



The Yemen Review

May 2023

A Southern Reshuffle

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The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

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

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Political news in May was dominated by the reorganization and resurgence of the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Seemingly sidelined by the Saudi-Houthi talks and the Kingdom's support of Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi, the Emirati-backed group extended its influence through the recruitment of powerful politicians, an internal reorganization, and a conference resulting in a new 'Southern National Charter.' Saudi-Houthi negotiations appear to have stalled over disagreement on a number of long-standing issues, but the recent involvement of China could bring additional resources and leverage to the table.

The STC's revived fortunes have led to renewed political and military mobilization in Hadramawt. The Nation's Shield forces, paid for and supplied by Saudi Arabia, but under the nominal control of President Al-Alimi, increased their presence in the governorate, and were visited by the Saudi coalition commander before assuming control of an important border crossing. For their part, STC-affiliated forces took up positions on the strategic Ataq-Al-Abr road linking Hadramawt and Shabwa, including a key stretch used by Islah-affiliated forces. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also stepped up its activity, conducting at least two drone strikes in Shabwa as it publicly condemned the easing of tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Houthis launched their latest offensive in the economic war, banning the sale of domestically produced cooking gas in favor of imports. Imported gas is more expensive, but the brunt of the impact will be felt by the internationally recognized government and its production facilities in Marib. Having shut down the government's oil exports and rerouted trade to deprive it of customs fees, the sanction will further cripple the government's finances. It is already having trouble purchasing sufficient fuel to keep the lights on – May saw an extension of rolling blackouts in Aden as a Saudi grant has expired without extension. Summer sees the highest demand for electricity, but a number of generators in the interim capital have already shut down due to the shortage.



Aiderous al-Zubaidi, head of the Southern Transitional Council and Vice President of the Presidential Leadership Council, greets crowds in Mukalla, site of the group's 6th Southern National Assembly, on May 18, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Rajeh Al-Omari

Politics at a Glance

Southern Transitional Council Resurgent

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) announced a major **reorganization** on May 8, recruiting several key members of the internationally recognized government. Southern leaders then convened for the Southern Consultative Meeting in Aden, the largest such regional gathering since 1990. Nearly 300 representatives attended the four-day event, although several influential southern factions, including the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference and the National Conference for the People of the South, boycotted the proceedings. On the last day of the meeting, Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) member and STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi appointed three deputies, including fellow PLC members Faraj al-Bahsani and Abdelrahman al-Mahrami, and established an advisory council that included over 400 members.

Though the ostensible aim of the conference was to build consensus on the Saudi-Houthi talks, the STC's immediate objective appears to be to establish itself as the sole representative body of the southern cause. To that end, it has wooed Fadi Baoum of the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation and Independence of the South, a branch of the Southern Movement (Hirak) that has moved closer to the STC; Ali Haitham al-Gharib, a founder of the Hirak; and Abdelrauf Zayn al-Saqqaf and Aiderous al-Yahri, who both head their own small factions. All four were brought on as members of the STC, along with Amr al-Beidh, the son of former South Yemen president and post-unification vice president Ali Salem al-Beidh.

More **surprising** was the recruitment of PLC members Al-Bahsani, former governor of Hadramawt, and Al-Mahrami, also known as Abu Zaraa, a Salafi from the Yafea region of Abyan and graduate of the Dar al-Hadith school in Sa'ada who leads the UAE-backed Giants Brigades. Al-Mahrami was likely pressured to join by the UAE, which wants to bolster the STC's position as Saudi-Houthi talks progress. He has good personal relations with Al-Zubaidi, and it is possible

that his inclusion could mean that the Giants Brigades will soon operate in closer coordination with STC-aligned armed groups. Al-Bahsani was previously seen as closer to the Saudi camp, but after his removal as governor of Hadramawt in late 2022 he appears to have switched sides.

Institutionally, Al-Zubaidi is now in a much stronger position. The removal from the presidium of Nasser al-Khubaji, head of the STC negotiating team, and the appointment of figures such as Al-Zubaidi's former bodyguard, Mu'min Hasan Ali al-Saqqaf, show him not only embracing influential factions in southern politics but replacing personal rivals with allies and friends. Among the informal reactions to the STC's conference and charter, Abdulkhaleq Abdulla – former advisor to UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed – **welcomed them** as laying the practical foundations for a “southern Arab state.”

The conference's resultant declaration, the ‘Southern National Charter,’ was surprising for its strong language, demanding the southern issue be handled separately in peace talks and given “priority in the resolution.” It also stated that northern parties should have no role in the formation of the southern negotiating body, that talks should take place in a foreign country, and that international actors should act as witnesses to a final agreement. ‘Northerners’ likely refers to the former ruling party, the General People's Congress, and Islah. Opening statements at the conference were notable for hostile rhetoric about ‘northerners’ more broadly but did not single out the Houthi movement.

Notable absences from the conference highlight the political problems the group faces in the eastern governorates of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. The Hadramawt Inclusive Conference refused to attend, as did Oman-backed groups in Al-Mahra, and there were few major political figures from Abyan, Shabwa, Islah, or the GPC. During a meeting at the STC-controlled Journalists' Syndicate in Aden ahead of the gathering, officials requested that television reporters refrain from referring to it as an STC event, and instead present it as a meeting of southern factions, casting themselves as a facilitator of southern consensus. To make up for the gaps in political representation, organizers expanded attendance to student, union, regional, and civil society groups.

Other political groups predictably condemned the new charter. Commentators in Islah media attacked Al-Zubaidi for making the PLC an adjunct to the STC, which has become a **“state above a state.”** Abdelmalek al-Houthi attacked the document in a television appearance on May 7, and Houthi negotiating team member Abdelmalek al-Ejri **tweeted** on May 9 that it was an “escalatory move” and a “complete coup against the Yemeni republic as an entity.” On May 12, he **tweeted** that unity and the republic were the “most important gains in modern Yemen,” that the Saudi-led coalition wanted to divide the country into “cantons, sultanates, and sheikhdoms,” and that southern problems stemmed from the nature of unification, not the principle. He also obliquely acknowledged the STC's preeminent position in the south: “Since your negotiating position is better than before, this will help you realize justice through unity.”

Significantly, all the major UAE-backed southern leaders are now under the STC umbrella. Nominally, the UAE still supports the PLC, and it continues to bankroll PLC member Tareq Saleh, scion of the family of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, whose National Resistance forces now have their own UAE-funded airport on the Red Sea coast in Al-Makha. His forces have launched recruitment drives in Taiz, Marib, and Al-Bayda for new brigades.

Competition in Hadramawt

Cognizant of its limited appeal, the STC has moved repeatedly to extend its influence in Hadramawt and the east, and sought to build on its newfound momentum with a renewed push. On May 21, the group convened the sixth session of its National Assembly in the governorate capital of Mukalla, coinciding with the 29th anniversary of the southern call to split from the Republic of Yemen, which sparked the 1994 civil war. STC leaders highlighted the recent southern dialogue and charter, and their recruitment of PLC member and former governor of Hadramawt Faraj al-Bahsani. Al-Bahsani has been boycotting PLC meetings, ostensibly due to the marginalization of Hadramawt, and delivered a speech emphasizing the importance of the assembly being held in the governorate, calling it a “defining historical moment.”

The two-day assembly ended with a statement affirming the importance of Hadramawt to the STC’s southern cause and the group continuing its ongoing recruitment drive. On May 23, Sultan Ghalib Bin Saleh al-Quaiti, the last of Al-Quaiti sultans of Hadramawt, declared his support for the STC after his son, Saleh al-Quaiti, was made special adviser to STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi and his representative for foreign affairs. While former defense minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi, recently freed in the Houthi-government prisoner exchange, has resisted STC overtures, the group would like to net other southern players, such as current defense minister Mohsen al-Daeri, from the Al-Shuayb area in Al-Dhalea, an STC stronghold. The secessionist group also reportedly intends to form new brigades, including one or two in Hadramawt, which could also be affiliated with its Aden-based Storm Brigades.

The moves fly in the face of Saudi efforts to co-opt Hadrami groups and roll back UAE influence in the governorate. At a May 22 meeting in Riyadh with the PLC, Saudi Defense Minister Khaled bin Salman criticized Al-Zubaidi for the gatherings and harangued him specifically over STC actions in Hadramawt, which he said were targeting the PLC’s authority, according to senior government officials aware of points discussed during the meeting. Al-Zubaidi reportedly countered that the STC was “filling a void.” The Saudi government tried to respond to the assembly in Mukalla by organizing a Hadramawt meeting in Riyadh, composed of local government officials, the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, and other groups opposed to the STC’s agenda. Convening the meeting, Governor Mabkhout bin Madi spoke of Hadramawt as a political entity in its own right, **telling** the group the aim was local control of its resources and “partnership, not subjugation.”

Having put its foot down to stop STC mobilization against the 1st Military Region in the Wadi Hadramawt region, which borders Saudi territory, Saudi Arabia plans to extend its influence to the coastal region, where the UAE still holds most of the cards. On May 8, the office of Governor Bin Madi issued a statement claiming to have taken control of Al-Rayyan airport from UAE-led coalition forces. The question now is whether Emirati and US forces will agree to leave the military section of the airport.

PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi’s strategy has been to try to make nice with southerners. To that end, he made a conciliatory **speech** from Riyadh on May 21, on the eve of the anniversary of the 1990 unification of north and south Yemen, but was widely **attacked** online for ceding too much ground. Advertising the PLC’s recent **decision** to begin the process of reinstating and compensating some 52,000 civil servants sacked after the 1994 war, Al-Alimi said southerners “are right to rally around their just cause after the unification project veered from its path and was emptied of its participatory substance and value following the war in the summer of 1994.” Al-Alimi was part of the state apparatus seen in some quarters as oppressing southerners after

1994, serving as interior minister in the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh from 2001 to 2008, when the Southern Movement first emerged, demanding respect for southerners' rights. The reparations, which include the rehiring and promotion of some employees and retirement benefits for others, are likely an attempt by Al-Alimi to broaden his appeal among southerners as Al-Zubaidi actively seeks to consolidate control. It is unclear how or when the outstanding wages will be paid, given the inability of the Aden-based government to cover the salaries of existing state workers.

Saudi-Houthi Talks

The deadlock in Saudi-Houthi talks continues, with the now-familiar question of salaries returning to the fore. Houthi negotiators want them to be paid out of government oil and gas revenues, but Saudi Arabia, with the support of the government and STC, has refused. The talks in Muscat also remain stuck on the issue of Saudi Arabia's role as a belligerent to the conflict, as the Houthi side sees it, or mediator, as Riyadh insists. Saudi ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber has expressed concerns about the extent of Houthi demands in recent meetings. Abdelmalek al-Houthi voiced frustration in a speech on May 23, in which he threatened a return to war. "Though we've given space to our brothers in Oman, we cannot continue forever while the other side thinks they're gaining time to implement their conspiracies," he said, adding Saudi Arabia can only achieve the stability needed for its economic ambitions through peace. The prospect of renewed war was evidently on the mind of an EU delegation to Aden, which met with Minister of Defense Mohsen al-Daeri and reportedly asked how cohesive government forces would be in the event of hostilities resuming.

There are indications of growing doubt inside the Houthi camp about the wisdom of their negotiating stance. A figure close to Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi reportedly reached out to non-Houthi figures for help in setting up a secret backchannel, without foreign involvement. The Houthi figure confided that the resumption of wholesale military operations would be difficult for the Houthi authorities at this stage, as improved Iranian and Omani relations with Saudi Arabia mean it is unlikely to find support for a major escalation of hostilities. The Houthi source also acknowledged that certain Houthi policies, such as privileging Hashemites, were problematic for other parties. Al-Jaber and chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam have both indicated privately that their schedules are free in July and August – suggesting some kind of summer time-out is to be expected, allowing each side time to reflect.

However, public indications are that both parties still expect the talks to reach a positive conclusion. The UN special envoy's office is working with the government and Houthis on plans to monitor frontlines, and has received approval from Riyadh to map scenarios for how the peace process would play out. The UN has also reached out to both the government and Houthi negotiating teams over a roadmap that would follow a permanent ceasefire. The UN seems to be following the Saudi proposal, which would involve six months for implementing salary issues, followed by a period of consultations with the different Yemeni parties ahead of the final transitional period.

Following its success in brokering the Saudi-Iran detente, China has ventured into the Yemen peace talks arena, sending a delegation to meet the Houthi team in Muscat. They reportedly hope to get the Houthis to accept the Saudi bid to recast the kingdom as mediator. The delegation told Houthi negotiators that China's neutrality vis-a-vis US-led anti-Houthi positions at the Security Council could change in future, as could its role in helping Sana'a obtain drones via Iran. But

alongside these threats, they also said China is ready to participate in Yemen's economic recovery, including developing the oil sector – Chinese firms are reportedly angling to enter the northern governorate of Al-Jawf, where oil exploration could begin once a Saudi-Houthi deal is in place. As if on cue, official Houthi media reported on May 20 that Hong Kong-listed Chinese firm Anton Oil had signed a memorandum of understanding on exploration, but after objections by the internationally recognized government, the firm issued a statement saying it had canceled the arrangement. A politically active China could radically alter regional dynamics, particularly in the Gulf, which lies adjacent to waterways that form part of China's Belt and Road initiative and enable its investments in Africa.

Other Developments in Brief:

Hackers Target NGOs

Cybersecurity firm Recorded Future published a [report](#) revealing cyber attacks by the hacking group OilAlpha targeting humanitarian groups, media outlets, and non-profits working in Yemen. The hackers, whose identities have not been determined but appear to have a pro-Houthi agenda, use mobile phone apps like Whatsapp to disseminate espionage software that can track call logs, SMS data, network information, and GPS data, among other information.

Yemenis Evacuated from Sudan

On May 29, the government announced it had completed the evacuation of Yemeni nationals from Sudan, repatriating nearly 2,900 adults and their children. The announcement followed an agreement with Yemenia Airways, through which multiple [flights](#) were chartered to bring people home.



A man prays at the Martyrs' Cemetery for war victims in Taiz city on May 5, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha

Military & Security

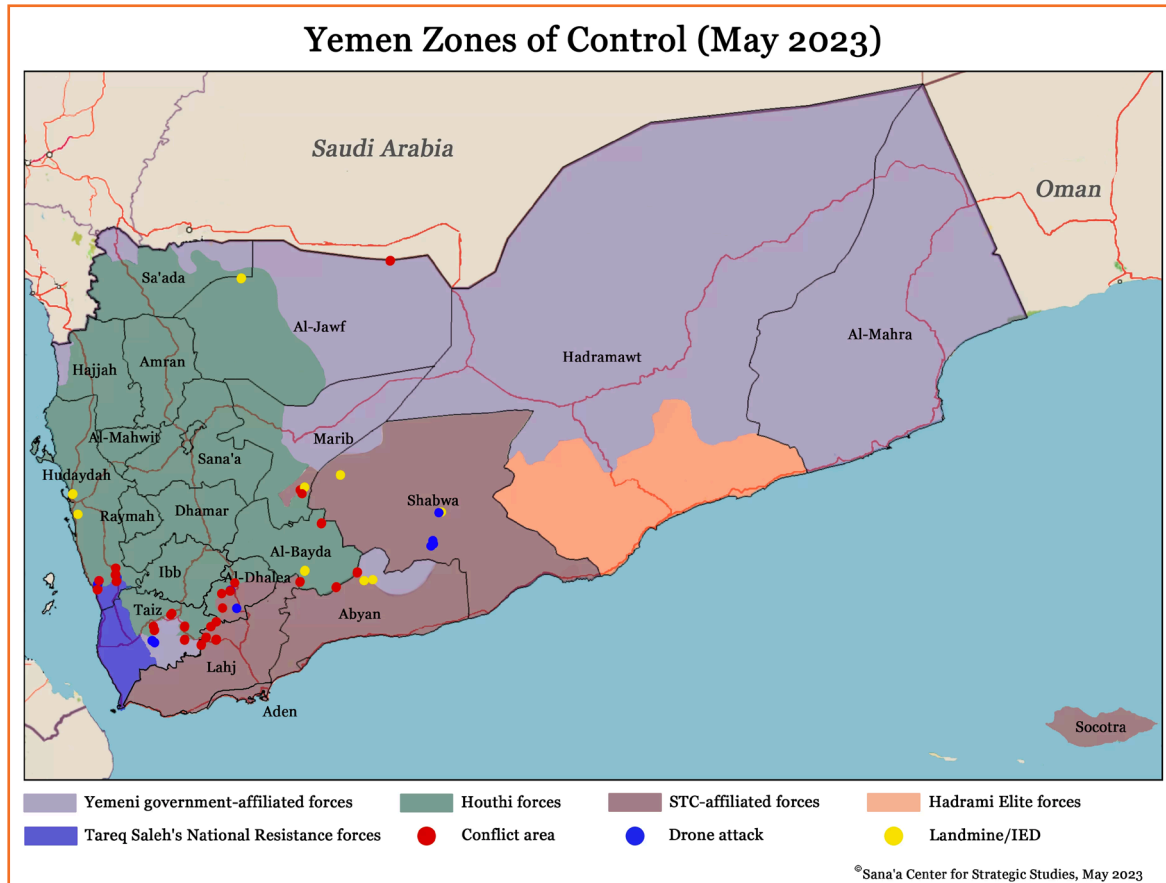
Military Mobilization in Hadramawt

Tensions appear to be rising again in Hadramawt, as the PLC-backed Nation's Shield forces increase their presence in the governorate. On May 5, Governor Mabkhout bin Madi met with senior military leaders in Seyoun to discuss security at the Al-Wadea border crossing with Saudi Arabia. On May 7, the commander of the Nation's Shield forces, Bashir al-Madrabi, **arrived in Hadramawt from Aden**, leading a convoy of Nation's Shield soldiers. The next day, the Saudi commander of the Joint Forces of the Saudi-led coalition, Mutlaq al-Azima, **visited** these forces at the border crossing. Saudi Arabia created the Nation's Shield militia to operate under PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi, partly in order to curb STC influence in southern governorates. Some of the units were previously known as the Al-Yemen Al-Saeed forces, formed with Saudi support throughout 2022.

In early May, following this show of force, the Al-Wadea border crossing was handed over to Hadrami troops from the Nation's Shield forces. On May 8, 11, and 25, large convoys carrying armored vehicles and soldiers were seen in Shabwa and Abyan on their way to and from the border crossing, and in Aden and its environs.

On May 17, units of the Shabwa Defense forces **were deployed** in the Nukhan area of Ataq district and the Khashm Ramid area of Amraa district in northeastern Shabwa to secure the Ataq-Al-Abr road linking Shabwa and Hadramawt. The deployment gives the STC-affiliated forces authority over a key stretch of highway used by Islah-affiliated forces, which fled to the Shabwa-Marib border region after they were ejected from Ataq following battles in August 2022 with Shabwa Defense and Giants Brigade forces

Southern actors have also ramped up political activity in the governorate, with local authorities re-opening the **Al-Rayyan International Airport** on May 8. STC-opposed Hadrami figures used the airport to attend a meeting in **Riyadh** at the invitation of Saudi Arabia on May 20. At the same time, the STC hosted the **sixth session** of its National Assembly in Mukalla on May 21.



Al-Qaeda Steps Up Attacks; STC Forces Claim Capture of Islamic State Cell

May witnessed an increase in the number and sophistication of attacks from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Khaled Batarfi, AQAP's leader in Yemen, issued a video on May 2, condemning Saudi Arabia's detente with Iran and urging Sunni Muslims to rally behind their jihadist cause.

On May 16 and 20, Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for drone attacks targeting the 1st Brigade of the Shabwa Defense Forces in Shabwa's Al-Saeed district, bordering Abyan. This is the second time since the beginning of the war that Al-Qaeda has claimed drone strikes in Yemen, likely a show of power to raise morale among the militants as their influence wanes. It remains unclear how the group obtained the drones, but a local analyst said they probably came from the Houthis. On May 23, a **third drone strike** targeted Colonel Ahmed al-Suleimani of the 1st Brigade, but the attack has not yet been claimed by any party.

In response, security units across Yemen have stepped up their campaigns against AQAP, with Houthi forces launching a manhunt in the Al-Sawadiyah and Al-Shariya districts of Al-Bayda. In a series of home raids, a hundred Houthi fighters arrested dozens of civilians while claiming to search for Al-Qaeda militants. However, Houthi forces have a history of using Al-Qaeda as a pretext to round up political opponents or consolidate control in certain areas.

An Islamic State cell of seven people, four of them Saudi, was captured by Security Belt forces in the Yafea region of Lahj governorate on May 26. The group fled there from Al-Bayda, which is under Houthi control.

Houthis Target Key Road in Taiz

A stretch of highway in the Al-Kadha area of Taiz's Ma'afer district was subject to multiple Houthi drone strikes throughout the month, in an attempt by Houthi forces to secure the area. The road, for which UAE-funded construction began in October 2022, was where Houthi forces targeted the convoy of Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan in March.

On May 2, Houthi explosives-laden drones targeted vehicles and machinery being used to pave the road, damaging several construction sites in the process. On May 8, a Houthi drone strike assassinated Colonel Tawfiq al-Waqar, the former Security Director of Jabal Habashi district, according to local sources. Another drone was spotted over the area on May 16.

Tribal and Security Clashes Erupt in Marib

On May 18, a land dispute between the Al-Rashid Munif and Al-Fujaih subtribes of the Abidah tribe resulted in clashes that left at least 12 dead and 20 wounded. The fighting, which began after an Al-Fujaih tribesman killed a bulldozer driver from the Al-Rashid Munif clan, spread to the Al-Mukarib, Al-Museel, Bin Maali Station, and the Qummad areas of Marib Al-Wadi district. In the process, several homes and vehicles were burned and dozens of internally displaced families were forced to relocate from the Al-Naqea camp.

On May 20, tribal mediation successfully negotiated a ceasefire between the subtribes, but clashes briefly resumed on May 22 before subsiding again, according to a tribal mediator and an independent media source.

In other areas in the governorate, regular fighting between Houthi forces and the UAE-backed Saba Axis of the Giants Brigades continued in Harib district in southern Marib. On May 3-4, Houthi forces killed two members of the Saba Axis and wounded three others in the Mala'a area. Clashes broke out on the front again on May 8-14, May 16, and May 24, resulting in an unknown number of deaths on both sides, according to community activists and local residents. Fighting also spread to the Wadu and Bwara areas during this period.

Clashes Continue Across Various Frontlines

In Lahj and in neighboring Al-Dhalea, clashes between Houthi forces and STC-affiliated forces increased slightly from last month, resulting in the injury and death of dozens of soldiers on both sides. Fighting in Lahj governorate was focused on the Hamala Hawamrah front in northwest Al-Qabaytah district, the Habil Hanash front in the north of Al-Musaymir district, and the Tur al-Bahah front, all located near the border with Taiz. Nearby, in Al-Dhalea, Houthi forces disrupted pro-government and STC-backed attempts to expand their positions in the Al-Jub and Batar Hajar areas of northwestern Al-Dhalea district, as well as the Al-Fakher and Bab Ghalq areas, both in northwestern Qaataba district.

In Hudaydah, regular clashes continued in Hays district, particularly in the Al-Bughail Al-Asfal and Al-Sha'iniyah areas. Clashes also flared along the coastal region in the southwest of Al-Tuhaytah district where Katyusha rockets were used. On May 25, Houthi marine forces launched a number of patrols into international waters, one of which came within five nautical miles of Zuqar Island, home to the largest Joint Forces naval base in the Red Sea. Houthi forces also inaugurated the group's annual youth indoctrination camps in the districts of Al-Tuhaytah and Bayt al-Faqih, where students are trained to handle weapons and receive "cultural awareness" lessons.

Clashes continued across the frontlines in Abyan, particularly in the Aqbat al-Tharah and Aqbat al-Halhal fronts in Lawdar district. In Mudiya district, STC-affiliated Security Belt Forces and Operation Arrows of the East counterterrorism forces responded to several roadside bomb attacks by sending reinforcements to the former Al-Qaeda stronghold on May 1 and 13.

Other Security Developments in Brief

May 7: Dozens of citizens from the village of Dar al-Haid in Sanhan district southwest of Sana'a city **protested** in front of the Public Prosecution Office, calling for an end to the ongoing confiscation of land by influential Houthi leaders. Similar large-scale land appropriations, which Houthis claim are state endowments, have been carried out in Bani Hushaysh, Hamdan, and Bani Matar districts. The main roads into and out of the capital run through these four districts.

May 10: Armed gunmen led by the director of the Yemen Petroleum Company's branches in Al-Khawkhah and Hays districts, Mohammed al-Hindi, prevented three of the company's oil tankers from entering the Al-Khawkhah district in southern Hudaydah, according to an official company statement. Gunmen loyal to Al-Hindi previously prevented eight tankers from entering the district on April 30, reportedly following a directive from the company's Hudaydah branch leader, Anwar al-Amiri, that the branch headquartered in Al-Makha is not permitted to send oil derivatives to stations in the two districts. Representatives from the company stated that the measure is aimed at starving the local market in both districts of oil derivatives in an attempt to increase fuel prices.

May 12: Four Al-Masoud tribesmen were killed and 13 were wounded in Mansoura village in Al-Quraishiyah district of Al-Bayda when Al-Arami tribal gunmen **threw a hand grenade** at worshippers in the local mosque. According to local sources, the attack was the result of a five-year-old tribal vendetta, in which the attacker's brother was killed by a member of the Al-Masoud tribe.

May 18: An armed gang led by migrant smuggler Riyadh Daresh killed one African migrant and wounded another in Al-Rabwa area, in the central part of Lahj's Radfan district, according to local activists. Daresh, who smuggles African migrants through Lahj to areas in Al-Bayda governorate, was arrested along with an associate and placed in a detention facility run by the STC-affiliated 5th Support and Backup Brigade in Al-Habilayn city in Radfan.

May 24: Houthi and government forces **exchanged the bodies of eight fighters** in southern Al-Bayda district. The exchange was mediated by the Yemen Foundation for Justice, Development, and Peace, and carried out under the supervision of Abu Amir al-Musabi, a local mediator and employee of the foundation.

May 25: Houthi gunmen **stormed** an annual meeting of Yemen's Baha'i community, kidnapped 17 members, including five women, and raided several Baha'i homes in Sana'a. Baha'is in Yemen have suffered for years from campaigns of violence, imprisonment, interrogation, and public incitement. The Houthis have seized their property and exiled a number of their members.

May 30: Over 100 Yemeni fishermen **arrived** in Al-Khawkhah district in southern Hudaydah after being released by Eritrean authorities. The fishermen were reportedly arrested, taken from their boats, and forced to perform hard labor in Eritrean prisons before being released and repatriated.



A farmer crates tomato crop harvested in the Wadi al-Akhum, area of Al-Mawasit district in Taiz governorate on May 28, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha

The Economy & Finance

Houthis Ban Locally Produced Cooking Gas

Houthi authorities banned the sale of domestic gas cylinders from Safer in Marib during the last week of May. The heavily populated regions in the north will now be exclusively supplied with imported cooking gas through the Houthi-controlled port of Hudaydah. The decision will further economically undermine the government, already deprived of its main source of revenue following Houthi drone attacks on oil export terminals. This has been compounded by a Houthi campaign to redirect commercial ships from Aden to Hudaydah in order to gain control of customs revenue previously collected by the government.

The government could lose close to YR7 billion a month from the new ban. It is estimated that more than 100,000 gas cylinders from Safer are sold each day in areas controlled by the Houthi movement. The decision to import cooking gas from abroad will increase its price by around 40 percent. An imported 20-liter cooking gas cylinder is currently sold at YR7,000, compared to YR5,000 for one produced in Marib.

Power Outages Hit Aden

The interim capital Aden experienced long-lasting power outages during May. In the beginning of the month, generators in many neighborhoods gradually ceased operations before completely shutting down toward the end of the month due to a lack of available diesel fuel. On May 8, the government-owned General Electricity Corporation in Aden warned that the governorate's five power plants may also be forced to cease providing electricity, and called on the government to intervene to secure enough fuel to continue operating. The power stations have already been forced to reduce generation to specific hours.

The General Electricity Corporation in Aden repeated its warning of power outages on May 14. Starting on May 22, the corporation shut down several diesel-fueled power stations, capable of generating more than 80 megawatts of electricity, which resulted in a near-total power outage. Most neighborhoods in Aden experience at least 10 hours without power each day, with outages worsening during the hot summer months as demand for electricity increases. The blackouts have been driven by a critical shortage in fuel following the expiration of a Saudi grant in April. The Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen had supplied the Yemeni government with over 1.2 million metric tons of diesel and mazut, valued at US\$422 million, which had supplied more than 80 stations since November, as part of a deal between Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognized government. Fuel to run power plants costs the government close to US\$1.2 billion a year, and it struggles to collect bills for the electricity generated. The government has requested new financial assistance from Saudi Arabia to address its widening fiscal deficit, but the Saudis are pushing for structural reforms in the energy sector before renewal of the grant, including improvements in collecting fees.

Aden suffers from frequent power outages, which worsen during the hot summer months as demand for electricity increases. Recurrent blackouts in government-controlled areas have provoked public anger against the internationally recognized government.

YICOM Employees Threaten Strike

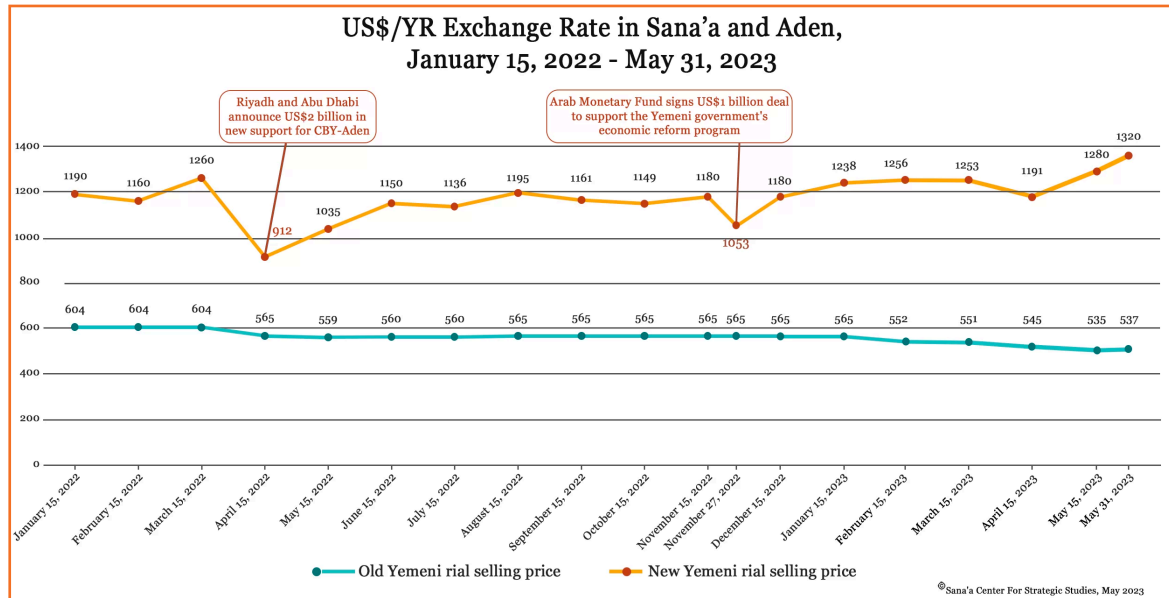
Employees at Oil Block 4 in Shabwa planned to strike over unpaid wages and benefits and accused the administration of the Yemen Company for Investments in Oil and Minerals (YICOM) of discrimination against employees. On May 8, the director of YICOM called on employees at Oil Block 4 to postpone a planned strike. According to the director, YICOM has been forced to borrow to cover operational expenses after the government was forced to halt hydrocarbon exports following Houthi drone attacks on oil export terminals in October and November of 2022. He promised that the company was exploring solutions to resume paying wages as soon as possible. In a memorandum to the company's management on May 4, the employees union in Shabwa called on YICOM to reduce its operating budget in order to afford salary and health insurance payments, which have been halted since September 2022, and threatened to launch a strike if their demands were not met within five days. YICOM announced in mid-January that it would cut operating expenses at its Aden office and at Oil Block 4, and reduce the number of active workers due to budget shortfalls. Crude oil from Block 4 in West Ayad is currently transported overland to power plants in Aden.

On May 18, the union issued a statement accusing the company of discrimination against some employees in paying wages and benefits. The union contends that the leadership of the company, which is based in Aden, has only disbursed salaries and cost-of-living allowances to select employees working at Oil Block 4 and at the Aden office, excluding most other workers.

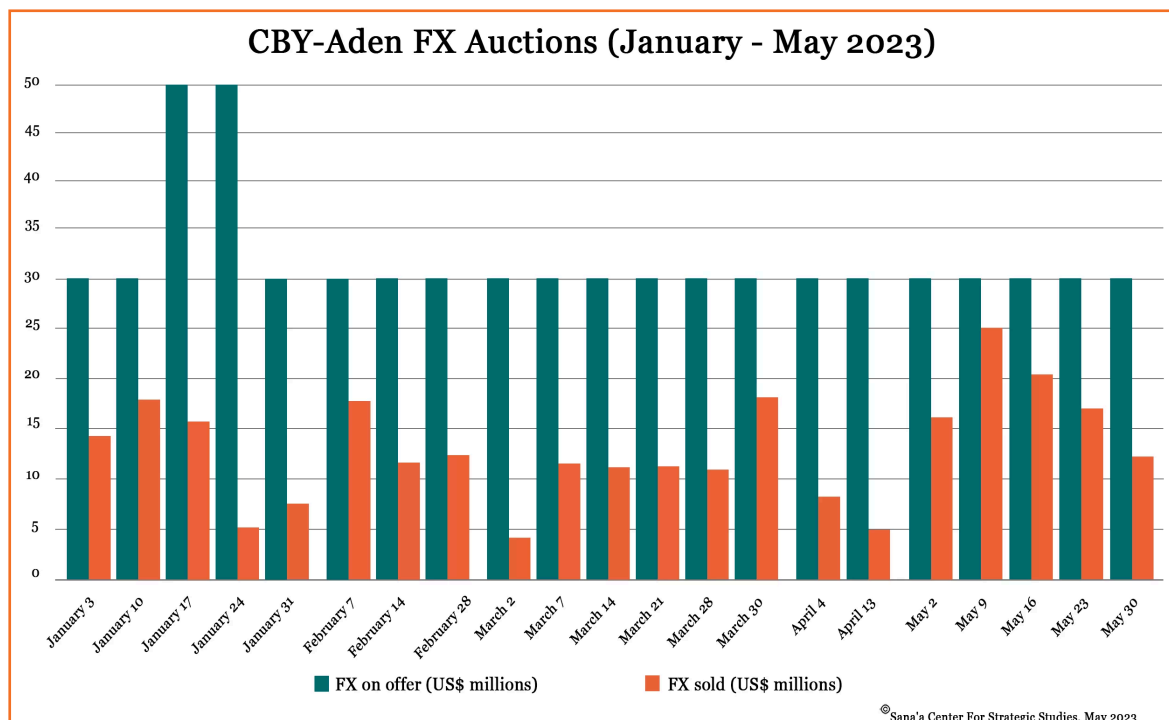
Rials Lose Value

Both new and old rials areas fluctuated in value over the course of May. New rials experienced a precipitous decline in the first three weeks of the month, depreciating by nearly 7 percent, from YR1,228 per US\$1 to YR1,320. Old rials in Houthi-controlled areas depreciated almost 2 percent, to YR540 per US\$1 in the first week of the month, and were trading at YR537 by month's end. Over the course of April, old rials had traded at between YR520-535 per US\$1.

The drop in the rial’s value was expected after the Eid al-Fitr holiday, during which Yemeni workers abroad typically send increased remittances to their families. In particular, the depreciation of new rial notes was driven by the government’s critical shortage of foreign currency. The currency is now trading at its lowest value since late 2021, when Houthi forces were threatening to seize Marib and its oilfields.



Despite its dwindling foreign currency reserves, the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) continued to hold its weekly auctions to intervene in the money market, in an attempt to contain recurrent bouts of depreciation in the new rial. On May 9, the CBY-Aden held its first currency auction since the Eid al-Fitr holiday to finance the import of essential commodities, which was 83 percent subscribed. On May 23, it announced its second auction WAS nearly 59 percent subscribed. The last auction of the month, on May 30, was nearly 42 percent subscribed. Since the beginning of the year, the central bank has held 21 FX auctions, with US\$670 million on offer, of which only 42 percent (or US\$279 million) has been purchased by Yemeni banks.



CBY-Aden Warns Public about Money Exchangers

On May 18, the government-affiliated CBY-Aden issued a statement warning the public against depositing money in accounts with money exchange companies, in reaction to false reports on social media claiming that exchangers were now allowed to accept deposits and distribute interest to customers. The central bank reiterated that money exchange companies are limited by law to buying and selling foreign currencies and conducting money transfers, and threatened punitive measures against violators.

Houthi-Run Central Bank Freezes Assets of Accused Fraudsters

On May 11, the Financial Information Unit of the Sana'a-based Central Bank of Yemen (CBY-Sana'a) issued a circular freezing the bank accounts of two dozen companies and individuals accused of involvement in Ponzi schemes, which defrauded thousands of Yemenis with promises of high returns on investment. Among those targeted with sanctions were the Sana'a-based Tihama Flavor company and its owner Fathiya al-Mahweti, who refused to let hundreds of shareholders withdraw their money prior to declaring bankruptcy in October. On March 1, residents in Sana'a's Bani Matar district protested a Houthi military campaign to appropriate lands in the area for the construction of a housing development led by Tihama Flavor, which failed to purchase all of the lands on which it intended to build the housing. Fake financial companies have been on the rise as investors have shifted assets from the formal banking sector to less-regulated money exchange outlets.

PLC Chief Authorizes Settlement of Southerners' Employment Claims

On May 15, PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi signed presidential decrees authorizing the payment of outstanding wages to nearly 53,000 civil, security, and military employees who were dismissed from their jobs in southern governorates after the civil war of 1994. Based on the decision of a committee formed in 2013 to address the reparations, the decrees rehired and promoted some employees, referred others to retirement, and settled all outstanding wage claims. Addressing grievances associated with southerners' loss of employment after 1994 has been one of the main priorities of the Southern Movement (Hirak). Some observers viewed the decrees as an attempt by Al-Alimi to boost his standing among southerners in the face of efforts by STC leader Aiderous al-Zubaidi to consolidate control in the south. It is unclear how or when the wages will actually be paid, given the government's dire financial situation.

Chinese Firm Cancels Deal with Houthis for Oil Exploration

Chinese energy firm Anton Oilfield Services Group (Antonoil) announced on May 23 that it was nullifying a deal with the Houthi-run government in Sana'a to develop oil fields "due to a lack of sufficient understanding of the relevant information previously."

The Dubai branch of the group and a representative of the Chinese government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Houthi-affiliated Ministry of Oil and Minerals on May 17 to invest in oil exploration in the country, according to the Sana'a-based Saba news agency. Yemen's hydrocarbon infrastructure is based in three governorates – Marib, Hadramawt, and Shabwa – that are all under the control of the internationally recognized government. Hydrocarbon exports have been halted since the end of last year following Houthi attacks on oil port infrastructure in southern Yemen, which have cut off the government's main source of revenue. The MoU signed between Houthi authorities and Antonoil likely aimed to conduct oil exploration and develop infrastructure in Al-Jawf, which borders Saudi Arabia and is divided between Houthi and government control.

Maintenance of Yemen Mobile Network Temporarily Ceases in Aden

On May 15, the Aden-based Public Telecommunications Corporation issued a directive blocking any maintenance, modernization, or development of telecommunications infrastructure by Yemen Mobile, the country's largest mobile network operator. This will likely lead to decreased mobile and internet coverage. Yemen Mobile is the only telecommunications company operating nationwide after the government suspended the mobile services of Yemeni-Omani Company "YOU" (previously MTN) in June 2022 over delinquent tax payments.

Houthis Announce New Price Caps on Food

On May 23, the Sana'a-based Ministry of Industry and Trade **announced** new price caps on basic food commodities, with reductions ranging between 3 to 8 percent. The new controls will apply at commercial shops and retail stores operating in areas under Houthi control. The cost of a 50-kilogram sack of wheat grain was reduced from YR14,200 to YR13,700, and wheat flour from YR15,900 to YR14,700. The list also included reductions on other food commodities, including rice, tea, yogurt, eggs, margarine, cooking oils, cheese, and legumes. The ministry stated that the list is the fourth of its kind, set following an updated review of food prices in line with international prices and transportation costs. During the course of May, Houthi authorities carried out regular field visits to shut down commercial centers, groceries, and sale outlets caught violating the price controls.

The move was met with opposition from an industry group, who questioned its legality. On May 25, the Sana'a-based General Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry **accused** the Houthis of illegally shutting down companies without court orders and imposing fines without legal justification. It stated that imposing price caps violates Yemeni law, the constitution, and the free market system. The federation demanded an adjustment to keep pace with the increase in the prices of raw materials in global markets, especially in light of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It further complained that Houthi authorities were arbitrarily stopping trucks at customs outlets for days or even weeks, causing heavy losses, and had raised fees on containers.

The new controls had been accepted by the private sector after a request from the ministry for their application during Ramadan, but the ministry has reneged on its promise to remove them.

Houthis Shutter Generator Operators

The Houthi-affiliated Ministry of Electricity and Energy **announced** it was shutting down private generator operators violating its newly-enforced electricity tariffs and took parallel measures to replace services through the government-owned Public Electricity Corporation (PEC). On May 24, the Houthis closed the private generator operator Beit Mayad, along with dozens of others in Sana'a. The ministry indicated that it would restore electricity to 6,000 houses through the PEC.

In mid-April, the ministry **responded** to lower diesel and mazut prices by cutting the price for electricity provided by the PEC to YR270 per kilowatt-hour, while owners of private generators were required to sell at YR284. The ministry claimed that 246 of 408 privately owned generators operating in areas under Houthi control had adhered to the new prices, including 140 of 177 in Sana'a. Since then, judicial bodies have fined non-compliant operators with fines amounting to hundreds of millions of Yemeni rials.

Concurrently, Houthi authorities have pushed for a plan to rehabilitate three power stations owned by the PEC in an attempt to increase production and dominate supply in areas under their control. The diesel-powered generators would be converted to mazut, which could reduce fuel costs by up to YR13 million a day and make electricity supplied by the PEC more competitive.

In March, the Sana'a-based Parliament approved **Resolution** No. (33) regulating the activity of generator owners, nominally to enhance service and competition and set environmental requirements. But the decree has complicated licensing, limited operators' ability to collect fees, and allowed Houthi-aligned actors to dominate the market.

The shutdowns have provoked widespread anger. Owners have complained that the new price caps are too low. Consumers have experienced blackouts following the closure of several private generators. Some have accused the Houthis of taking a systematic approach, replacing private operators with ones loyal to the group as part of a broader strategy to dominate lucrative parts of the economy.

Motorcycle Imports Banned in Socotra

On May 24, the Governor of the Socotra Archipelago **issued** Circular No. 10, banning the import of motorcycles and spare parts to the islands. The law is intended to limit traffic and fatal motorcycle accidents, and threatens violators with confiscation of their vehicles and parts.

Houthi Authorities Approve Plan to Rehabilitate Hudaydah's Ports

On May 7, the Sana'a-based Council of Ministers approved a plan by the Yemeni Red Sea Ports Corporation to rehabilitate Hudaydah's ports and bolster their capacity. The plan, presented by Houthi-affiliated Minister of Transport Abdelwahhab al-Durra, requested additional equipment for the ports of Hudaydah, Ras Isaa, and Saleef, including marine pontoons and gantry cranes, as well as the implementation of new procedures to handle increased shipping traffic.

STC Forces Impose Illegal Tolls at Aden Checkpoint

On May 7, truck drivers complained that STC-affiliated Security Belt forces at the Al-Rabat checkpoint at the northern entrance to Aden had impounded a number of trucks and detained their drivers for refusing to pay additional illegal tolls at the checkpoint. The head of the Heavy Transport Syndicate, Anis al-Matari, issued a statement warning that such tolls threaten to destroy the commercial sector in Aden and may push merchants to reroute their shipments to the Houthi-controlled port of Hudaydah.

The Sana'a Center Editorial

No Freedom Without Press Freedom

The release of journalists from Houthi prisons in April has given the government the opportunity to vaunt its commitment to human rights, specifically the cause of press freedom. Four of the prisoners – Tawfiq al-Mansouri, Abdelkhaliq Amran, Al-Harith Hamid, and Akram al-Walidi – were sentenced to death by Houthi authorities on charges of spying for the Saudi-led coalition. Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) leader Rashad al-Alimi later hosted them in Aden in May, in a meeting hailed by pro-government media as a turning point in its rights discourse. Al-Alimi used the occasion to lean into the language of restorative justice, one of the thorniest questions of future peace talks. In widely reported comments, he **told the group** that he would direct the government to support civil society initiatives that “memorialize and include victims in building peace and the future our people deserve.”

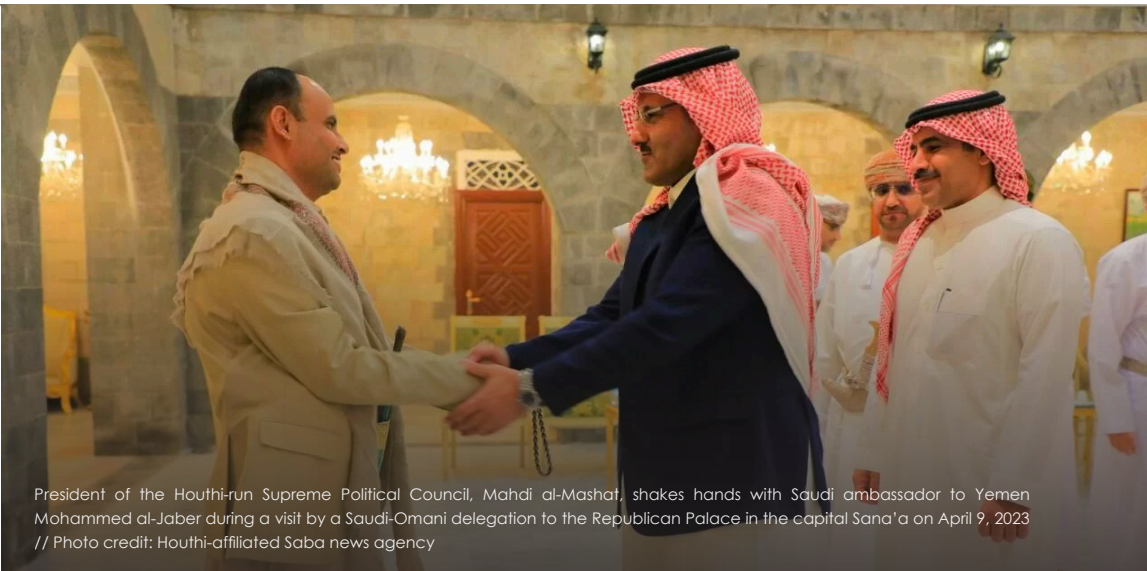
The journalists have spoken **with admirable frankness** about the mistreatment they suffered during detention, with Tawfiq al-Mansouri **implicating** Houthi Prisoners' Affairs Committee chief Abdelqader al-Mortada directly in instances of the alleged abuse. As Yemeni activists have noted in previous cases, once the fanfare dies down, former detainees are usually left to deal with the ongoing trauma from their experiences with little help from the state. We have yet to see concrete plans for released prisoners to receive needed health and psychosocial support, and policies that put them on a steady path toward reintegration into society. Absent this, the government's highlighting of journalists' and detainees' flight amounts to little more than cynical point scoring against both Houthi authorities and southern political forces, who are aggressively pressing their case as a state-in-waiting in the south.

Journalism in the Arab world is often viewed as a crime and the punishments can be extreme. The situation in Yemen is particularly acute. In 2021, rights organizations said they had recorded over **3,000 cases of abuse**, such as threats, censorship, and violence, including 49 deaths, since the war began. Amnesty International has criticized the **Houthi authorities** in particular for the use of trials and torture to extract confessions. The persecution of journalists, whoever the perpetrator, must not be allowed to disappear from the **historical narrative of the war**.

Yemen now ranks **168th** in Reporters Without Borders' global rankings of press freedom. But things were not always so bleak: In 2002, before the political and economic deterioration of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's final years, the country was **ranked 103rd**, and the Yemeni press was relatively free by regional standards. After television, radio, and print media developed in the north and south from the 1960s, unification in 1990 led to a surge of new media outlets, with more than 150 appearing by the end of the decade. The sector was still hampered by press laws that gave the government a wide berth to censor, suppress, and prosecute, while pro-government media used disinformation campaigns to target critical writers. But journalists pushed back. In one famous case, a female columnist successfully sued Al-Dustour newspaper for spreading false information about “immoral relations” with men as retaliation for her criticism of Saleh's decision to run for reelection in 2006.

The uprising in 2011, followed by the Houthi seizure of Sana'a in 2014 and the onset of the wider war in 2015, have made Yemen one of the world's most hostile environments for journalists. A [recent study of Yemeni media](#) showed that around [148 journalists](#) were kidnapped or arrested and 150 websites were blocked in 2015-2016. Houthi authorities [shut down six radio stations](#) during 2022 alone. Coalition airstrikes were a deadly threat, aided by the notorious Houthi practice of using journalists and other detainees as human shields at military sites. Factional violence continues to make reporting a high-risk occupation. [In June 2022](#), a reporter who had worked for foreign media was killed by an explosive planted in his car in Aden; another car bomb [in November 2022](#) killed pregnant journalist Rasha Abdullah al-Harazi, a reporter for UAE-based Asharq TV, and injured her husband and fellow journalist Mahmoud al-Atmi. There is a long history of political groups trying to use industry organizations to impose their agenda, after the [first effort to organize](#) a professional syndicate of journalists in Sana'a in 1963. In February, the recently established Southern Journalists' Syndicate [was installed](#) by force in the offices of the national Yemeni Journalists' Syndicate (YSJ) in Aden.

Despite the dangers associated with reporting in the country, Yemenis are drawn to journalism as a profession. The current de-escalation, which has seen the release of hundreds of prisoners, including journalists, offers the possibility that the worst may be over. There are dozens of Yemeni and international organizations concerned with press freedom – now is the time for them to step up and press the government, Houthi authorities, and other actors to uphold the rights of journalists, and to offer practical and moral support to those who have put their lives on the line to give us what is often called, with justification, the first draft of history.



President of the Houthi-run Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, shakes hands with Saudi ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber during a visit by a Saudi-Omani delegation to the Republican Palace in the capital Sana'a on April 9, 2023
// Photo credit: Houthi-affiliated Saba news agency

Commentary

The Frog in Boiling Water: Saudi Arabia's Negotiations with the Houthis

Abdulghani Al-Hryani

It has been eight months since the Saudis began direct negotiations with the Houthis, excluding the internationally recognized government and other Yemeni parties. After months of secret talks, Saudi Arabia made a huge concession by bringing bilateral negotiations into the open, receiving a Houthi delegation in Saudi Arabia and sending their own delegation, led by Ambassador Mohamed al-Jaber, to Sana'a. Houthi media hailed the arrival of the Saudi delegation as a sign of their outright victory. The absence of the internationally recognized government served to validate the Houthi claim that the conflict is between the Yemeni state, which they claim to represent, and the Saudi state, and that all other Yemeni factions are mercenaries in the service of the Saudi-led coalition. The Saudis made several other concessions, some of which were reasonable and necessary, such as lifting all remaining restrictions imposed by the coalition on the entry of ships to Hudaydah's ports (the UN Inspection Mechanism to prevent the entry of weapons is still in force). Other concessions were political victories for the Houthis at the expense of the government, such as agreeing to discuss salary payments for all Houthi personnel, including their fighters. Despite a lack of agreement on what revenue streams would be used to finance the payment of salaries, Houthi propaganda currently claims that they will be covered by income from oil and gas sales, the only major revenue stream under government control, which were estimated at US\$1.2 billion in 2021. No mention has been made of Houthi revenues, which were around US\$6 billion for the same year, according to a conservative estimate made by the Sana'a Center Economic Unit. Further, the government's oil and gas revenue has effectively been halted since Houthi drone strikes on oil export terminals last fall.

While the Saudi delegation was in Sana'a, a Houthi spokesperson attacked it viciously on account of a tweet by Ambassador al-Jaber, in which he claimed he was mediating between the Yemeni parties. The role of a mediator is coveted by the Saudis for the benefit of their base. They have always claimed that if they were actively fighting the Houthis, they would defeat them in a matter of days. The Houthi media attack on Al-Jaber was vicious, yet he remained in Sana'a for another week. Most diplomats would have quietly withdrawn and waited for a more hospitable climate to return.

Despite these concessions and Saudi flexibility, the Houthis have not made even a symbolic reciprocal gesture. On the contrary, they began raising the bar, making demands on the government to disclose its financial records and show where oil revenues went in past years. In early May, their leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi warned that they will not keep the informal truce for long if the issues under discussion are not concluded soon. Mahdi al-Mashat, the President of the Supreme Political Council, warned that the coming fight would be more ferocious than ever before.

Whether negotiations resume along the same lines or not, the developments so far have been surreal. Saudi Arabia appears to be **negotiating the terms of its surrender**. Is Saudi Arabia really so weak?

There are two possible explanations for this situation. The first is that Saudi officials were ordered to make the Yemen problem go away so as to focus on Vision 2030, the country's ambitious economic plan, and are doing everything they can to make that happen. One of the lessons from ten years of border negotiations with the Saudis was that the hardest task facing Yemeni negotiators was to get the Saudis to the table. The rest was easy. Yemeni negotiators enjoyed full access to domestic leadership, and in keeping with Yemen's egalitarian culture, did not hesitate to call their leaders in the middle of the night to discuss the negotiations, and had no qualms in disagreeing with the president of the republic.

A case in point was the Supreme Border Committee's strong opposition to a concession made by then President Ali Abdullah Saleh in drawing the border between South Yemen and Saudi Arabia (the border between North Yemen and Saudi Arabia had been drawn by the Taif Treaty of 1934). That concession, known as the Como line, in reference to Lake Como in Italy, where Prince Sultan of Saudi Arabia had been vacationing when he invited Saleh to settle the border, was seen by the committee as unfair to Yemen, as it gave away significant territory that it could have successfully claimed. The committee opposed the Como line, and its chair declared it null and void on several occasions, but each time Saleh responded by declaring the Yemeni state's commitment to the line. Finally, the chairman of the committee, testifying in Parliament, declared that the committee could no longer be responsible for delineating the border as Saleh had taken charge, and said he would be solely responsible for the consequences.

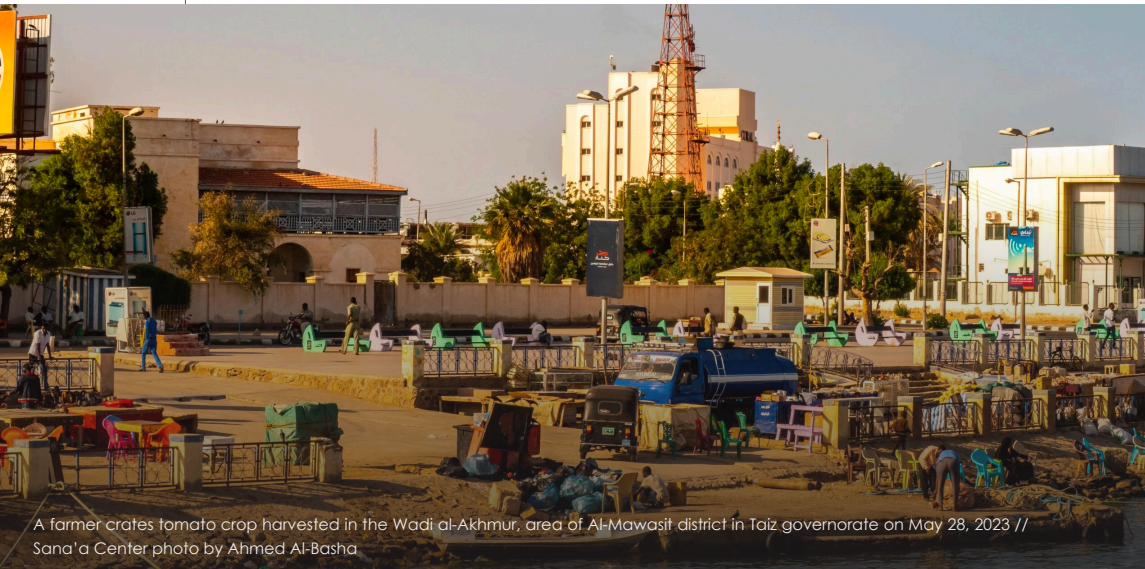
Saudi culture, on the other hand, is very hierarchical. The royal family holds absolute power, and the bureaucracy is extremely centralized. This creates a disconnect between the working level and the leadership, and constricts access. Communication during the border talks was difficult and slow. So despite the massive advantage of Saudi negotiators, who had many Yemeni leaders on their payroll, the few good men in the Yemeni team – regrettably, no women were included – found a winning strategy. They mimicked the proverbial “frog in boiling water,” routinely holding firm for small concessions from their Saudi counterparts. Often, it was easier for the Saudi negotiators to make these concessions than to go back to their leadership and tell them

that the talks had stalled. Over time, the cumulative concessions were significant, especially in the demarcation of the old Taif Treaty border further to the west.

The Houthis are extracting small concessions one after the other, but this would not be an issue if they were willing to enter into good-faith negotiations with their Yemeni brothers to reach a reasonable power-sharing agreement. Unfortunately, the Houthis show no inclination to do so. The huge imbalance between their military and institutional capabilities and that of their adversaries makes it nearly impossible to reach a viable power-sharing agreement. During the past year, they have doubled down on asserting control of state institutions and implementing their vision of a highly centralized, theocratic “Zaidi Taliban state.” Successful Saudi-Houthi negotiations will be the death knell of the Yemeni state. Neither the South nor much of the Sunni North will agree to live under Houthi control. Yemen will disintegrate.

There is another possible explanation for the surreal scene of the Saudi-Houthi negotiations. It is conceivable that the Saudis, after lengthy and fruitless secret negotiations, have decided to address the central obstacle to a viable peace, the imbalance of power. They are addressing that imbalance with unprecedented generosity in supplying their allies with heavy firepower in preparation for another round of fighting. But having been condemned by the international community for contributing to one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, the Saudis now need to demonstrate that they tried everything possible to end the conflict peacefully, but were met with Houthi intransigence. This would be used to justify resorting to force to bring the Houthis down a peg or two, and convince them to make the necessary concessions for a lasting peace.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani is a senior researcher at the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies where he focuses on the peace process, conflict analysis and transformations of the Yemeni state. Al-Iryani has more than three decades of experience as a political and development consultant. Prior to joining the Sana’a Center, Al-Iryani worked with the United Nations in the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen and with the United Nations Development Programme’s mission in Hudaydah, as well as with the World Bank on issues related to the conflict in Yemen. He has conducted research on constitutional reform, anti-corruption, governance, government capacity, state-building, and conflict management and resolution as well as social and economic development. Since the 1980s, Al-Iryani has consulted for a number of international organizations, including UN agencies, the World Bank, DFID, GIZ, USAID and AUSAID. His volunteer work includes co-founding and serving as president of TAWQ, a political NGO advocating democracy. He also served on the Advisory Board of Human Rights Watch MENA Region.



A farmer crates tomato crop harvested in the Wadi al-Akhum, area of Al-Mawasit district in Taiz governorate on May 28, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha

InFocus

Yemenis Stranded in Sudan: The Last Community

A busy coastal area of Port Sudan on April 7, 2019 // Photo credit: Aleksandra Tokarz / Alamy

Tawfeek Al-Ganad

In one month, from April 15 to May 15, tens of thousands of foreign nationals **evacuated Sudan** as clashes escalated between the Sudanese military and the country's main paramilitary group, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). **Armored convoys** wound out of Khartoum, evacuees were **airlifted** in military planes, and **warships** from different nations worked together to ferry people to safety. Yemen was the last nation to organize an official evacuation – which only began after other countries had completed their own. Except for internal measures to relocate Yemenis from Khartoum to Port Sudan, Yemen's evacuation only started on May 14 and 15, when Yemenia Airways flew approximately **775** Yemenis, including 75 children, on four direct flights from Port Sudan to Sana'a and Aden, according to a source from the Emergency Committee to Evacuate Stranded Yemenis. This left 1,239 people huddled in a rented wedding hall in Port Sudan or sleeping on the streets until seven additional Yemenia flights took them to safety on **May 27 and 28**.

Yemen's Foreign Ministry estimates that **17,000** Yemenis were living in Sudan at the beginning of 2023. The majority were residents of Sudan long before Yemen's war. However, most of the Yemenis who requested emergency evacuation were those who had fled the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Sudan hosted around 3,500 such Yemeni refugees, now uprooted twice, according to a source from the Emergency Committee. Many were students or had restarted their careers in Sudan, and some had brought their young families with them.

On April 24, Yemenis in Khartoum and Madani, in east Sudan, began a community-led emergency evacuation to Port Sudan. Two days earlier, Saudi warships had **launched** from the city, the first nation to use their navy to ferry foreign evacuees to safety. In the largest evacuation Saudi Arabia has ever coordinated, the Gulf nation transported civilians from over **110 countries** out of Port Sudan, completing evacuations for many nations, including Syria and Iraq. By May 12, when Saudi Arabia **concluded** its operation, around 864 Yemeni refugees had been evacuated via Saudi ships, **according to an attaché for expatriate affairs** at the Yemeni embassy in Sudan. Thousands of Yemenis were left behind, however, often because they couldn't make it to the port. To buy time and protect themselves, Yemenis in Sudan formed their own committee, "The Emergency Committee to Evacuate Stranded Yemenis," which included community leaders and the local student union, as well as representatives from the embassy.

Evacuations began as violent clashes erupted in Khartoum's streets. Local Yemeni community leaders arranged transportation for Yemenis stranded in neighborhoods under siege, first relocating them to safer areas. When fighting escalated, discussions of a complete evacuation of Khartoum began, as street battles turned neighborhoods into war zones. The city experienced **rolling blackouts**, and public services, including electricity and drinking water, were in short supply. Grocery stores **doubled prices** as they ran out of food, and many shops either closed or were destroyed. Committee members shared reports of several Yemenis being robbed, allegedly by the RSF.

As gunshots and artillery fire shook the Sudanese capital, many Yemenis fled, and volunteers arranged transportation for those who couldn't afford to evacuate. The committee did not have the resources to support a complete evacuation during the early days of the fighting, and so encouraged people to travel independently to Madani, four hours drive from Khartoum, or to Port Sudan, around 12 hours away. Those who could not afford local transportation were asked to shelter in place until the committee could raise funds from Yemeni corporations for an evacuation, providing five tourist buses that transported 300 Yemenis to Madani and on to Port Sudan, according to Dr. Ismail al-Ganad, a member of the evacuation committee. Later, the Hayel Saeed Anam Group, one Yemen's largest business conglomerates, intervened and used company money to transport remaining groups of stranded Yemenis. Logistical challenges were compounded as it became impossible to transfer money in or out of Sudan, preventing the local committee from accessing financial support.

When Yemeni evacuees arrived in Port Sudan, they faced another crisis. A total of 2,246 Yemenis arrived in the port city and registered with the evacuation committee, and another 500 arrived in Madani, where they requested transportation onward. A small city with limited infrastructure, Port Sudan could not accommodate the influx of people, and Yemenis were forced to crowd into a rented wedding hall. A field kitchen was assembled nearby, as owners of Yemeni restaurants in Sudan banded together with their staff, and the Yemeni government provided financial support for meals.

The Hayel Saeed Anam Group repeatedly tried to evacuate Yemenis from Port Sudan to Yemen, according to a member of the evacuation committee. First, they attempted to repurpose a nearby shipping vessel, but it was not approved to transport passengers. The Anam Group then targeted a cruise ship, but the vessel was not given the necessary permits to enter Sudan by the Sudanese government nor was it authorized to dock in Yemen by the coalition. Tarco Aviation, a Sudanese airline that had worked with the Yemeni government to transport RSF personnel to Yemen when Sudanese forces fought alongside the Saudi-led Coalition, offered to take the stranded Yemenis to Sana'a and Aden at a price of US\$900 per passenger.

The offer required the government to arrange the necessary entry permits with the coalition for flight clearance to Yemen. Belatedly, the government resorted to an alternative solution of evacuating stranded Yemenis via Yemenia Airways.

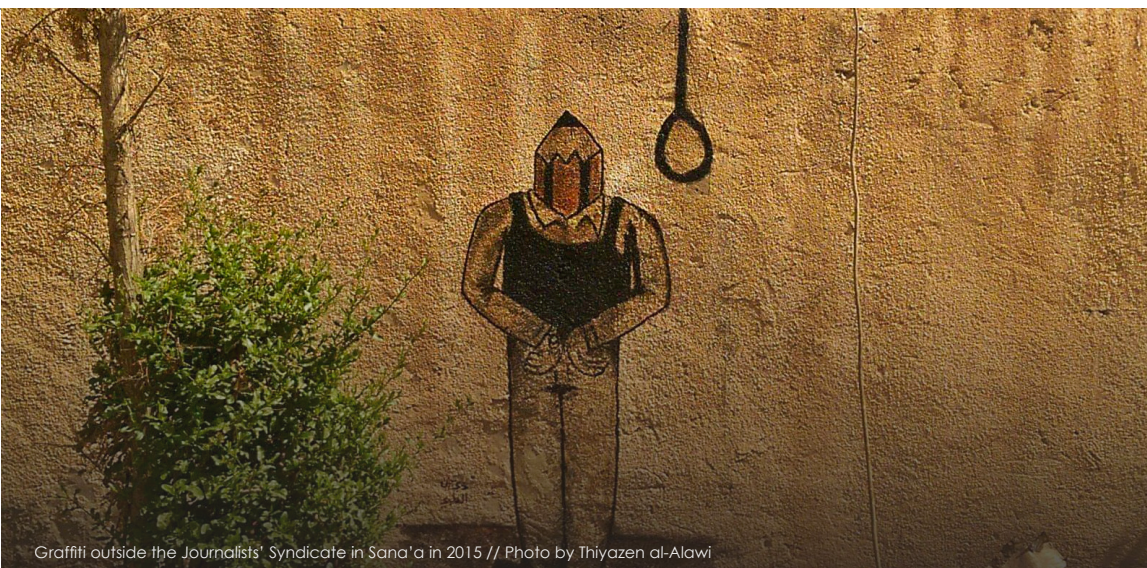
The official evacuation was planned in partnership with Yemenia Airways, which is **partially state-owned**. The airline contacted a British insurance company to insure flights to and from the warzone. The insurance company requested a million dollars to insure seven flights, with each flight expected to transport approximately 280 civilians, to evacuate the almost 2,000 Yemeni citizens still stranded in Port Sudan. But the government was unable to pay the insurance premiums. The operation was then separated into two parts, with **four flights** taking off on May 14 and 15, and seven flights to Sana'a and Aden scheduled for late May. Thousands of people were left waiting for weeks, unsure if the second evacuation would ever take place.

According to a source in the emergency committee, the government's response to the crisis was completely inadequate: "After transferring emergency funds to the embassy in Sudan, they seemed to think they had done enough." Other countries took action and implemented plans to evacuate their citizens, while Yemenis were left behind. Despite the efforts of restaurateurs, bare minimum subsistence rations were provided for food. An elderly Yemeni woman who was sick during the Port Sudan evacuation died due to lack of medical care, and a woman and her daughter were killed in a traffic accident trying to make their way to safety.

After two more weeks, the long-awaited second phase of the operation evacuated the remaining **1,239 Yemenis** on seven flights, which took off on May 27 and 28. In total, 2,894 Yemenis were reportedly evacuated from Sudan, although more fled the country using private resources.

There was one bright spot in this period of misery: two impromptu weddings were held in the hall where Yemenis took shelter. Young love, and a desperately needed celebration, brought a modicum of joy in the midst of the suffering.

Tawfeek Al-Ganad has worked as a writer and editor for various Yemeni and Arab news outlets, including Al Joumhoria, Al Masdar, and Assafir. As a researcher Tawfeek has led several studies regarding Yemen's political history and contemporary gender-based issues in education. He holds a bachelor of arts in history from Sana'a University.



Graffiti outside the Journalists' Syndicate in Sana'a in 2015 // Photo by Thiyazen al-Alawi

Commentary

Crackdown on Press Freedom in Yemen Threatens Peace-Building Efforts

Afrah Nasser

As a Yemeni with over 15 years of experience in journalism, I was delighted to have recently been invited by the [Samir Kassir Foundation](#) to be one of the seven jury members for its 2023 Award for Freedom of the Press. I am the second Yemeni to be on the foundation's jury, after photojournalist Amira al-Sharif took part in 2021. Out of 240 entries, 75 made it to the pre-final stage, where they were judged based on three criteria: relevance to human rights topics, journalistic style, and innovation. The [winners were announced](#) on June 5: Syrian filmmaker and writer Inas Hakky in the opinion piece category, Egyptian journalist Mahmoud Al-Sobky in the investigative article category, and Lebanese reporter Mohamad Chreyteh in the audiovisual news report category.

As I reviewed the entries from multiple Arab countries, I could not help feeling disappointed with the small number of entries by Yemeni journalists and the generally poor quality of the work. It was a sad reminder of the severe deterioration of press freedom in Yemen, the dangerous environment Yemeni journalists now work in, and the impact of that deterioration on our struggle for peace and justice in our country.

War on Media

Prior to 2014, Yemen enjoyed a **relatively vibrant media landscape**, but this has been rapidly eroded during the war. All parties to the Yemen conflict have committed abuses against journalists, and even ordinary citizens who express themselves on social media have not been spared from the recent crackdown on freedom of expression.

Almost half of Yemen's media outlets that existed prior to 2014 have reportedly been shut down, and at least **49 Yemeni journalists** have been murdered since 2011, including **five** killed by the Saudi-led coalition. The Houthi movement will go down in history for having used journalists as human shields, after abducting **two** and keeping them captive in a building being targeted by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes in 2015, leading to their deaths. In the latest wave of repressive measures against dissent, between December 2022 and January 2023 the Houthis detained four **YouTubers** for nearly six months before granting them pardons. In Aden, largely controlled by the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), car bombs **killed pregnant journalist Rasha al-Harazi**, and journalist **Saber al-Haidari** in June 2022. The STC has detained journalist **Ahmed Maher** since August 2022, with no clear reason for his arrest. The STC's detention of journalist Adel al-Hasani in 2021 remains particularly poignant for me, as I investigated the case while working at Human Rights Watch, and found evidence that a **UAE intelligence officer had ordered his detention**.

The Yemeni government, which championed the recent **release of four journalists** from Houthi prisons, has assaulted nine journalists, detained nine more, and threatened three **in 2022** alone.

And the list goes on.

Media Freedom Matters

These violations give a glimpse into a widespread pattern of repression in the country and the dangers facing Yemeni journalists at the hands of all warring parties. They also reflect the threat media freedom poses to them. It is telling that one of the first military attacks the Houthi movement carried out when they took over Sana'a in 2014 was the **shelling of the state television building**. Attacks on the press in Yemen are motivated by the warring parties' understanding of the significance of a strong, independent press.

In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the occasion of **World Press Freedom Day in May** of this year, "Freedom of the press is the foundation of democracy and justice." If Yemen enjoyed media freedom, journalists could play critical roles in raising people's awareness of their rights and promoting peace and justice. A free press could contribute to the prosperity of the nation.

How We Can Support a Free Press in Yemen

In June of 2022, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, **Irene Khan**, said, "Independent, free and pluralistic news media is crucial for democracy, accountability, and transparency, and should be nurtured by states and the international community as a public good." Ensuring media freedom in Yemen likewise requires international action.

Calls on the warring parties to end their violations and abuses against journalists have been in vain. Holding them accountable, however, could pay off. The UN Human Rights Council is morally obliged to **establish an independent and impartial monitoring body** to investigate and document human rights abuses and possible war crimes in Yemen, which could contribute to accountability efforts.

Yemeni journalists lack international support for press-related work. The UN, European Union, UK, US, and relevant international organizations should generously fund and support media groups in Yemen. Journalists need support in three main areas: projects that aim at building a strong and independent press, journalism oriented toward a peaceful settlement, and projects that improve journalists' skills. This support would go a long way in helping Yemeni journalists document attacks and threats directed at the media, gather evidence to hold perpetrators to account, and bring impunity for war crimes to an end.

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