigade or the Abu al-Abbas Group, both of which it clashed with repeatedly in 2019 and 2020. Local authorities and military units don't trust the Islah-dominated Taiz military axis, which in turn doesn't trust the Saudi-led coalition.

In February, a delegation from the Taiz military axis presented a plan to the Saudi forces in Aden, according to an official from the Taiz local authority. Understanding the gravity of the fighting in Marib, the Taiz forces proposed reigniting previous dormant frontlines in the governorate. The Saudis responded positively in person but later failed to provide sufficient weapons and munitions to Islah-affiliated units. According to the same official in the Taiz local authority, the Saudi military leadership was concerned that these weapons would later be used by Islah to target the National Resistance Forces – led by Tareq Saleh, nephew of the late former president Ali Abdullah Saleh – based along the Red Sea Coast in Taiz and supported by both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Instead, the Saudi military leadership in Aden asked local commanders in Taiz to purchase the weapons themselves, saying Saudi Arabia would reimburse them later. Not surprisingly, local leaders in Taiz rejected this suggestion. Lack of weaponry on the government side, at least according to local officials, eventually became a contributing factor in the offensive grounding to a halt.

At the same time, the anti-Houthi coalition was struggling to patch over old rivalries and demonstrate to the Saudi-led coalition that they could work together. In the battle, pro-Islah forces needed support and assistance from the rest of the anti-Houthi coalition, including groups it had previously clashed with. For instance, in Al-Kadhah frontline, forces from the pro-Islah 17th Infantry Brigade came together with the 5th Presidential Protection Brigade, commanded by a Salafist leadership, and the 35th Armored Brigade, in an attempt to demonstrate unity within the anti-Houthi alliance. The 35th Armored Brigade, which has traditionally been close to the Socialist and Nasserist parties and seen as a counterweight to Islah, has increasingly been brought under Islah's umbrella since the assassination of the brigade's commander in December 2019.

Across the governorate, the various pro-government armed groups generally failed to coordinate and agree on a single strategy. Instead of one coordinated battle, the anti-Houthi coalition fought a series of disconnected, and ultimately fruitless, engagements, which allowed the Houthis, benefiting from more effective coordination, to move men from one flashpoint to another.

It was the same story on the financial front. Despite Shamsan's call for donations to aid the war effort, few in Taiz trusted that the money would actually be used for its stated purpose. According to a local businessman, wealthy merchants and private donors from Taiz worried that money collected by one of the various armed groups may later be used to fund intra-coalition rivalries.

The Houthis in Taiz

In recent years, as the battle lines in Taiz hardened and the conflict shifted to one within the anti-Houthi coalition, the Houthis gradually withdrew some of their fighters from Taiz, siphoning them off to more active fronts in Hudaydah and, more recently, Marib. To offset these losses, the Houthis have recruited locals in areas under their control. This often means that the Houthi fighters in Taiz are less ideologically motivated than their northern peers, even though they participate in the same “cultural” courses as all Houthi fighters. A government military source in Taiz pointed to this as a factor in government forces’ initial gains in early March. In both Al-Kadahah and Jabal Habashy, there were reports of Houthi fighters abandoning forward positions and weapons as government troops advanced.

The Houthis have complete control of the districts of Al-Taiziyah, Shar’ab al-Salam, Shar’ab al-Rawnah, Mawiyah, Khadir, and Hayfan, as well as parts of Salah, Al-Salw, Maqbanah, and Jabal Habashy. In most of these districts, however, the Houthi military presence is limited to token forces and supervisors (mushrifeen) – Houthi hardliners from outside the governorate.

The Houthi supervisors have more authority than the district directors, and often rule the population by force. Residents are required to make mandatory “donations” – either in cash, in-kind (livestock) or a quota of fighters – to the Houthi war effort, or else risk imprisonment. Supervisors also appoint lower-level supervisors, which operate under their authority in each village or sub-district.

Most of the Houthi military presence is centered on the frontlines around the city of Taiz, or on the outskirts of the city in areas in Jabal Habashy, Al-Shaqb, Dimnat Khadir, and Sami’. The Houthi’s military and administrative headquarters are based in Hawban, northeast of Taiz city. The group also has a strong military presence on the border with Lahij, where its forces have regularly clashed with joint government and Southern Transitional Council forces.

Civilians Caught in the Middle

As ever in Taiz, it was the civilian population that bore the brunt of the fighting in March. As frontlines moved first one way and then back the other, civilians were forced to flee to avoid being caught in the crossfire. Over the past few weeks, there have been several civilian casualties. Independent monitors who spoke with the Sana’a Center on March 30 said they had documented 35 civilian casualties in the recent battles, including 20 children and four women. More than 30 families found themselves homeless after these clashes, and a wave of IDPs started heading towards areas in Jabal Habashy.

The fighting also brought back fears of indiscriminate shelling and more price spikes. Already the price of basic foodstuffs in Taiz are more than 30-40 percent higher than other government-controlled areas, according to the industry and trade bureau in Taiz office. This is largely due to the siege and resulting cost of transporting goods via a single main route into the city: the precipitous Hayjat al-Abed mountain road. The Houthis control most of the secondary roads into the city, manning a number of checkpoints that trucks have to negotiate. The costs of bribes and payoffs are passed on to the consumer.

Despite the decline in combat operations, and the Houthis retaking many positions lost early in the government offensive, pro-government military commanders and political party leaders claim the battle has not stopped. Instead, they depict the recent lull as an opportunity for forces to rest and for commanders to reassess the course of the previous battles to avoid making the same mistakes again.

Government forces likely have the capacity to restart the offensive, and potentially gain ground against the Houthis in Taiz, given the government's massive advantage in terms of the number of fighters available. Lack of coordination and trust between the Saudi-led coalitions and government forces, and among the various anti-Houthi forces, however, will remain an obstacle. Some anti-Houthi groups view Taiz as nothing more than the second stronghold for the Islah party. As a result, opaque intra-government rivalries and competing agendas will continue to play a prominent role in developments in Taiz moving forward.

Ultimately, even if there is a new round of battles to lift the siege on Taiz, expectations for success are low absent the formulation of new tactics and methods for enhanced coordination.



‘The Battle of All Yemenis Against the Houthi Coup’

– A Q&A WITH TAREQ SALEH

On April 9, 2021, the Sana’a Center held a media briefing with Brigadier General Tareq Saleh, the commander of the National Resistance Forces (NRF) and nephew of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The meeting shed light on the latest developments on the Western Front and Red Sea Coast, as well as the establishment of the Political Bureau of the NRF announced by Saleh in March 2021. The event was facilitated by Sana’a Center Executive Director Maged al-Madhaji.

**This transcript has been edited for length. The full interview is available [here](#).*

Sana’a Center: What exactly is the political office of the National Resistance? Can it be seen as an alternative to the General People’s Congress (GPC), which seems to have fragmented and no longer has the political influence that it once did?
Tareq Saleh: The political office was created as a result of the ongoing political situation in Yemen and the developments that have occurred. We, on the West Coast, need a political entity that represents us in any upcoming

negotiations, for it to be another voice that represents the Yemeni people outside of any religious political parties. The GPC is the umbrella that we are all under, but unfortunately, it was fragmented between those inside Yemen and those outside. This major political party was not given the opportunity to play its role in the Yemeni political arena, whether in foreign representation or internally.

Saleh: Inside Yemen, it is under pressure by the Houthis and the GPC in Sana'a has become very marginalized in its political role. Outside of the country, it is divided into a number of different factions. We hope the GPC can play a very important role. We're obviously never going to be an alternative to the GPC and the role it has played. But the political office of the National Resistance represents the Joint Forces here on the West Coast, and it also represents the political arm of all of these forces here in the Yemeni political arena.

***Sana'a Center:** The National Resistance Forces were established in 2017 to go into battle with the Houthis, and they did that and got to the outskirts of Hudaydah city. They seemed to be the most ambitious forces against the Houthis, and they achieved results very quickly. But then the Stockholm Agreement came into play. This agreement is now two years old. What have you been doing since the signing of the Stockholm Agreement? What is the exact situation on the frontlines now?*

Saleh: We had hoped that the Stockholm Agreement would actually achieve something for the Yemeni people. The main purpose behind the Stockholm Agreement is to alleviate the suffering. But unfortunately, none of it was implemented. The only thing that was implemented is that it stopped the battle to liberate Hudaydah from these militias who are using the Hudaydah port for smuggling and for their own interests, as well as for military purposes, such as smuggling weapons and ballistic missiles through the port. The Houthis continue to control the port; they did not withdraw their forces from Hudaydah city, as per the Stockholm agreement.

As for forces within the Joint Forces, we adhere to the agreement that was signed by the legitimate government and we are committed to anything signed by the government because they represent the constitutional legitimacy of the Yemeni state and represent all Yemenis ... But with regards to the frontlines themselves or any changes or shifts, there have not been any changes. Last November, we proposed to participate in the defense of Marib. We got a formal request and had a meeting within the Arab coalition with the other military forces, and they said that the legitimate government was discussing this. We volunteered to participate, but the government said that they did not need external forces to participate in the defense of Marib. We wish them well and hope that they are victorious in that battle.

Sana'a Center: There had been talk that there would be forces deployed from the West Coast to Marib, but until now, there has not been any acceptance or rejection of this offer. Is that the case?

Saleh: Yes. We offered our support after the first wave where the Houthis took control of the Maas base and made progress in Serwah and on the desert frontlines toward Al-Alam base. And then their assault stopped for two or two and a half months and then the second wave started. During this period, we said we had the forces and the front lines here are not dynamic, and we could support the national army in this battle, which we believe is a part of the battle of all Yemenis against the Houthi coup. We offered to deploy some of our forces to Marib where we could assist in some of the activities, but we did not get the green light.

Sana'a Center: Why don't you move to another frontline other than Hudaydah if the situation here is so static?

Saleh: At the end of the day, I'm not the person who makes this decision, whether we can move to the frontlines. The legitimate government is the one who makes these decisions regarding military strategy.

Sana'a Center: Let me ask you about your relationship with the local authorities, in Taiz governorate, which Al-Mokha is a part of. How is this relationship? Is it a complicated relationship? Is the political identity of the party in power in Taiz (Islah) reflected in your relationship with the local authorities?

Saleh: There are some who are trying to cause a media ruckus about this relationship, and this does not serve our interests as Yemenis. Our relationship with the governor (Nabil Shamsan) is good. He is the one who makes appointments. He is the one who appoints district managers. It's not our job to do that. We cooperate with them. We try to facilitate anything we can. But with regards to who is in control on the ground, we said that any time the government wants to come visit these areas, wants to come and observe what is happening in Al-Mokha, we don't have a problem. We don't have any problems with the local authorities.

The deputy governor has visited Al-Mokha a number of times. We don't have any issue with this. But for us to come under the control of any other political party, I think that's not in anyone's interest. We're now in the middle of a battle for the liberation of these areas, we're in an extraordinary situation. But we've never claimed to not recognize the local authorities there; they are the forces on the ground, and we do everything we can to assist them in that function.

Sana'a Center: Why have the Houthis not released your brother and your son? Why did they release some of your cousins instead?

Saleh: There were mediation efforts by the Omanis and the late Sultan Qaboos tried to mediate with the Houthis. There was a request by my family to do so, and he communicated through the channels the Omanis have with the Houthis. The Houthis continued with the discussion for a while, and there were also some mediation efforts by prominent social figures and members of the GPC like [Chairperson] Sheikh Sadeq Amin Abu Rass, as well as many other prominent social figures and politicians. After a lot of discussions between the two, there was a televised meeting with Abdelmalek al-Houthi. A lot of tribal figures and sheikhs were attending. He told them in this televised meeting, "I will release two and then two more will be released in a second stage." He said that he was under pressure by extremist factions within his own group.

He said that in two months they would release Mohammed (my brother) and my son (Afash). This is the agreement that was reached. They said they didn't think that he would be able to lie in a televised meeting or a statement that was this public, especially since he sees himself as a man with a holy lineage. After a while, even the visits to these detainees were stopped and communication was stopped. But hopefully they'll be released soon.

Sana's Center: When was the last time you contacted them?

Saleh: Myself personally? December 2017 was the last time I contacted them. But there was contact with them through my brothers and through their mother, who would be in touch with them. The last call was almost exactly two years ago, February 2019.

Sana'a Center: So as long as we're talking about the Houthis and Tareq, the question we always hear is, how were you able to escape the Houthis after the events that occurred in December 2017*?

Saleh: God made it easy. After they (the Houthis) took control of the city, and their tanks were meters away from the positions that we were in control of, we were able to leave along with a small group of people. We went our separate ways and I went from one home to another. After a few days, I would hear about raids and so I would have to leave. I spent 10 days in Sana'a after trying to leave the city and staying in four different homes. There was an offer to leave for Marib, but I preferred to leave for Aden. I organized it through people who worked in smuggling. I was able to leave Sana'a using different vehicles, including a truck and a taxi, and I was able to arrive in Aden safe and sound. I think most of it was in a cargo truck, actually, most of my trip.

*Editor's note: In December 2017, the alliance between the Houthi movement and Ali Abdullah Saleh fell apart, and the former president was killed by his erstwhile allies.

Sana'a Center: There's a question from The Guardian. What is the current state of your relationship with the UAE?

Saleh: It is a partnership. We and the UAE have put in place principles for this coalition, for this alliance, this is our cause and our interest. The UAE are part of this coalition and we need support to fight against the Houthis. We welcome their support on the condition that we are partners to liberate Yemen and to restore the state. These are our main objectives, to restore the state and ensure the return of state institutions and the legitimate government. This is the agreement that we had for our partnership with the UAE and they have adhered to this. There are no other interests or agendas outside of the liberation of Yemen from the coup.

Sana'a Center: There's a question from the deputy Dutch Ambassador. He's asking about the Political Bureau. Are the Giants Brigades and Tihama Resistance part of it?

Saleh: They (the Giants Brigades) are very religiously conservative and do not get involved in political affairs. But they said that they support that the voice of the Political Bureau gets across, and they considered it representative. With regards to the Tihama Resistance, most of the resistance commanders are members of the Political Bureau. They were in attendance at the meetings.

Sana'a Center: What is the relationship on the West Coast between your forces and the Giants Brigades and the Tihama Resistance? Who decides the military strategy?

Saleh: Even before the withdrawal of the Emirati forces, they formed the Joint Command and a joint operations room between the National Resistance and the Giants Brigades. The Tihama Resistance is part of the National Resistance and part of the Giants Brigades. So the UAE formed the Joint Operations Command, and there are representatives from the Giants Brigades, from the National Resistance and from the Tihama Resistance. Decisions are made all through consensus and consultations, through meetings between the leadership and representatives of all these parties. They make what they believe is the best decision with regards to military strategy.

Sana'a Center: We'll go back to the south very quickly. How is your relationship with the Southern Transitional Council?

Saleh: We have a common goal, which is to regain control of Sana'a. We've talked about this with them, that this is our main objective. And we also thank them because at the beginning of the process, they supported us. They were a big part of establishing the nucleus of the resistance despite the pressure from different parties who told them that I had come to invade Aden. I came with 10 other people; how could I invade Aden? But they were trying to cause problems among us, but the STC supported us and stood with us. And we will never forget their position at the time.

Commentaries

THE CORRUPTION IS REAL – UN PANEL SHOULD NOT HAVE RETRACTED EMBEZZLEMENT ACCUSATIONS AGAINST CBY- ADEN, YEMENI GOV AND HSA

Commentary by Khaled Monassar

At the end of March, the UN Security Council's Panel of Experts on Yemen retracted a number of accusations it had leveled at Yemen's internationally recognized government, the affiliated Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) in Aden, and the Hayel Saeed Anam (HSA) group, Yemen's largest business conglomerate. These accusations, part of the panel's larger annual report on developments from the previous year, detailed alleged corruption and illicitly profiting related to a US\$2 billion deposit made by Saudi Arabia at the central bank in January 2018 to help support basic commodity imports. The report asserted that almost a quarter of the Saudi deposit – some US\$423 million – had been embezzled through the manipulation of an exchange rate mechanism.

In a March 26 letter, the panel said that it was retracting its allegations due to “new information” the panel had received – without saying what information it was or how it was obtained – and that “a preliminary review showed no evidence of corruption or money laundering”, according to Reuters, which saw a copy of the letter. The Sana'a Center spoke to three different diplomatic sources, which confirmed that some UN Security Council member states had pressured the panel into retracting its accusations. The panel's financial expert subsequently resigned.

The panel's original report had faced withering criticism of its findings. The Yemeni government, HSA and others asserted that the report contained major errors and lapses in judgement. Observers also asserted that the panel report threatened to exacerbate Yemen's dire humanitarian situation, given that the CBY-Aden requires new foreign currency support to continue financing imports, and accusations of corruption will deter international stakeholders from supplying these funds. [For an example of such a critique, see ‘The Panel of Experts Err on Yemen’ by Rafat Al-Akhali, published by the Sana'a Center in March.]

Certainly, the panel's most recent report contained errors of both fact and analysis. However, the broader story the panel painted of corrupt practices within the Yemeni government, the CBY-Aden and the private sector were accurate, and the panel only erred further in withdrawing its accusations, rather than issuing the necessary corrections. Those parties that stood accused now publicly claim they are vindicated, and the true story of corruption is lost.

Various critics argued that the panel's report was outside of its mandate in UNSC Resolution 2140 concerning sanctions related to Yemen. The panel's mandate is to "report on acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen." Corruption, profiteering and the war economy are all threats to security, peace and stability, and each directly contributes to prolonging the conflict. By contrast, pressuring the panel to retract its conclusion promotes a lack of accountability.

The interests of Yemen and Yemenis must not be confused with the narrow interests of a particular company, businessman or even a particular government. Prioritizing the wealthy and privileged at the expense of the broader interests of society is a dangerous precedent. In the absence of inclusive institutions, the capture of wealth by a limited group of elite Yemeni families is one of the primary reasons for economic inequality and monopolistic policies that contribute to a fragile state.

Critics of the panel's initial report, such as Rafat al-Akhali, also argued that the preferred exchange rates that were used by the Central Bank to cover the import of basic goods were legal, and refute the report's citation of Articles 2, 23 and 47 of Central Bank Law No. 14 of 2000. This claim, however, is incorrect. Article 2 of the Central Bank Law only includes general definitions, nothing more, and does not include any provisions on the use of preferred exchange rates. Articles 23 and 47 of the law include provisions on deciding the foreign exchange rate regime (pegged, floating, fixed, etc.) in consultation with the government, and not on setting an exchange rate.

Specifically, Article 23 states that: "The Bank shall determine the foreign exchange rate regime of Yemen in consultation with the Government and shall formulate and execute the exchange rate policy for Yemen." Article 47 of the Central Bank Law also states that "The foreign exchange rate regime of Yemen shall be determined by the Bank in consultation with the Government and shall be consistent with the obligations of any international treaty to which the Government is a party or to which it has adhered. The Bank may declare an external value for the rial and any subsequent change in said value. If the Bank elects not to declare an external value for the rial, the exchange rates for the rial against other currencies shall be determined by the market."

The exchange-rate policy used in the Republic of Yemen since the adoption of the 1996 financial and administrative reform program is floating – with the market price arrived at through market supply and demand mechanisms – and not fixed. In addition, the CBY-Aden reinforced this by issuing a decision to float the rial in August 2017, and no subsequent decision was taken to cancel that. In addition, Article 47 of the Central Bank Law states, in the end, that the exchange rates of the rial against other currencies are set in the market – external value. Government Decision No. 75 of 2018, paragraph 2, provides for the provision of foreign currency to traders of basic materials at the market price. What this means is that actions were taken in violation of the decisions by the central bank to float the currency exchange rate and Cabinet Decree 75, intended to regulate the process of importing basic commodities and oil derivatives, allowing public funds to be used for the benefit of a limited number of businessmen.

Others, including a recent Sana'a Center report, stated that the preferred exchange rates had an effect on the prices of food and basic commodities, though other factors – including double-taxation by the authorities in Aden and Sana'a, and fuel cost – also impacted prices. Despite the fact that prices of commodities remained relatively stable, although at high levels, they did not decrease in line with the difference between the exchange rate supported by the Saudi deposit and the market exchange rate.

Roughly 40 percent to 50 percent of all basic goods imported during this period were covered under the Saudi deposit; the other 50 percent to 60 percent of goods were imported using the market exchange rate, at non-preferred rates. The prices of goods in the market remained the same, whether traders had imported them at rates supported by the Saudi deposit or used the market exchange rate. In essence, this means that the traders benefited from the preferred rates, not the Yemeni consumers facing hunger and malnutrition. It is also ironic that the CBY-Aden, although it sold dollars to businessmen at less than market prices, has recorded in its accounting system a fictitious profit of tens of billions of YR as a result of differences between preferred exchange rate and evaluation exchange rate.

The retacted Panel of Experts report singled out one importer specifically, Hayel Saeed Anam Group (HSA), as one of the primary beneficiaries of the subsidy scheme. Aside from long being Yemen's largest food importer, controlling 50 percent of grain imports into the country, HSA also controls numerous companies and entities in the banking, insurance, and industrial sectors. However, many basic goods imported by the HSA Group (grain, sugar, oil and milk) are not resold on the market, which was the purpose of the CBY-Aden providing preferred rates for goods. Instead, an important share of these imports was used as raw materials for the manufacturing of other consumer products. For example, the Yemen Company for Ghee and Soap, owned by HSA, received more than US\$52 million in import financing from the Saudi deposit, according to the Panel of Experts report. This point supports the conclusions of the Panel of Experts report that funds were diverted from the Saudi deposit for purposes other than was originally, and legally, intended.

The HSA Group, along with a number of other large importers of basic goods, have also conducted deals with the World Food Programme and other international organizations to supply food baskets. These aid organizations paid the importers in dollars, but the importers also received financing through the Saudi deposit. The HSA Group also exported wheat bran, selling it in foreign currencies, transactions which should be deducted from the amount covered under Saudi deposit, but this was not the case.

Traders also benefited from the difference in exchange rates between newly printed banknotes and older ones. A noticeable difference in these exchange rates started in early 2020 after Houthi authorities banned the use of new rials, printed by CBY-Aden, in areas under Houthi control. Old banknotes trading in the market have since become increasingly more valuable relative to new banknotes. This has led importers, including HSA Group, to raise the price of food in areas under the control of the Government of Yemen where the new rials are in circulation. Even though the Panel of Experts report did not address this point, most of the importers, including HSA Group, benefitted from the difference in exchange rates between old rials and new rials into US dollars. They did so by purchasing US dollars with the new rial

banknotes, whose price noticeably deteriorated in 2020. The HSA Group had the lion's share of this currency speculation because of its wide presence and ability to cover the Yemeni rial value of its letters of credit from the Tadhamon Bank branch in Aden to comply with the requirements of the Central Bank in Aden.

Instead of leveling accusations at the Panel of Experts, which has issued an important albeit flawed report, critics would be better served demanding that the Yemeni government form a committee to investigate the transactions supported by the Saudi deposit. This committee would look into the reason for the differences in exchange rates in the market and the exchange rate offered through the Saudi deposit, ensure that there are equal opportunities and treatment of all importers of basic goods, and verify that all documentation is complete. The results of such an investigation should be published to inform public opinion, hold the perpetrators accountable (the previous and current leadership of the Central Bank), and remove these officials from their positions.

The Central Bank should also publish its financial statements and statistical reports and put in place just procedures and requirements that are suitable for importers of basic goods.

The key question that needs to be asked is what is the point of preferred rates, especially in light of a lack of resources in foreign currencies and the failure of subsidy policies in the first place? How were goods like chicken feed added to the list of goods covered by the Saudi deposit? Why did sugar continue to be considered a basic good? Who benefitted from the large differences in the market exchange rates and the preferred rates from the Saudi deposit, and from the differences between the exchange rates of the old and new banknotes? And finally, why were these differences not reflected in the prices of basic goods?

Khaled Monassar is the former chief internal auditor of the Central Bank of Yemen.

TOWARD A WISE US POLICY IN YEMEN

By Alexandra Stark

“I am not opposed to all wars. I’m opposed to dumb wars,” said then-state Senator Barack Obama at an anti-war rally in Chicago in October 2002, the same month that Congress voted to authorize the US invasion of Iraq. It was a theme that candidate Obama would repeat throughout the 2008 presidential election season, after he was catapulted to national fame in part due to his early public opposition to the Iraq War. “I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East,” Obama told the crowd, “and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of Al-Qaeda.”

Obama’s predictions about the US invasion of Iraq were prescient then, but almost thirteen years later, they could just as easily have described the Saudi-led coalition’s intervention in Yemen – with the backing of the Obama administration. US support for the coalition, which included aerial refueling and intelligence sharing, would become a sore point in the Obama administration’s foreign policy legacy. By the time Obama left office, the war had generated a humanitarian crisis, with more than 450,000 children under 5 suffering from acute malnutrition and the worst cholera epidemic in recorded history already brewing.

For decades US policy toward Yemen has focused on short-term, narrowly defined solutions ostensibly related to US strategic goals in the broader region, rather than on Yemen itself. But instead of facilitating US strategic interests in the region, this short-termism has harmed them. Both Republicans and Democratic administrations have viewed Yemen primarily as an add-on to other areas of policy – Saudi Arabia, counterterrorism, Iran – rather than as a country deserving of its own policy approach. In practice, this has meant giving security partners in the Gulf, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, what they want in exchange for their cooperation on other US strategic priorities, rather than focusing on what it would take to help provide Yemenis with the tools to achieve sustainable internal stability.

In the current war, for example, the US has maintained its assistance to the Saudi-led coalition for six years not because the intervention was succeeding on its own terms, but because US support has been seen as essential to its relationships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In addition to maintaining these relationships, US officials initially hoped their support would encourage reciprocity on US security priorities, especially the Iran nuclear agreement – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – and later arms sales. The US also hoped that its involvement could mitigate the worst harms that could come out of the coalition’s intervention.

Yet this short-sighted approach has backfired. Far from achieving US objectives, the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition has seen increased instability in Yemen and the broader region. The spillover effects of the conflict have created conditions that could allow AQAP to present a threat for years to come. The war and the coalition’s intervention opened more space for Iran to build a partnership with a non-state actor that is capable of antagonizing Saudi Arabia on its southern border. A permanently fragmented Yemen would be more likely to succumb to future conflict, creating

opportunities for intervention and increased regional instability. At the same time, involvement in the war has damaged the United States' international reputation. The United States cannot inoculate itself from these problems, which are in part the result of its support for the intervening coalition, nor can it dismiss the moral implications of the ensuing humanitarian disaster.

The Trump administration doubled down on the Obama administration's initial support for the Saudi-led coalition when it came into office. Trump's first foreign trip took him to Saudi Arabia, where he signed a joint "strategic vision" including \$110 billion in arms sales. Later in his term, Trump vetoed efforts by Congress to block arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE and to invoke the 1973 War Powers Resolution to end US support for the coalition. The administration also introduced controversial new arms sales to the UAE, including a sale of F-35s, "the United States' most advanced stealthy, fifth-generation combat aircraft." The Biden administration initially put a hold on this and other arms sales, but to the dismay of many policymakers and activists, a State Department spokesperson recently confirmed that the administration plans to move forward with many of these sales.

A Bipartisan Approach

The US approach to Yemen, under both the Obama and Trump administrations, was driven by US security partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Seeing Yemen and the war through that prism led the US into a number of policy mistakes.

Senior US national security officials reported that when Saudi officials approached them privately in March 2015 and told them they were going ahead with the intervention, the Obama administration believed it had to provide some support. By then, both Saudi and US officials believed – largely at the insistence of the Saudis – that the bilateral relationship between the two security partners had frayed. KSA's leadership was disappointed by US calls for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a Saudi (and erstwhile US) ally, to step down in 2011 during the Arab Spring and the signing of the Iran nuclear agreement. Saudi leaders worried that the JCPOA signaled a US softening toward Iran, the kingdom's chief regional opponent. Reflecting that view, in a 2016 interview, while noting that "my view has never been that we should throw our traditional allies overboard in favor of Iran," Obama asserted that US Gulf partners and Iran "need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace."

As a result, several US officials confirmed that the Obama administration felt it had little choice. They believed that a failure to support the intervention would irreparably damage the relationship, and saw providing support for the intervention as a kind of quid pro quo arrangement in exchange for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies to not actively undermine the JCPOA. At the same time, many US officials did not have a lot of confidence that the intervention could succeed. A senior U.S. official later said of the decision: "We knew we might be getting into a car with a drunk driver," but thought that the US could help mitigate the Kingdom's worst impulses.

For the Trump administration, personal ties to leaders of Gulf monarchies, US arms sales and a desire to advance normalization of relations between some Gulf nations and Israel prevailed over concerns about the humanitarian situation in Yemen or the increasing agreement that there was no military solution to Yemen's conflict.

Reframing US Strategic Aims in the Gulf

To contribute to building a sustainable peace in Yemen, the US needs to reframe how it understands its interests in the Gulf. A stable Yemen that provides access to economic opportunity for its citizens and a fairer distribution of government resources would be less likely to succumb to violent conflict in the future, which in turn will prevent external military intervention and the spillover effects of conflict. A sustainable political settlement will also help keep US regional security partners like Saudi Arabia safer. In short, a prosperous, well-governed Yemen would be good for Yemenis, the region, and the US.

To move toward this alternative, longer-term vision for a stable and prosperous Yemen, the United States should use the leverage that it holds with Saudi Arabia and the UAE to end or limit external military intervention. The US can accomplish this by providing security partners with assurance measures. It should also work to get these Gulf states to bring their local partners on the ground to the table for good faith negotiations. Indeed, the appointment of the US special envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking, has lent diplomatic heft to mediation efforts, and reported preliminary meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia on Yemen are promising, even if the parties are still far apart on the key issues. The US should also provide support and resources for a political transition process that invests in transitional justice and addressing underlying causes of conflict. US economic aid to Yemen should focus on investing in sustainable development, in addition to much-needed humanitarian assistance, while working to ensure that such emergency assistance does not inadvertently disrupt local markets. US diplomats should support good governance efforts in Yemen, as well as local conflict resolution strategies to prevent the outbreak of future violence. Rushing this process in order to achieve a short-sighted version of “stability” will only ensure that the underlying issues that led to the conflict will remain unresolved.

The Biden administration’s move to end US support for the Saudi-led coalition is a good start, but Yemen’s wars will not be resolved without painstaking negotiations that require difficult political tradeoffs, a robust transitional justice process, and investments in humanitarian assistance as well as sustainable economic development. All of this will take time and require sustained diplomatic attention from the United States, including helping to ensure that negotiations are truly inclusive and that demobilization processes are effective. Once a deal has been struck, the US can help monitor implementation, deter spoilers, and raise the cost of non-compliance. At the end of the day, it will be up to the Yemeni parties themselves to decide Yemen’s post-war political fate — but US diplomacy can help create the conditions necessary for a sustainable peace.

By engaging in a peace process for the sake of Yemen, rather than viewed through the prism of the United States’ relationships with its Gulf security partners, US policy can not only support a more sustainable peace in Yemen, but achieve US strategic goals in the region.

*Alexandra Stark is a Senior Researcher at New America and holds a PhD from Georgetown University. She is currently working on a book manuscript, *Forgotten Wars: What intervention in Yemen’s civil war tells us about Middle East politics and the failures of U.S. policy*, with Yale University Press.*



The UAE-funded Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital in Socotra // Sana'a Center photo by Quentin Müller

In Focus

AFTER REOPENING TO INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL, SOCOTRA FACES COVID-19'S RISING TIDE UNPREPARED

By Quentin Müller, Socotra

When the COVID-19 virus started to spread rapidly across Yemen in April and May 2020, Socotra was largely spared. This was in large part due to the archipelago's isolation. Socotra is one of the more isolated land masses in the world. With the war restricting travel options, as of late 2020 only a handful of regular routes connected the island's main city, Hadebo, to the Yemeni mainland, with flights from Sayoun airport and boats from Mukalla and Aden, as well as a passenger ship route from Salalah, Oman.

At the beginning of 2021, Felix Airways restarted direct international flights to Socotra, via Dubai, although this was canceled the next month. In March, Air Arabia established a regular route to the island via Abu Dhabi. Thus, since January, Socotri families living in the United Arab Emirates – where many reside in the emirates of

Ajman and Ras al-Khaimah – have had a convenient means to travel back and forth. Tourists, primarily Westerners, have also been returning. This provided a boost to the local economy, in particular the tourism sector – including local tour operators, guides, drivers and hotels – but it also provided an air bridge for the COVID-19 pandemic spread to Socotra.

Foreign tourists were requested to present a negative PCR test prior to boarding in the UAE and to take a blood test upon arrival. However, they were not required to quarantine. Nor were masks worn frequently either by locals or tourists to Socotra. Unlike foreign tourists, Yemenis traveling to Socotra from the mainland were not required to present negative PCR tests prior to travel.

For the first few months of 2021, life on the island looked much as it had pre-pandemic, and local guides often told their clients that Socotra was COVID-19 free. The consequences of reopening to international travel, however, have since become apparent. Over the first four days of April, more than 40 Socotris tested COVID-19 positive, according to Dr. Saad al-Qadumi from the Emirati-funded Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital, which is based in the capital Hadebo and is considered the main hospital in Socotra. “The island is still open for visitors, and citizens who come from Hadramawt and Al-Mahra are not tested,” he said. “They still move freely among the people in the markets and in the streets.”

A Socotri employee of the Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital, speaking to Sana’a Center on the condition of anonymity, revealed that 19 out of 25 COVID-19 tests conducted on April 1 were positive – a small sample, but a dangerously high positivity rate. “My neighbor, an old lady, died of COVID-19. Cases are increasing every day,” he said. “But no one is wearing a mask.”

Making the matter even more precarious is the fact that there are no quarantine rooms at Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital, meaning Socotra has minimal resources to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak. “We have only four intubating machines and four ventilators machines for the whole island, which is not enough but better than nothing,” Doctor al-Qadumi told the Sana’a Center. He added that the island’s medical facilities are normally supplied with oxygen from Hadramawt, but high winds that characterize the spring season are limiting these boat-bound deliveries. The other medical center on the island, the Saudi Field Center, funded by Saudi Arabia, also recently laid off most of its staff, who were primarily Jordanian.

Only one facility on the island – the Alasli laboratory – conducts COVID-19 PCR tests, although the cost is prohibitively expensive, about 45,000 Yemeni rials (YR) per test (roughly US\$52 as of this writing), equivalent to a month’s salary for many families. Those tests must then be sent to the mainland for processing. The Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital uses the less reliable and cheaper antigen tests that cost YR6,000 (roughly US\$6.90).

Individual indiscretions are also aiding in COVID-19’s spread. One local employee who works for the Sharjah-based low-cost airline Air Arabia and requested anonymity to speak candidly about the situation, said that 15 passengers attempted to board a March 29 flight to Abu Dhabi but were turned away because they had tested positive for COVID-19. “The real concern is that people who test positive do not confine themselves. They even go to the airport, mixing with the crowd thinking they can

still board the flight, until they get stopped at the counter and are requested to show a negative COVID-19 PCR test certificate. Some said: ‘I am healthy, it is just the flu.’”

One hotel manager, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that several Socotri tour guides continued working without masks despite being COVID-19 positive. “I recall one who recently tested positive. Now he is self-isolating, but he stayed for a week with 12 tourists who came from the UAE,” the manager said.

“People still do not believe that there are dozens of positive cases in (Hadebo) and carelessly cope with the situation. They do not wear masks or take proactive measures,” said Al-Qadumi, the doctor.

Masks are available in shops around Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan Hospital at the cost of 200 Yemeni rials each (\$0.20). Although a single mask is affordable for most, purchasing several can impact the budgets of low-income households.

Local authorities initially took little action to address the pandemic’s threat, having made no statements regarding the circulation of the virus in recent months nor issuing new public health protocols. People continue to go about their daily lives, families sit around a big dish to share meals, people gather to chew qat, and hand-to-hand and nose-to-nose greetings continue. Cans of fresh water and cups remain in front of most homes for thirsty passers-by.

At the end of April, a local vaccination campaign, backed by UNICEF and the WHO, began for those 60 and older on the island.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by (in alphabetical order): Ghaidaa Alrashidy, Naziha Baassiri, Ryan Bailey, Casey Coombs, Ali Al-Dailami, Yasmeen Al-Eryani, Amani Hamad, Hamza al-Hammadi, Abdulghani Al-Iryani, Gregory Johnsen, Bilqis Lahabi, Maged al-Madhaji, Farea Al-Muslimi, Spencer Osberg, Salah Ali Salah, Susan Severeid, and Abubakr al-Shamahi.



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

WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG

Yemen, Sana'a, Hadda St
Tel: +967 1 444 375
Fax: +967 1 444 316
Email: info@sanaacenter.org
f /sanaacenter