

The Yemen Review

NOVEMBER 2019



**NEGOTIATION AND
DEESCALATION**



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:

The village of Al-Amir in the Haraz mountains, November 2, 2019
Photo Credit: Mohammed Mansur

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Workers harvest fruit during orange season in Marib's Al-Wadi district, November 21, 2019 // Photo Credit: Ali Owidha.

The Sana'a Center Editorial

The Minefield of Combating Corruption in Yemen

Among the less prominent, but no less crucial, aspects of the Riyadh Agreement, signed November 5 by Yemen's internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), are its commitments to combating corruption. Many in Aden and across the south blame the lack of public services and constant electricity blackouts there on crooked government practices. Raging against such garnered the STC popular support in its rivalry against the Yemeni government, and helped fuel southern aspirations to secede from the rest of Yemen.

The Riyadh Agreement – brokered by Saudi Arabia to incorporate the STC within the Yemeni government, military and security forces – explicitly states that all public spending should be subject to parliamentary oversight and that the Supreme National Anti-Corruption Commission, the Central Organization for Control and Auditing, and the Supreme Economic Council will be reformed, restaffed and re-empowered. In the absence of these entities during the conflict, corruption cases have gone directly to the president's office – effectively facilitating, rather than mitigating, the problem. Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek recently has been using this anti-corruption mandate to take aim specifically at graft surrounding fuel imports into southern Yemen – one of the largest expenses on the government's books – and the results of his efforts will likely be a harbinger for the success of any further reform efforts.

Currently, fuel imports in the south are essentially the purview of one man, Ahmed al-Essi, a business tycoon and close confidant to Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and the most likely spoiler of Abdelmalek's plans. Al-Essi has associated himself with Hadi since the latter was defense minister in the mid-1990s. When Hadi assumed the presidency in 2012, Al-Essi became one of his economic advisors. In February 2015, when Hadi fled from the Houthis in Sana'a for the safety of Aden, Al-Essi provided the cash-strapped president a financial cushion to land on. In April 2016, when Hadi suddenly fired Khaled Bahah as prime minister and an angry Riyadh retaliated by suspending its financial support for Hadi, Al-Essi again stepped in with cash to keep the president afloat. Today, Al-Essi is officially Hadi's deputy director of the Presidential Office for Economic Affairs.

Al-Essi's business empire is vast and opaque. He faced accusations of smuggling oil in East Africa in the late 1990s, while during the ongoing Yemeni conflict he has run logistics contracting for coalition-led forces in Yemen and partnered with Hadi's son Jalal to establish Queen Bilqis Airways. He's even the president of the Yemen Football Association. Perhaps most importantly, however, Al-Essi is the owner and chairman of the Alessi Group conglomerate, part of which is the Overseas Shipping and Stevedoring Company which specializes in marine transport of fuel and oil.

In 2015, when the Yemeni government was struggling to secure fuel imports for southern Yemen, Al-Essi arranged for deliveries – on credit – to the Aden Refinery Company (ARC), the only authorized fuel import entity in Aden. Today the outstanding debt to Al-Essi remains in the range of US\$200 million. Al-Essi also appears to hold sway over figures within ARC, which has helped him dominate fuel imports to southern Yemen. An example of how this has worked came in August this year when the ARC issued a tender for fuel imports – the tender was not made public and though three companies applied, all were owned by Al-Essi. His monopoly also allows him to charge well above market rates for the fuel, according to senior government officials who spoke with the Sana'a Center.

The prime minister, Abdelmalek, has recently been signaling that he intends to make future fuel import tenders for Aden public and allow real competition in how they are awarded. This would constitute a direct threat to Al-Essi's income and he has threatened retaliation, according to senior government officials who spoke with the Sana'a Center, including disrupting fuel imports to southern Yemen to spur public protests against the government. His close connection with Hadi and the president's inner circle also places him in a strong position to lobby for the prime minister's replacement when the government and STC finally agree on a new cabinet. Working against Abdelmalek is that he is a technocrat with little political backing to protect his position. Whether he remains prime minister in the cabinet-to-be could signal whether the Yemeni government is turning over a new leaf of transparency, or continuing to carry on with the dirty-business-as-usual.

Saudi-Houthi Negotiation and Deescalation

A major breakthrough from the Saudi-Houthi backchannel negotiations came in November with the coalition's release of more than 100 Houthi prisoners and the partial reopening of Sana'a International Airport. A Houthi delegation, including the movement's spokesperson Mohammed Abdel Salam and senior officials Abdelmalek al-Arji and Ahmed al-Shami, held talks with Saudi officials in Muscat, Oman, during the month of November. A source close to the Houthi leadership told the Sana'a Center that the talks focused on a broader military deescalation between the two sides in Yemen, a prisoner exchange and the reopening of Sana'a airport. The source added that discussions about holding official peace talks between the two sides also was discussed, with Oman and Kuwait both mentioned as a possible host for the negotiations. The Kuwaiti ambassador to the UNSC told the council on November 23 that his country was willing to host negotiations to end the Yemen war.^[1] Talks between Riyadh and the Houthis are expected to continue through December as the parties explore further confidence-building measures, a diplomatic source told the Sana'a Center.

Negotiations Underway

Face-to-Face Talks in Muscat Follow Those in Amman

On November 20, Foreign Policy, citing two diplomatic sources, confirmed that talks between the two sides were held on the sidelines of a meeting between Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman and Omani Sultan Qaboos bin Said in Muscat.^[2] Bin Salman visited Oman on November 11, where the pair discussed "bilateral ties" and "regional security and stability."^[3] Official statements from the two countries did not mention the Yemen conflict.

Communication between Saudi Arabia and the armed Houthi movement has been ongoing since September, following a September 14 attack on Saudi oil facilities, claimed by the armed Houthi movement. after which the group declared a unilateral

[1] "Kuwait offers to host Yemen peace talks," Gulf News, November 23, 2019, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-offers-to-host-yemen-peace-talks-1.68032660>

[2] Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, "Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?," Foreign Policy, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

[3] "Saudi vice defence minister meets Omani ruler in Muscat – state news," Reuters, November 11, 2019, <https://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN1XL2HU>

cease-fire from drone and missile operations on Saudi soil.^[4] Foreign Policy also reported that the British government had arranged a meeting in the Jordanian capital Amman in September between Houthi deputy foreign minister Hussein al-Azzi and the deputy of Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, the director-general of the Saudi General Intelligence Directorate.^[5] What has become clear in the months since is that the internationally recognized Yemeni government has been sidelined from the talks, as Abdel-Aziz Jabari, an adviser to President Hadi, said bluntly to The Associated Press in November.^[6]

The Saudi-Houthi diplomacy has shone a spotlight on Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman — the younger brother of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman.^[7] Khalid bin Salman took over the Yemen file in February and is seen as the driving force behind the push for deescalation. Meanwhile, King Salman appeared to give his blessing to the dialogue when he told Saudi Arabia's Shura Council that the Riyadh Agreement would “open the door” for a wider political settlement in Yemen.^[8]

There were further indications of a regional thrust toward dialogue in November. The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash spoke openly about a role for the Houthis in post-war Yemen, saying any political agreement to end the conflict “must take into account the legitimate aspirations of all parts of Yemeni society. That includes the Houthis.”^[9] Omani Foreign Minister Yousef bin Alawi, speaking to journalists on November 25 after a meeting in Washington with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, said that Saudi Arabia and the Houthis sought a peaceful settlement to end the war.^[10]

[4] “Aramco's Ashoura – The Yemen Review, September 2019,” The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8221#SAUDIARAMCOANCHOR>

[5] Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman, Robbie Gramer, “Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?”, Foreign Policy, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

[6] “Mohammed al-Houthi in an interview with Xinhua: We are ready for dialogue,” Saba Net, November 19, 2019, <https://www.saba.ye/de/news3079289.htm>

[7] Colum Lynch, Lara Seligman and Robbie Gramer, “Can a Young Saudi Prince End the War in Yemen?”, Foreign Policy, November 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/20/can-khalid-bin-salman-young-saudi-prince-end-yemen-war-mohammed-mbs/>

[8] “Riyadh Agreement to ‘open the door’ for broader peace talks on Yemen, says King Salman,” Arab News, November 20, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1587076/saudi-arabia>

[9] “Huthi rebels will have role in Yemen's future: UAE,” AFP, November 10, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191110-huthi-rebels-will-have-role-in-yemen-s-future-uae>

[10] “Yousuf bin Alawi holds talks with US Secretary of State [AR],” Oman News, November 25, 2019, https://omannews.gov.om/Arabic_NewsDescription/ArtMID/437/ArticleID/3801/

Deescalation Measures Implemented

Coalition Announces Release of 200 Houthi Prisoners

On November 26, the Saudi-led coalition said that it would be releasing 200 Houthi prisoners. Turki al-Maliki, spokesperson for the coalition, characterized the move as part of efforts to advance the Stockholm Agreement^[11] – in which the Yemeni government and the armed Houthi movement agreed to release about 7,000 prisoners each. November marked the third straight month in which parties to the conflict sought to revive the previously stalled prisoner exchange aspect of the December 2018 deal, beginning with the armed Houthi movement's unilateral release of 290 detainees on September 30 and offer in October to free some 2,000 prisoners in a "first phase" if the coalition responded in kind.^[12]

On November 28, Riyadh then released 128 prisoners from Khamis Mushait prison in Saudi Arabia, who were then transported to Sana'a. The Associated Press reported that dozens more prisoners were to follow.^[13] The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) facilitated the release, confirming prisoners' identities before ICRC representatives accompanied the prisoners on the flight back to Sana'a. The Yemeni Red Crescent also assisted the operation by transferring individuals from the airport to a health facility for medical check ups.^[14] Relatives and Houthi officials gathered at Sana'a airport to welcome home the freed prisoners.

Earlier in the month, the Yemeni government and the Houthis also exchanged 10 prisoners each. That deal, announced November 11, was secured through tribal mediation and conducted in Moton district in Al-Jawf governorate, according to the head of the Yemeni government's prisoner affairs committee Yahya al-Hasir.^[15]

Coalition Allows Sana'a International Airport Reopened for Medical Travelers

Sana'a airport, closed for more than three years, will reopen to Yemenis in need of medical treatment abroad, the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition announced in collaboration with the World Health Organization.^[16] The partial reopening of Sana'a airport came in the same statement on November 26 in which the coalition

[11] "Coalition: 200 Houthi prisoners released [AR]" Al Arabiya, November 26, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2019/11/26/>

[12] "Yemen's Houthis offer Saudi-backed government new prisoner swap deal," Reuters, October 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-offer-saudi-backed-government-new-prisoner-swap-deal-idUSKBN1WP31I?il=0>

[13] Ahmed al-Haj and Maggie Michael "Saudi Arabia, Yemen's Houthis rebels in indirect peace talks," November 13, 2019, <https://apnews.com/cb393079f7be48d2951b3ae3f2d4361b>

[14] "128 detainees repatriated back to Yemen from Saudi Arabia," International Committee of the Red Cross, November 28, 2019, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/128-detainees-repatriated-back-yemen-saudi-arabia>

[15] "Yemen's warring parties swap 20 prisoners," Xinhua Net, November 11, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/11/c_138547095.htm

[16] "Coalition: 200 Houthi prisoners released [AR,]" Al Arabiya, November 26, 2019, <https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2019/11/26/>

said it would be releasing 200 Houthi prisoners. The closure of Sana'a airport for commercial flights and civilian use since August 2016 may have contributed to the deaths of 32,000 Yemenis, CARE and the NRC said in August.^[17] Previously, Yemenis were only able to fly out of Aden and Sayoun airports, which was especially difficult for people based in northern areas who required road trips of 15 hours or more. The opening of the Sana'a airport was among the main initial demands by the armed Houthi movement going into the UN-led talks in Sweden in December 2018, but the Stockholm Agreement failed to address it.

UN Envoy: Deescalation Puts Country on Track for Formal Peace Talks

An overall deescalation, particularly in coalition airstrikes nationwide during a two-week period in November, and the armed Houthi movement's partial cease-fire, which has held for two months, are signs of change in Yemen, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council on November 22.^[18] Later, in closed consultations, he described the UN's efforts on Yemen, steps being taken under the new Riyadh Agreement (see below) and backchannel talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi leadership as complementary. If progress continues, he told council members that talks between the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis could begin as soon as January 2020, according to private briefing notes obtained by the Sana'a Center.

In his public remarks, Griffiths said that in the two weeks leading up to his November 22 briefing, coalition airstrikes had decreased by a "striking" 80 percent from the previous two weeks. He acknowledged the time frames were brief, but added that "there have been entire 48-hour periods without airstrikes at all for the first time since the conflict began." Griffiths also noted that the partial cease-fire announced by the Houthis on September 20, which stopped missile and drone attacks on Saudi territory, was still in effect, saying: "Efforts to deescalate violence are holding."

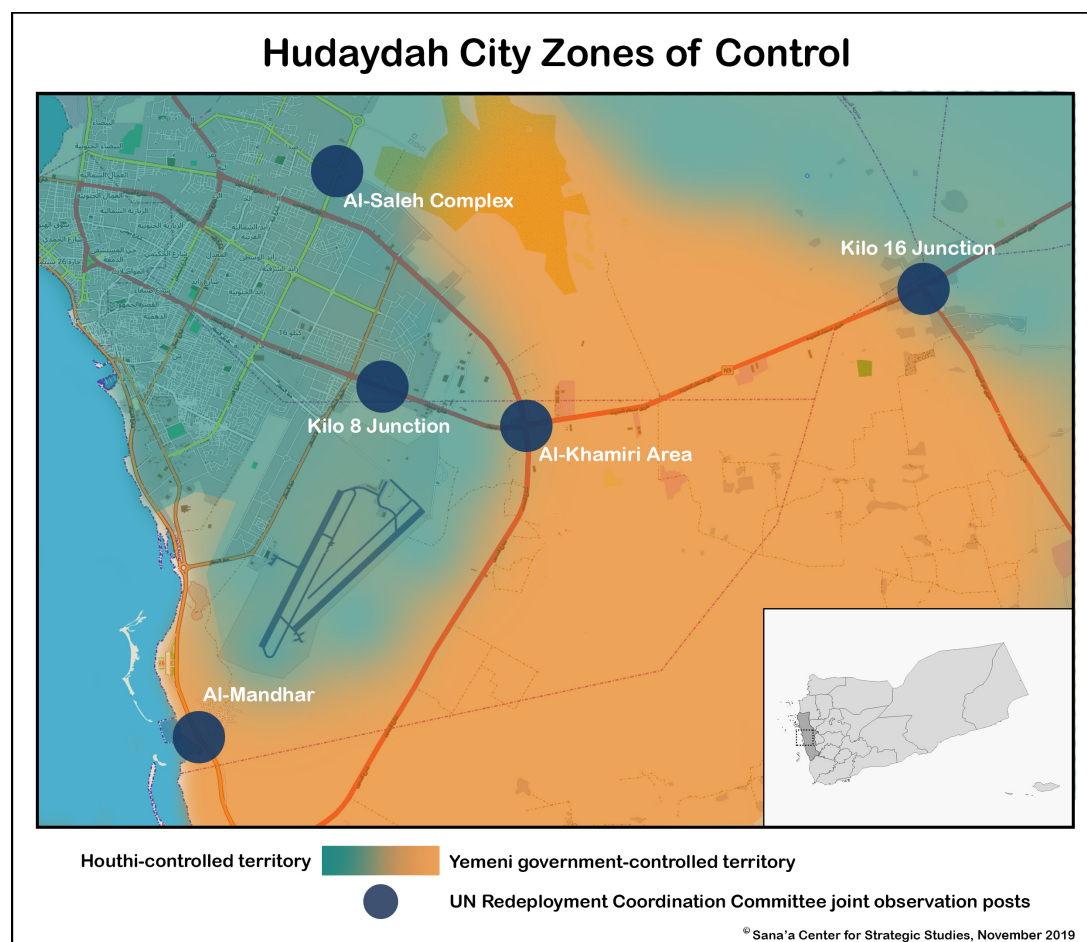
Griffiths complained about increasing restrictions on the movements of UN personnel in Hudaydah. However, he also cited an 80 percent reduction in the number of security incidents in Hudaydah city since teams of liaison officers comprised of UN, Yemeni government and Houthi personnel were deployed for cease-fire monitoring in late October at five points near the city's frontlines, tasked with deescalating potentially volatile situations as they arise.^[19] If successful, there were plans for similar teams to be placed in other hotspots in the south of the governorate that have seen daily hostilities, including in Al-Durayhimi, Al-Tuhayta and Hays districts, according to two independent sources privy to the plans and who spoke with the Sana'a Center on condition of anonymity.

[17] "CARE Welcomes Announcement of Re-Opening of Yemen's Sana'a Airport for Medical Transportation," Care, November 27, 2019, <https://www.care.org/newsroom/press/press-releases/care-welcomes-announcement-re-opening-yemens-sanaa-airport-for-medical>.

[18] Martin Griffiths, "Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen to the Open Session of the UN Security Council," New York, November 22, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-united-nations-secretary-general-yemen-open-session-un-security-council>

[19] Ibid.

Clashes erupted between government-backed forces and the armed Houthi movement on the eastern and southern outskirts of the city in mid-November.^[20] A few days after Griffiths' upbeat briefing, on November 25, coalition airstrikes hit near Ras Issa port, north of Hudaydah city.^[21] According to the private briefing notes obtained by the Sana'a Center, Griffiths said future peace negotiations are not contingent on the Hudaydah agreement, but the deescalation does provide a basis to promote a nationwide cease-fire, which the UN will support, followed by formal talks.



[20] "Clashes erupt between Yemeni warring sides in Hodeidah," Xinhua, November 18, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/18/c_138562486.htm

[21] "Saudi-led coalition carries out air strikes along Yemen's Red Sea coast," Reuters, November, 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security/refile-saudi-led-coalition-carries-out-air-strikes-along-yemens-red-sea-coast-idUSL8N2853BM>

Developments in Yemen

Riyadh Agreement Misses All of its Implementation Deadlines

The overly ambitious nature of the Riyadh Agreement was made readily apparent in November when every benchmark in the timeline for its implementation was missed.^[22] The Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) signed the deal, brokered by Saudi Arabia, on November 5, which was meant to end their power struggle in southern Yemen and rectify divisions within the anti-Houthi coalition. While token progress was achieved on the political front with the return of Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek to Aden, the timetable appeared to have been pushed back for other components, particularly those involving critical security arrangements and cabinet appointments.

The Riyadh Agreement granted the STC an official role in a reshuffled Yemeni cabinet and at future peace talks in exchange for placing all STC-aligned military and security forces under the authority of the internationally recognized government. It also outlined plans to return the Yemeni government to the interim capital of Aden and reactivate state institutions. The STC had been sidelined from previous UN-led peace talks as southern demands for separatism were considered secondary to ending the war between the Hadi government and the Houthi rebels. The deal to end anti-Houthi forces infighting, which followed the STC's coup in August that pushed the Yemeni government out of Aden,^[23] was brokered by Saudi Arabia and granted Riyadh ultimate responsibility for political, military and security matters in southern Yemen (Read the Sana'a Center's full analysis of the agreement here).

Prime Minister's Return to Aden Delayed, State Institutions Remain Idle

Efforts to pave the way for the government's return to the interim capital appeared to be underway as Yemeni President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi met with STC leader Aidarous al-Zubaidi and deputy chief Hani bin Breik in Saudi Arabia on November 7, along with Saudi ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber.^[24] However, meeting

[22] "Riyadh Picks Up the Pieces" as published in 'The Yemen Review, October 2019', Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8363#Riyadh-Reshuffles-the-Deck>

[23] "The Southern Implosion" as published in 'The Yemen Review, August 2019, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 4, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016#Overview>

[24] "Hadi meets with Zubaidi and Ben Brik in Riyadh .. What happened between them? [AR]," Hadramawt Net, November 8, 2019, www.7adramout.net/alyamanalarab/7215828/

the first deadlines laid out in the Riyadh Agreement proved problematic. The return of the Yemeni prime minister back to Aden and the reactivation of all state institutions in areas outside Houthi control were meant to take place by November 12, the appointment of a new governor and security director for Aden governorate by November 20.

On November 10, President Hadi ordered state institutions in government-controlled areas to immediately implement the Riyadh Agreement, with the Yemeni Foreign Ministry announcing the same day that it had resumed its operations in Aden.^[25] As of this writing, however, there was still little sign that any state institutions had become any more functional than before Hadi's order.

On November 18, Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed arrived at Aden airport. The Yemeni government blamed his delayed arrival on the STC refusal to hand over the presidential palace, among other locations, to Yemeni government control, and accused it of inciting unrest in the city. The STC, in turn, argued that joint committees should be formed to oversee security arrangements in the city.^[26]

Once in Aden, Saeed told The Associated Press that the reactivation of state institutions required normalizing the situation in the interim capital.^[27] The precarious security environment in Aden was illustrated by the clashes reported on November 17 and 18 between STC-aligned Security Belt forces and Saudi-backed forces in the Saylah area of Aden's Dar Saad district. Yemeni government ministers returning with Saeed included Deputy Prime Minister Salem al-Khanbashi, Minister of Finance Salem bin Breik, Minister of Higher Education Hussein Basalameh, Minister of Communications Lotfi Bashrif, Minister of Religious Endowments Ahmed Zubayn Atiya, Minister of Electricity Mohammed al-Anani and Minister of Local Administration Abdul Raqeeb Fateh.^[28] A high-ranking government official told the Sana'a Center that these ministers were chosen by the prime minister to return to Aden because they were unlikely to cause controversy.

Sources in Aden told the Sana'a Center that Saudi authorities prevented several other cabinet ministers from returning to the interim capital, including Minister of Youth and Sports Nayef al-Bakri, Minister of Education Abdullah Lamalas, Minister of Oil and Minerals Aous Abdullah al-Oud and Health Minister Nasser Baoum. Local media reports confirmed this, and speculated that some ministers were blocked from traveling due to their affiliation with the Islah party, a major rival of the STC.^[29]

[25] "Yemeni president directs state agencies to implement Riyadh agreement," Arab News, November 10, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1581811/middle-east>

[26] Ahmed al-Haj and Samy Magdy, "Yemen government delays return, officials blame separatists," The Associated Press, November 17, 2019, <https://apnews.com/897e595327ea4fef80b0fb0eee985404>

[27] Maad al-Zirky and Isabel Debre, "Yemeni government back in Aden under deal with separatists," The Associated Press, November 18, 2019, <https://apnews.com/693839956984446497828b37101a2166>

[28] "Minister in legitimacy: prevented from returning to Aden [AR]," Yemen News Portal, November 18, 2019, <https://yemnews.net/index.php/news/2019-11-18-12-25-00>

[29] "Saudi stops 6 Yemen ministers from returning to Aden," Middle East Monitor, November 19, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191119-saudi-stops-6-yemen-ministers-from-returning-to-aden/>

No New Governor or Security Chief, No New Cabinet, No Redeployment of Forces

The Riyadh Agreement's second benchmark date, November 20, when a new governor and security chief for Aden were to be appointed, passed without them being named. The current governor in Aden, Ahmed Salem Rabih, is considered to be pro-Hadi while security chief Shalal Shayea is close to the STC.

The biggest benchmark to determine the success of implementing the Riyadh Agreement came on December 5. This was the deadline for forming a new cabinet, composed of a maximum of 24 ministers and including STC members, which passed with no new cabinet unveiled. This was also the deadline for sensitive military aspects of the agreement, most notably the redeployment of Yemeni government and STC-aligned forces from areas they moved into in Aden, Abyan and Shabwa governorates to their pre-August positions, and their replacement with security forces from the relevant local authorities.

Other measures on the security front to be completed by December 5, as laid out in the Riyadh Agreement, included: the redeployment all government and STC military forces in Aden to camps outside the governorate, except for the 1st Presidential Protection Brigade, charged with securing the Ma'ashiq Presidential Palace; the transfer of medium and heavy weapons in Aden to camps in the city under Saudi supervision; local police and rescue forces assuming responsibility for security in Aden Governorate; and the reorganization of special forces and counterterrorism forces in Aden, and of forces responsible for the protection of government facilities, which will be placed under the control of the Ministry of Interior (for a full implementation timeline for steps in the Riyadh Agreement, see 'Riyadh Picks Up the Pieces – The Yemen Review, October 2019').

As of this writing, STC-aligned forces still controlled most of Aden, according to Sana'a Center team members in the city. This includes the area around the Ma'ashiq Presidential Palace in Crater district. Saudi military forces, taking over from Emirati forces that withdrew from the city at the end of October, have deployed at the coalition's administrative headquarters in Buraika district and at the Ma'ashiq palace. The head of the Yemeni army's 1st Presidential Protection Brigade, Brigadier General Sanad al-Rahwa, along with some government troops arrived at Aden airport mid-month and moved to the coalition's base in Buraika under Saudi protection. Other troops from the brigade were in Shakra district in neighboring Abyan governorate and were awaiting permission to redeploy to Aden.^[30]

Abyan and Shabwa: Tensions Simmer in Absence of Troop Redeployment

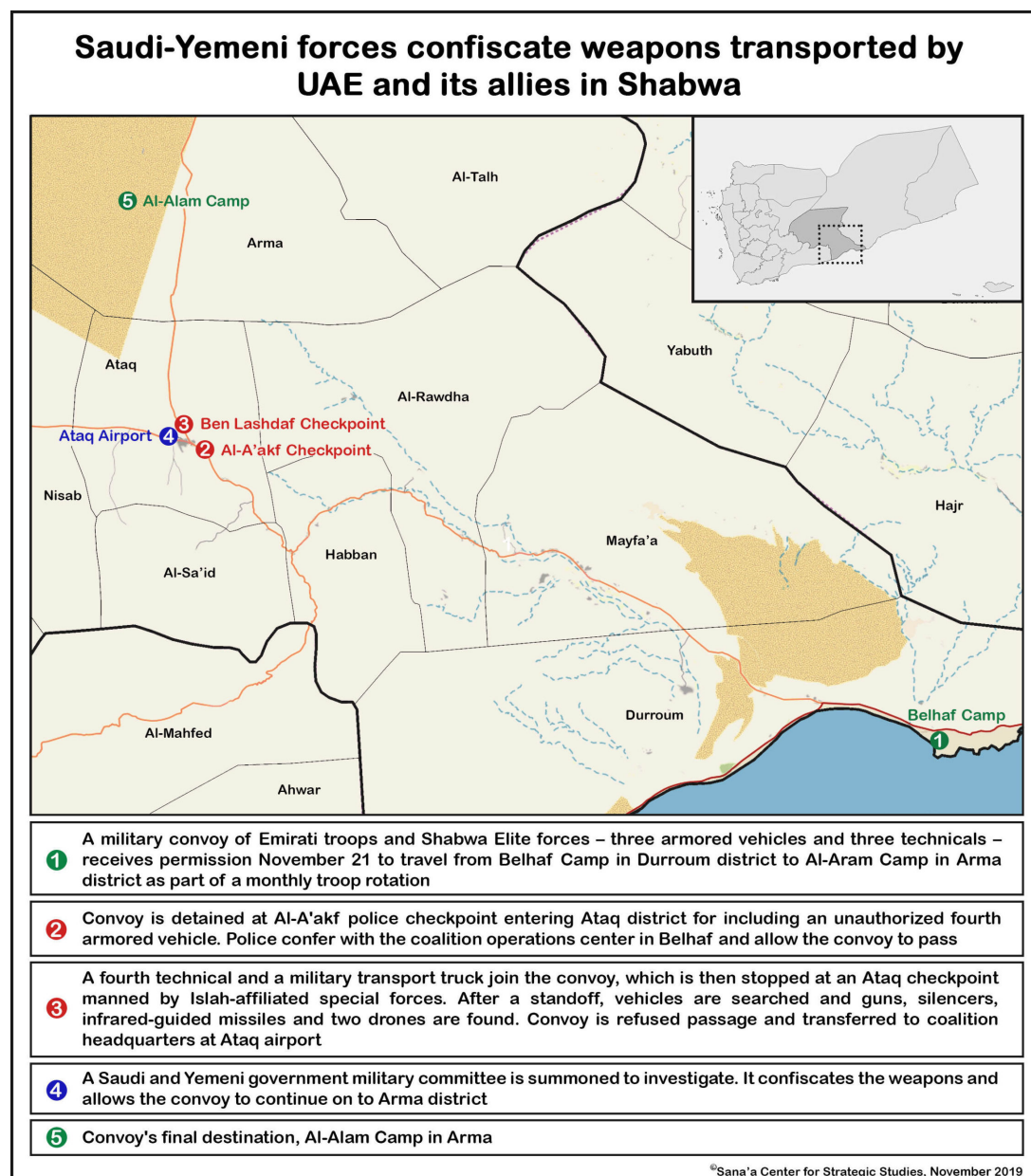
In Abyan governorate, local sources told the Sana'a Center that there was no major redeployment of forces in November. Some government troops withdrew from Ahwar district but the governorate remained split between zones of control for the government and for STC-aligned forces.

[30] "Minister in legitimacy: prevented from returning to Aden [AR]," Yemen News Portal, November 18, 2019, <https://yemnews.net/index.php/news/2019-11-18-12-25-00>

In Shabwa governorate, tension remained high as various military forces traversed the governorate. The Sana'a Center's local coordinator in Shabwa said 40 technicals (trucks with mounted heavy weapons) and 3 transport vehicles from the Presidential Protection Brigades had arrived in Ataq, the governorate's capital, from neighboring Marib governorate on November 25. On November 30, a large convoy of Saudi military equipment and armored vehicles was seen traveling through Shabwa. One truck was abandoned in the Aqbah al-Naqbah region after it overturned and exploded while the rest of the convoy continued toward Aden.^[31]

A small Emirati force remains stationed in Shabwa governorate following the UAE pullout from Aden last month. On November 21, a convoy of UAE troops and Emirati-backed Shabwa Elite forces was stopped multiple times in Ataq by pro-government Yemeni forces and had weapons seized while moving from a military camp in Belhaf to Al-Alam, underscoring the confused and potentially volatile security situation in the governorate.

[31] "Saudi reinforcements arrive in Shabwa en route to Aden [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, November 30, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/174590>



Military and Security Developments

Taiz: Top Military Commander Adnan al-Hammadi Killed by His Own Brother

Adnan al-Hammadi, commander of the 35th Armored Brigade and a prominent figure in the struggle for control and influence in Taiz, was shot dead on December 2, with Yemeni media reporting that the killer was his own brother.^[32] Al-Hammadi also was an influential figure in the 2015 battle for Taiz between Houthi and anti-Houthi forces.

The 35th Armored Brigade is officially a government military unit, but it also includes Salafi fighters loyal to UAE-backed warlord Abu al-Abbas. By allowing the Abu al-Abbas Brigades to formally operate under his command, Al-Hammadi provided cover for the group to pursue its and the UAE's agenda in the governorate. This arrangement caused tension with the Islah party and its affiliate forces in Taiz.

Although both Islah and Abu al-Abbas are nominally aligned with the internationally recognized government and are simultaneously fighting Houthi forces on Taiz's frontlines, their forces frequently have come to blows. Heavy fighting broke out between Islah-affiliated forces and the Abu al-Abbas Brigades in Al-Torbah in August, drawing the intervention of the Islah-aligned Fourth Infantry Brigade and the 35th Armored Brigade and leaving more than 10 dead on each side and more than 40 injured, according to sources from each side.

The death of Al-Hammadi has the potential to destabilize the front lines in Taiz. The 35th Armored Brigade controls the main areas south of Taiz city, including the main road to Aden. It is also not clear whether members of the 35th Armored Brigade will accept a new commander imposed by the government. There is also the potential for Islah-aligned military units to take advantage of the unstable situation and attempt to move into areas dominated by the 35th Armored Brigade, including Al-Torbah and Al-Hujariah region.

Marib: Houthi Missile Targets a Coalition HQ

A missile strike against the anti-Houthi coalition's ground campaign headquarters in Marib on November 7 killed at least five people and left a dozen injured. The base, located in Sahn al-Gin district, is the primary facility overseeing the coalition's offensive against the Houthi-controlled capital of Sana'a to the west. Reuters reported that Yemeni Defense Minister Mohammed al-Maqdishi was at the facility at the time of the attack along with Saudi military officers.^[33] Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television station reported that the missile was launched from the governorate's Mount Haylan region and that a high-ranking official was among those killed in the missile strike.^[34]

[32] "Brigadier Adnan al-Hammadi was killed by his brother following persona disputes [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, December 2, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/17465>

[33] "At least five Yemeni soldiers killed by Houthi missile in Marib military base," Reuters, November 13, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/at-least-five-yemeni-soldiers-killed-by-houthi-missile-in-marib-military-base-idUSKBN1XN1MY>

[34] "7 Yemeni soldiers killed by Houthi missile in Marib military base," Arab News, November 14, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1583561/middle-east>

Emirati, Saudi, Sudanese Casualties Reported in Border Fighting

Fighting in northern Yemen near the Saudi border killed one Emirati, six Sudanese and at least two Saudi soldiers during the month of November, according to media reports. On November 10, the official Saudi news agency SPA released the names of two soldiers who were killed along the border without providing details.^[35] Three days later, the UAE state news agency WAM reported that an Emirati soldier had been killed in Najran.^[36] Sudanese officials told The Associated Press on November 20 that six members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) had been killed earlier in the week after a Houthi attack targeted an RSF position on the Saudi-Yemen border. It is unclear whether the Saudi, Emirati and Sudanese casualties occurred in the same attack. On November 29, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea claimed Houthi fighters had downed a Saudi Apache helicopter near the Yemen-Saudi border, killing both pilots on board.^[37] In other Houthi anti-aircraft activity near the Saudi border, on November 9, the group claimed to have shot down a spy drone in the al-Sawh area of Kitaf district, Sa'ada governorate,^[38] and on November 30 it announced the downing of a Chinese-made drone with surface-to-air missiles while it was flying over Hiran district, Hajjah governorate.^[39]

Fighting in Sa'ada governorate near the Yemeni-Saudi border has been ongoing for several months, with fierce battles taking place between Houthi and coalition forces in the Kitaf region, bordering the Saudi Najran governorate, and Al-Malaheeth region, bordering Saudi's Jizan governorate.

[35] Hussein Mahmoud Ragab Elkabany, Safiye Karabacak, "2 Saudi soldiers killed near Yemen border," Anadolu Agency, November 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/2-saudi-soldiers-killed-near-yemen-border/1648189>

[36] "Emirati soldier in Arab coalition fighting in Yemen killed in Najran," Arab News, November 13, 2019, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1583711/middle-east>

[37] "Yemen's Houthis say they shot down Saudi helicopter, pilots killed: spokesman," Reuters, November 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-say-they-shot-down-saudi-helicopter-pilots-killed-spokesman-idUSKBN1Y30JL>

[38] "Yemen's Houthi rebels say down spy drone near Saudi border," Xinhua Net, November 9, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/09/c_138542687.htm

[39] "Air Defense Drop A Fighter Reconnaissance Aircraft With A Surface-To-Air Missile in Hiran," Ansarollah website, November 30, 2019, <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/296553>

Al-Dhalea: Houthi Forces Destroy Two Bridges

The armed Houthi movement blew up two bridges in Al-Dhalea amid fighting against coalition-backed forces in the southern governorate. On November 3, fighters destroyed a bridge in northern Murais district, close to Damt city. Known as the Great Bridge, the 30-meter structure was on the main road between Sana'a and Aden.^[40] Houthi fighters also blew up another bridge in Murais district near the village of Zalya at the end of October. According to Saudi-owned Al Arabiya, the Houthis have destroyed at least eight bridges in Al-Dhalea – four bridges linking Murais and Damt, and four on the main road between Qataba district and neighboring Ibb governorate – to hinder advances from anti-Houthi forces.^[41]

Houthis Seize Saudi, South Korean Ships in the Red Sea

On November 17, the armed Houthi movement seized three vessels – two South Korean and one Saudi – and their crews in the Red Sea before releasing them a few days later. A South Korean drilling rig was being towed by two tugboats, one South Korean and one Saudi, off the coast of Uqban Island when the vessels were intercepted by two boats containing Houthi fighters. All three vessels and 16 crew members, including two South Koreans, were taken to the Houthi-controlled port of Saleef in Hudaydah governorate.^[42] Houthi Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein al-Azzi announced via Twitter on November 19 that the Korean ships had drifted into Yemeni territorial waters due to bad weather, but had been released as a result of the friendly ties between Sana'a and Seoul.^[43] A spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition told Al Arabiya the next day that the Saudi tugboat also had been released.^[44]

[40] "Houthi militia detonates the largest bridge north of Al-Dhalea [AR]," Al-Mashad al-Yemeni, November 4, 2019, <https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/148649>

[41] Osan Salem, "Houthi militias blow up a vital bridge on the road between Sana'a and Aden [AR]," Al Arabiya, November 4, 2019, www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/yemen/2019/11/04/-مليشيا-الحوثي-تفجر-جسر-حيوي-على-الطريق-العام-بين-صنعاء-وعدن

[42] Ruba Alhenawi, Hande Atay Alam and Ryan Browne, "Yemen's Houthi rebels seize Saudi Arabian ship in Red Sea," CNN, November 19, 2019, <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2019/11/19/middleeast/houthi-rebels-seize-saudi-vessel-intl-hnk/index.html>

[43] Hussein al-Azzi Twitter account, November 19, 2019, <https://twitter.com/hussinalezzi5/status/1196904145770438661>

[44] "Yemen's Houthis release captured South Korean, Saudi vessels," Reuters, November 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-release-captured-south-korean-saudi-vessels-idUSKBN1XT2WD>

Military Developments in Brief:

- **November 4:** Similar to other Islamic State (IS) group affiliates around the Middle East and South Asia, IS' branch in Yemen announced its fealty to IS' new caliph, Abu Ibrahim al-Hishimi al-Qurashi, by releasing photos of fighters in Yemen pledging loyalty to him. Al-Qurashi was announced as the group's new leader following the death of former caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a US special forces operations in northwestern Syria in October.^[45] Very little is publicly known about Al-Qurashi.
- **November 7:** The US State Department announced a multi-million dollar reward for information leading to the identification or location of two senior Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leaders. The Rewards for Justice Program offered up to \$6 million for Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki, which the US identified as the AQAP emir in Shabwa governorate, and \$4 million for Ibrahim Ahmed al-Qosi, a Sudanese national and longtime Al-Qaeda veteran that the US says is part of AQAP's leadership.^[46]
- **November 20:** Islah announced that Ahmed Hamid al-Dharai, a member of the party's executive committee, was killed in fighting with the armed Houthi movement in Nahim district, east of the capital Sana'a.^[47]
- **November 24:** A Yemeni girl in Aden al-Azhar village, Ibb governorate, opened fire on Houthi fighters attempting to loot her father's qat farm, injuring two of the gunmen. The injured Houthis were transported the hospital and the girl's father was abducted after the incident.^[48]
- **November 25:** The Yemeni army command in Taiz condemned the detention of Brigadier General Abdel Aziz al-Majidi, chief of staff of the Taiz army command and a commander in the 170th Brigade. At the request of Taiz governor Nabil Shamsan, Al-Majidi had been traveling to Aden when UAE-backed Security Belt Forces at Al-Hadid checkpoint had stopped and detained him. Al-Majidi was released the following day and return to Taiz.^[49]

[45] "Pledges to new IS "Caliph" continue to come from group fighters, this time from Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen," SITE, November 4, 2019, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Statements/pledges-to-new-is-caliph-continue-to-come-from-group-fighters-this-time-from-pakistan-and-somalia.html>

[46] "Reward Offers for Information on Senior Leaders of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula," U.S. Department of State, November 7, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reward-offers-for-information-on-senior-leaders-of-al-qaida-in-the-arabian-peninsula/>

[47] "Al-Islah announces the death of one of its leaders in confrontations against the Houthis on the Niham front [AR]," Al-Mawqea Post, November 20, 2019, <https://almawqea.net/news/45784>

[48] "Yemeni girl opens fire on Houthi gunmen who tried to loot her father's farm and wounded two of them," Al-Masdar Online, November 24, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/174443>

[49] "Staff of the Taiz war axis returns to Taiz after release from the Security Belt," Al-Mashhad al-Khaleeji, November 26, 2019, <https://almashhadalkhaleeji.com/news3327.html>

Economic Developments

Lebanese Capital Controls Squeeze Yemeni Banks' Correspondent Accounts

Capital controls the Association of Banks in Lebanon (ABL) introduced on November 17 to limit foreign currency flight from that country are impacting Yemeni banks, many of which have correspondent accounts with the Bank of Beirut and other Lebanese financial institutions.

Lebanon has been undergoing widespread civil unrest since mid-October while simultaneously experiencing political, debt, currency and banking crises.^[50] On November 17, the ABL announced capital controls, including withdrawal limits of US\$1,000 per week and a ban on transfers abroad except in extraordinary circumstances.^[51] These controls applied to all account holders, including foreign banks and businesses,^[52] thus Yemeni banks with money in Lebanon largely lost the ability to access, transfer or use it to finance imports for Yemeni commercial traders.^[53]

A number of Yemeni banks had correspondent accounts in Lebanon before the ongoing Yemen conflict began. However, in 2015 the Financial Action Task Force, an intergovernmental body that seeks to combat global money laundering and terrorism financing, elevated Yemen's risk designation for banking to 'high'.^[54] Banks in the Middle East, Europe and the United States subsequently sought to limit their exposure and closed any Yemeni correspondent banking accounts they held.^[55] Lebanon presented Yemeni banks and traders with a viable alternative. The appeal of opening a correspondent account in Lebanon was rooted in the ability to finance international trade and the relatively high interest rates Lebanese banks offered.^[56] Thus, there was a large-scale migration of Yemeni bank and business capital – mainly US dollars and Saudi riyals – to Lebanese banks.^[57]

The recent ABL capital controls have both trapped Yemeni bank and business funds in Lebanon, and forced Yemeni bankers and traders to look for alternatives for foreign correspondent banking, with Turkey and the United Arab Emirates appearing to be the most attractive options.^[58]

[50] Jason Tuvey, "Why Lebanon is heading for a debt restructuring", Capital Economics, October 23, 2019, <https://www.capitaleconomics.com/clients/publications/middle-east-north-africa-economics/middle-east-economics-focus/why-lebanon-is-heading-for-a-debt-restructuring/?tk=6f08f0cfb8b9573fa3531046da8ea779081e7a90>

[51] Lebanon banking association agrees \$1,000 weekly withdrawal cap – statement," Reuters, November 17, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-protests-banks-limits/update-1-lebanon-banking-association-agrees-1000-weekly-withdrawal-cap-statement-idUSL5N27X0S5>

[52] Sana'a Center interviews with two senior Beirut-based banking officials on November 29 and December 02, 2019.

[53] Sana'a Center interviews with a senior Beirut-based banking official and a senior Yemeni banking official on November 29, 2019.

[54] Ibid. Also see: "High-risk and other monitored jurisdictions", Financial Action Task Force, n.d., <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/countries/#other-monitored-jurisdictions>

[55] Ibid.

[56] Sana'a Center interviews with two senior Yemeni banking officials on November 29, 2019.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Sana'a Center interview with a senior Beirut-based banking official on December 2, 2019.

‘Payroll Initiative’ Hudaydah CBY Account to Collect Import Tariffs

During November, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESgy) assumed greater responsibility regarding Hudaydah fuel imports, having actively mediated between the government and the Houthis in September to establish the current payment mechanism for Hudaydah fuel imports.^[59] In briefing the UNSC on November 22, Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths announced that the Government’s Economic and Technical Team had reached an agreement with his office “to establish a mechanism to have traders deposit the taxes and customs for commercial oil and gas shipments into a special account in the central bank in Hudaydah under UN supervision.”^[60]

According to Sana’a Center sources, a banking account called the Payroll Initiative has been opened at the Hudaydah branch of the Central Bank of Yemen with customs and taxes collected from commercial oil shipments being deposited into this account. According to a Sana’a Center source, the logistical arrangements for distributions remain a challenge. Distribution of the money from the bank account in the form of public sector salary payments in Houthi-controlled territories in northern Yemen has yet to occur.

As requested by several fuel importers, OSESgy is now the initial point of contact and first receiver of any Hudaydah fuel import applications.^[61] The applications are then forwarded to the Technical Office of the Economic Committee to assess their compatibility with Decree 75 and Decree 49 – with a specific focus on the banking information provided.^[62] Decree 49 requires fuel importers to pay the government fuel import taxes and customs fees, which is determined by the size of the shipment.^[63] Hudaydah is a notable exception. As of late September 2019, merchants who import fuel via Hudaydah have started paying the accompanying fuel import tax and customs into the central bank branch in Hudaydah.^[64] The money that is deposited is set to be used for the payment of public health and education workers’ salaries in Houthi-controlled areas.^[65]

[59] Sana’a Center interviews with UN officials and fuel importers in September, October, and November 2019.

[60] Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen to the Open Session of the UN Security Council,” New York, November/September 22, 2019, <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-united-nations-secretary-general-yemen-open-session-un-security-council>

[61] Sana’a Center interviews with UN officials and fuel importers in November 2019.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, “An Interim Capital of Carnage – The Yemen Review, July 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, August 05, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7941#Analysis-The-Challenges-to-Implementing-Decree-49-to-Regulate-Fuel-Imports>

[64] Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, “Riyadh Picks Up the Pieces – The Yemen Review, October 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8363#Fuel-Shortages-Blamed-for-Water-Crisis>

[65] Ibid.

Government Presents Decree 49 Revenue Calculations

The government claims that Decree 49 helped generate a combined estimated total of 29 billion Yemeni rials in revenues from August 13 until November 14, 2019.^[66] Per government figures published on the Economic Committee Facebook page, 12.8 billion Yemeni rials were generated via fuel imports to Hudaydah that were subsequently deposited in the local central bank branch.^[67] The majority of the remaining 15.2 billion Yemeni rials generated at government-controlled ports came from fuel imports via Aden Port that accounted for 10.2 billion Yemeni rials, with an additional 4.5 and billion Yemeni rials made at Mukalla Port, Hadramawt governorate, with the remaining 500 million Yemeni rials accumulated from Nishtun Port in Al-Mahra governorate.^[68] According to the Economic Committee, the government offered an exemption to any fuel importer whose shipment is for the designated purpose of humanitarian aid e.g. fuel provided by a private fuel importer to the World Food Programme (WFP). A total of 695,228,727 Yemeni rials was exempted on the grounds of being fuel provided by humanitarian aid, while a further 575,916,071 Yemeni rials are listed as not having been accepted as the import application did not meet the requirements of the government's fuel import regulations.^[69]

Houthis Level Unofficial Tax Through Forced Religious Commemorations

On November 9-10, the Houthi authorities mandated commemorations for Mawlid, the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, in the capital Sana'a and other areas controlled by the group. Yemeni media opposed to the Houthis reported that the group imposed financial levies on business owners – with reports of looting from individuals who refused or could not pay in cash – and forced them to hang decorations on storefronts, using the celebration as a pretext for informal taxation.^[70]

[66] Economic Committee Facebook Page, November 15, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/economiccommittee/photos/a.273096309986297/462915764337683/?type=3&theater>; <https://www.facebook.com/economiccommittee/photos/a.273096309986297/462917511004175/?type=3&theater>; <https://www.facebook.com/economiccommittee/photos/a.273096309986297/462917884337471/?type=3&theater>

[67] Ibid.

[68] Economic Committee Facebook Page, November 15, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/economiccommittee/photos/a.273096309986297/462917511004175/?type=3&theater>

[69] Economic Committee Facebook Page, November 15, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/economiccommittee/photos/a.273096309986297/462917884337471/?type=3&theater>

[70] The Houthis spend millions of riyals on their activities for the Prophet's birthday [AR],” Al-Mashahid, November 8, 2019, <https://almushahid.net/52604/>

Transportation Developments

Riyan Airport Reopened for Civilian Use After Four-Year Closure

Yemen's Civil Aviation and Meteorology Authority announced on November 21 that Riyan International Airport, in the southeastern coastal city of Mukalla, Hadramawt governorate, was reopening for business more than four years after shutting down. A circular published on the authority's Facebook page said the airport would be operating from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. for both inbound and outbound traffic.^[71]

Regular flights were suspended in March 2015 after the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition began military operations in Yemen. Two months later, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) seized Mukalla. In April 2016, UAE-backed local forces drove AQAP from the city again, with Riyan Airport receiving an Emirati aid flight the following month.^[72] In May 2019, Hadramawt governor Faraj al-Bahsani announced that the airport was being restored with Emirati funding.

The opening of Riyan International Airport brings the total number of airports handling civilian traffic in the country to three – along with Aden International Airport and Sayoun Hadramawt Airport (for more information on air travel in Yemen, see 'A Yemeni Travel Odyssey: Unpredictable Airports and Risky Roads'). The Saudi-led coalition this month also agreed to partially reopen Yemen's main aviation hub, Sana'a International Airport, for civilians seeking urgent medical care abroad, following its enforced closure for three years. The 2017 UN Panel of Experts report concluded that the closure of Sana'a airport to those seeking medical treatment abroad constituted a violation of international law.^[73]

According to a report by The Associated Press in 2017, Riyan airport housed a secret prison run by Emirati military personnel and the Hadrami Elite Forces, a UAE-backed group composing of tribal fighters and other locals. US military personnel were also stationed at the prison, participating in interrogations of detainees accused of having links to AQAP. The AP report documented numerous instances of detainees being subject to beating and torture at the facility.^[74]

[71] General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology Facebook Page, November 21, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/CAMAYEADEN/photos/a.429214593943249/1153177201546981/?type=3&theater>

[72] "Yemen's Mukalla airport reopens with aid flight after Qaeda exit," May 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-airport/yemens-mukalla-airport-reopens-with-aid-flight-after-qaeda-exit-idUSKCN0Y00HI>

[73] "UN 2017 Panel of Experts Report on Yemen," United Nations, January 26, 2018, <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2018/594>

[74] Maggie Michael, "In Yemen's secret prisons, UAE tortures and US interrogates," June 22, 2017, <https://apnews.com/4925f7f0fa654853bd6f2f57174179fe/In-Yemen-s-secret-prisons,-UAE-tortures-and-US-interrogates>

Humanitarian and Human Rights Developments

Houthis Replace Aid Coordination Body; UN Cites ‘Alarming’ Mistreatment

The Houthis’ Supreme Political Council in Sana’a dissolved the former Houthi-run humanitarian aid coordination body on November 6 and replaced it with a new institution — a move that comes as the Houthis face growing pressure for the harassment of aid workers and for enforcing severe restrictions on humanitarian access in areas under their control.^[75]

The newly formed Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) will continue the mandate of the National Authority for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (NAMCHA).^[76] It also will take over some functions previously carried out by the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MOPIC). The international cooperation section of MOPIC was the conduit between donors and Houthi-run ministries in Sana’a — many of which receive millions in humanitarian funding to support their running costs.

A copy of the decree outlining SCMCHA’s mandate seen by the Sana’a Center states that the new body will be the national partner for all aspects of humanitarian activity, from needs assessments and budget allocations to donor reporting — a potential threat to the independence required by humanitarian actors. It also stipulates that 2 percent of the total budget of all projects in Houthi-controlled areas be given to the council. Leadership of SCMCHA remains unchanged from its predecessor, with Abdel Mohsen al-Tawoos continuing as executive director and Ahmed Hamed as chairman. Since taking over in July as head of NAMCHA, Al-Tawoos — who previously held security positions within the Houthi authority — has overseen a period of centralization of humanitarian coordination and increasing restrictions. The new body will answer directly to the Supreme Political Council, and its board will include representatives from ministries as well as the head of national security.

The shake-up comes amid a period of pressure on the Houthi authorities regarding the operating environment for humanitarian agencies in areas under their control. In October, UN Humanitarian Coordinator Lise Grande sent a letter to the Houthi authorities calling for an end to constraints on aid distribution (see, ‘UN Pressures Houthi Authorities on Humanitarian Access in Northern Yemen: The Yemen Review — October 2019’).^[77] This was followed on November 12 with a letter to the Houthi authorities signed by European donors and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The letter echoed the points raised by Grande and added that

[75] Facebook post, The Supreme Council for the management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation,” @scmchayemen, November 6, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/scmchayemen/posts/556161558468851>

[76] “Resolution Establishing The Supreme Council For Administration and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs And International Cooperation,” Al-Thawra Net, November 6, 2019, <http://althawrah.ye/archives/600344>

[77] “The Yemen Review – October 2019,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, November 10, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8363#UN-Pressures-Houthi-Authorities-on-Humanitarian-Access-in-Northern-Yemen>

continued funding would be dependent on change surrounding these issues. At the end of 2018 the Associated Press published a report documenting large-scale Houthi theft and diversion of aid,^[78] while the World Food Program had partially suspended its aid deliveries in Sana'a in June this year over such, restarting them in August after reaching an agreement with the Houthi authorities over the biometric registration process for beneficiaries.^[79]

Separate sources from the humanitarian sector told the Sana'a Center that organizations and agencies are facing an even more prohibitive operating environment since the new body was announced in November, with increasing restrictions on assessments and freedom of movement. Criticism of the UN and INGOs by Houthi authorities and in pro-Houthi media also escalated through November, with the head of SCMCHA accusing humanitarian actors working in Yemen of corruption and political bias.^[80]

Ursulla Mueller, the UN's assistant secretary-general for humanitarian affairs, told the UN Security Council in New York on November 22 that little progress had been made in improving access for humanitarian agencies in Houthi-controlled areas and that mistreatment of aid workers recently had worsened.^[81] She cited some "limited improvements," such as the Houthis allowing more NGO projects to start in recent weeks. However, she also said some new restrictions have been imposed even though the UN has repeatedly and directly raised its concerns with the Houthis.

Mueller, who coordinates emergency relief, also cited an "alarming increase in violence and harassment targeting humanitarian workers in areas controlled by Ansar Allah," including attacks, intimidation and the detention of humanitarian staff. There had been 60 separate incidents over the past three months, she said, including cases in which relief supplies were looted and humanitarian facilities occupied. Monitors often are blocked and there have been cases of UN and other humanitarian workers being forced out of Yemen without cause, she said.

[78] Maggie Michael, "AP Investigation: Aid stolen as Yemen starves", The Associated Press, December 31, 2018, <https://apnews.com/c9fee661bfa64ca7adb02c037f93b09f>

[79] "WFP Resumes Food Aid After Deal with Houthis" as published in "The Southern Implosion – The Yemen Review, August 2019", September 4, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8016#WFP_Food_Aid

[80] Facebook post, The Supreme Council for the management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation, @scmchayemen, November 22, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/scmchayemen/photos/a.187800595304951/569706940447646/?type=3&theater>.

[81] "Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ursulla Mueller – Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen, 22 November 2019," Reliefweb, November 22, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/assistant-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-deputy-emergency-relief-2>

MSF Hospital in Al-Mokha Damaged in Houthi Attacks

A hospital run by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Al-Mokha was badly damaged November 6 in an attack targeting a nearby military warehouse.^[82]

The Saudi-led coalition said Houthi missiles and drones had fallen on residential areas, a camp for displaced persons and the MSF health center.^[83] The aerial attack had targeted Yemeni army logistics warehouses in Mokha, a spokesman for the Joint Forces in the West Coast, Wadhah al-Dubaish, was quoted by Anadolu Agency as saying.^[84]

On November 25, Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea confirmed the group had attacked Al-Mokha with nine ballistic missiles and more than 20 drones, claiming that the strikes were retaliation for the coalition's violations of the cease-fire in Hudaydah governorate.^[85] More than 70 people were evacuated from the MSF facility in Taiz governorate after an explosion and the resulting fire spread to the hospital's pharmacy.

The hospital, which opened in August 2018, is the only facility capable of providing emergency surgical care in Yemen's western coast area. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs condemned the attack, noting international law protects medical facilities.^[86] MSF reopened the hospital within two weeks.^[87]

Fire Destroys More than 30 Muhamasheen Homes in Aden

A fire in Aden's Dar Saad neighborhood on November 18 destroyed more than 30 homes belonging to members of Yemen's Muhamasheen community. The president of the National Union of Muhamasheen, Noman al-Hodaifi, told the Sana'a Center that the causes of the fire were not clear. Witness testimony conflicted on whether it was an accident or deliberately set. Al-Hodaifi said nobody was hurt. Displaced residents initially were moved to Ibn Hanbal school in Dar Saad. Most Muhamasheen in Aden live in Dar Saad, where services are scarce and jobs are generally in garbage collection or fighting for various local militias (see: 'The Historic and Systematic Marginalization of Yemen's Muhamasheen Community').

[82] "MSF hospital partially destroyed in Mocha attack", MSF, November 7, 2019, <https://www.msf.org/msf-hospital-partially-destroyed-attack-mocha-southwest-yemen>

[83] "Houthis fire missiles at Yemen's Mokha port, military coalition says," Reuters, November 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/houthis-fire-missiles-at-yemens-mokha-port-military-coalition-says-idUSKBN1XG2RO>

[84] "MSF suspends its work in a hospital in Yemen [AR]," Anadolu Agency, November 7, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%af%d9%88%d9%84-%d8%a>

[85] "Yemeni quality operation through 9 ballistic missiles and 20 drones against the camps of aggression in Mokha [AR]," Al-Manar, November 25, 2019, <https://almanar.com.lb/5997180>

[86] "Strikes damage a key hospital serving hundreds of thousands of Yemenis," Office of The Resident Coordinator And Humanitarian Coordinator For Yemen, November 7, 2019, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HC_Statement_7_November_2019_FINAL.pdf

[87] "Aid group reopens hospital hit during Houthi attack in Yemen," The Associated Press, November 19, 2019, <https://apnews.com/9ed213d5a6304216aadc171212fb8b35>

Outbreak of Dengue Fever Reported in Hudaydah and Taiz

Houthi health authorities in Sana'a declared a state of emergency on November 13 in the governorates of Hudaydah and Taiz in response to the Dengue fever outbreaks as well as in Hajjah, Raymah, Al-Mahweet, Ibb and Saada.^[88] In line with that, the director of the Hudaydah health office, Abdul Rahman Jarallah, was quoted by Al-Araby Al-Jadeed as saying medical teams had arrived to help treat the ill at health centers and workers had been sent in to fill in swampy areas where mosquitoes breed. Local authorities in Hudaydah and Taiz governorates reported a spike in suspected Dengue fever cases in October and November, with at least 38 deaths blamed on the mosquito-borne virus.

Abductee Dies After Three Years in Houthi Prisons

Khaled al-Haith, who was kidnapped in February 2016 from a Sana'a street and allegedly tortured in custody, has died in a Houthi prison, the Abductees' Mothers Association in Sana'a announced November 20.^[89] Amat al-Salam al-Hajj, head of the Abductees' Mothers Association, told the Sana'a Center that Al-Haith was abducted and had disappeared for six months, eventually turning up in the Houthi-run Habrah Prison in Sana'a. He had been tortured, she said, and was later moved to the Central Prison after his health began to deteriorate; he had hepatitis and had undergone an operation on his liver in early November. The day after his surgery at Al-Mutawakel Hospital, he was transferred back to the prison, she said.^[90] In a November 2 statement, the association had warned Al-Haith and three other abductees required urgent medical care. It held the Houthi authorities fully responsible for the detainees' safety and well-being.^[91]

[88] "33 people died of dengue fever in less than two months in Hudaydah, Yemen [AR]," Al Araby, November 18, 2019, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2019/11/18/>

[89] Abductees Mothers Association, Twitter post, November 29, 2019, 08:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/abducteesmother/status/1197231293265776640>

[90] Amat al-Salam al-Hajj, head of the Abductees' Mothers Association, interview with the Sana'a Center, November 25, 2019.

[91] "Abductees Mothers Association Urgent Report Urging to Save Ill Abductees at Central Security Prison in Sanaa" Abductees Mothers Association, November 02, 2019, <http://www.ama-ye.org/?no=1118&ln=En>.

Other Humanitarian and Human Rights Developments in Brief:

- **November 11:** Recent fighting in Al-Dhalea governorate has displaced about 1,300 people, many from the Muhamasheen community, forcing some to seek shelter in mined areas, according to the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations.^[92]
- **November 25:** The armed Houthi movement released two Jordanians who had been detained in Sana'a while conducting an audit of UN humanitarian programs, Jordanian state media reported.^[93] A Jordanian foreign ministry spokesman said Thamer Qutishat and Hamdi Melhem had been held for 17 days. The UN Special Envoy's office and the Jordanian Foreign Ministry worked for their release, the spokesman said. The secretary general of the Houthi Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation, Abdel Mohsen al-Tawoos, said in a press release that the pair were Jordanians who had been smuggled from Aden to the north to conduct "intelligence operations." He accused UN organizations of paying Yemenis to carry out intelligence work.^[94]
- **November 25:** Ten African migrants were killed and at least 30 injured in the shelling of a local market in Al-Raqu, near the Saudi border in Sa'ada governorate, according to Action on Armed Violence.^[95]

[92] "Yemen – Conflict, displacement, hospital targeted (DG ECHO, IOM, MSF, media) (ECHO Daily Flash of 11 November 2019)," ReliefWeb, November 11, 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-conflict-displacement-hospital-targeted-dg-echo-iom-msf-media-echo-daily-flash-11>

[93] "Two Jordanians held by Yemen's Houthis released," Petra, November 24, 2019,

[94] "Where the humanitarian aid money goes .. al-Tawoos reveals the futility and corruption of international organizations, [AR]," SCMCHA, November 25, 2019, https://www.scmcha.org/ar/namcha982.html?fbclid=IwAR3I7nUs_9lJ0Uxq7mvRIPclNgYTc8kaQDbCPKIkjphUGzb60DuNWyCfoqI

[95] "10 migrants killed in shelling on Yemeni border market," AOA, November 25, 2019, <https://aoav.org.uk/2019/10-migrants-killed-in-shelling-on-yemeni-border-market/>

International Developments

At the United Nations

UNSC Members Discuss Lack of Progress on FSO SAFER

Several UN Security Council member states and UN officials raised concerns during November 22 briefings about Houthi authorities' unwillingness to grant the UN permission to carry out an independent assessment of the FSO SAFER oil terminal offshore of Ras Issa port in the Red Sea, according to UN and SAFER officials.^[96] The terminal fell into disuse following the onset of the regional military intervention in 2015 with more than a million barrels of oil aboard. There are mounting concerns regarding explosive gases building up in the holding tanks and the possibility of an environmental disaster.^[97] The assessment of the FSO SAFER was originally meant to be carried out in August but remains on hold indefinitely. As noted by the Sana'a Center in October and May this year, the lack of progress made on FSO SAFER may have more to do with the inability to secure agreement from the Houthis and the government on what to do with the 1 million barrels of oil on board FSO SAFER.^[98]

In the United States

Riyadh, Abu Dhabi Delay US Investigations of Weapons Transfers to Non-State Actors

The US State Department said inadequate responses from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have delayed investigations into allegations that US-made military equipment sold to the coalition allies has ended up in the hands of various factions fighting in Yemen — including Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the armed Houthi movement and armed southern separatist groups.

The comments were made in a letter from the State Department to Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), who pushed the state and defense departments in October for

[96] Interviews with UN and SAFER officials on November 24 and 25, 2019.

[97] "An Environmental Apocalypse Looming on the Red Sea" as published in "The Yemen Review, May 2019", Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7504#An-Environmental-Apocalypse-Looming-on-the-Red-Sea>

[98] Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, "The Brinkmanship of a SAFER Disaster," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 14, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/8359>; Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, "An Environmental Apocalypse Looming on the Red Sea — The Yemen Review, May 2019," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, June 6, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/7504>

answers regarding the findings of CNN investigations published in February and October.^[99] The State Department said that “insufficient responses” from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi had prolonged the probe into possible violations of end-user agreements. It noted, however, that along with the Pentagon it had sent teams to the UAE in September to investigate the findings and was planning to do the same with Saudi Arabia. The investigation would conclude, the letter said, once these visits and consultations with the respective governments have been completed.

In response to the State Department letter, spokesman for the Saudi-led coalition Col. Turki al-Maliki said that “all required information [is] available.”^[100] Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have denied that they have violated the terms of US arms sales.

US Ambassador to Yemen Visits Country for First Time Since Aden Takeover

US Ambassador to Yemen Christopher Henzel visited Yemen for the first time since the STC takeover of Aden in August. Henzel met with Hadramawt Governor Major General Faraj al-Bahsani in Mukalla on November 18. There were no official statements made regarding the nature of the meeting but Al-Masdar reported that the visit “appeared to be security-related.”^[101] Mukalla has been the headquarters of the UAE-backed counterterrorism campaign in Yemen since AQAP was pushed out of the port city in April 2016 – a campaign that the US has provided support for.^[102]

Henzel also met Vice President Ali Mohsen, Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek, and STC leader Aidaros al-Zubaidi soon after the embassy welcomed the signing of the Riyadh Agreement.^[103] Henzel was last in Yemen in June, when he visited Aden in his first trip to the country as ambassador.

[99] “State Dept Response Regarding Weapons Retransfers Yemen,” November 18, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/State%20Dept%20Response%20re%20Weapons%20Retransfers%20Yemen%2011.19.2019%20bw.pdf>; “Warren Calls on DoD and State to Respond to Reports that American Military Weapons Have Been Transferred to Suspected Terrorists and Separatist Militias in Yemen,” October 23, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/oversight/letters/warren-calls-on-dod-and-state-to-respond-to-reports-that-american-military-weapons-have-been-transferred-to-suspected-terrorists-and-separatist-militias-in-yemen>; “Sold to an ally, lost to an enemy,” CNN, February 4, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/02/middleeast/yemen-lost-us-arms/>; “American weapons ended up in the wrong hands in Yemen. Now they’re being turned on the US-backed government,” CNN, October 20, 2019.

[100] “US sends investigators to UAE and Saudi to probe CNN weapons violations findings,” Florence Davey-Attlee and Nima Elbagir, CNN, November 26, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/26/middleeast/us-yemen-investigators-sent-uae-saudi-arabia-intl/index.html>

[101] “Hadramout .. The American ambassador arrives in Mukalla with a military and security delegation.” Al-Masdar, November 18, 2019. <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/174237>

[102] “Full Accounting Needed of US-UAE Counterterrorism Partnership in Yemen,” Luke Kartig, Just Security, December 7, 2019. <https://www.justsecurity.org/61761/full-accounting-needed-us-uae-counterterrorism-partnership-yemen/>.

[103] Twitter Post, US Embassy Yemen, November 12, 2019. <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyYemen/status/1194313927594627074>; Twitter Post, US Embassy Yemen, November 14, 2019. <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyYemen/status/1194880631903096832>; Twitter Post, US Embassy Yemen, November 21, 2019. <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyYemen/status/1197571321116233728>; Twitter Post, US Embassy Yemen, November 7, 2019. <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyYemen/status/1192329149504876545>

US-led Maritime Coalition Opens Bahrain Command Center

On November 7, the command center for a US-led maritime coalition to counter threats to shipping in the Gulf opened in Bahrain. The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) was proposed following sabotage attacks in the region's waterways earlier in 2019. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, Australia and Albania have signed up to the venture. US Central Command (CENTCOM) said that the command center will be a hub for coordination and information-gathering between IMSC members to inform naval operations.

In Europe

French Government, Total, Implicated in Secret Prison and Human Rights Abuses at Belhaf LNG Terminal

French government and business involvement in a multi-billion dollar liquid natural gas (LNG) export terminal near Belhaf, Shabwa governorate, and the secret prisons UAE-backed militias established there during the ongoing conflict, came under renewed scrutiny in November. On November 7, the NGOs Observatoire des armements, SumOfUs and Les Amis de la Terre jointly published a report,^[104] with Le Monde newspaper publishing a related article the same day,^[105] detailing accounts of human rights violations at the detention facilities in Belhaf and possible complicity by the French government and the French oil company Total.

The Belhaf facility, a US\$4.8 billion investment according to the NGO report, began production in 2009 under the consortium Yemen LNG. Total is the largest shareholder (39.6 percent).^[106] The French government has guaranteed loans to the project totaling 216 million euros, with financing involving several French banks, among other financiers. The facility itself is a heavily militarized complex, with numerous observation posts and surveillance systems, with the NGO report describing a restricted "loop course" of roads leading to the site which facilitate control points and patrols, and isolate it from the surrounding area.

Total evacuated its international staff from Yemen in 2015 with the beginning of regional military intervention, with remaining local staff carrying out security and maintenance. Sources told the authors of the report that Emirati-backed Shabwa Elite Forces, which the UAE has deployed in counterterrorism operations, have been

[104] "Operation Shabwa: France and Total at war in Yemen [French]?", Les Amis de la Terre, November 7, 2019, https://amisdelaterre.org/IMG/pdf/rapport_yemen_total_final.pdf

[105] "A Total site, used as a prison in Yemen [FR]", Louis Imbert, Le Monde, November 7, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/11/07/un-site-de-total-utilise-commme-prison-au-yemen_6018350_3210.html?fbclid=IwAR3wLKEwKwVaHKtD6TkBqSrBja1Q5Xmfy9pPp2b7JS4ibINzWAGWqLsOluM

[106] "Yemen LNG Update," Total, November 07, 2019, <https://www.total.com/en/media/news/press-releases/yemen-lng-update>.

present at the site since 2016. The report, and the Le Monde article, both offer victim testimonies that reinforce previous reports of human rights violations at the secret detention facility in Belhaf.^[107]

Given the extensive surveillance systems at the complex, and that Emirati helicopters and vehicle traffic would regularly access the site, the NGO report suggests that Total had to be aware of the detention facility that was operating at the Yemen LNG site. Total's classification under French law as a 'operator of vital importance' mandates that it share security-related developments directly with the French government. The NGO report thus alleges that the French government, through Total and Yemen LNG, knowingly provided logistics for the UAE to run a detention center at the Belhaf site where human rights abuses occurred.

Following the report's publication, Total released a statement saying it is a minority shareholder that "does not intervene directly at the Yemen LNG-operated Belhaf site."^[108] The company noted that in April 2017 the Yemeni government "requisitioned" a portion of the Belhaf facilities for use by Saudi- and UAE-led coalition forces, and that "Total does not have any specific information on how the coalition is using the requisitioned areas."

A Yemen LNG official told the Sana'a Center that exports from Belhaf would only resume after six months of stability along the LNG pipeline from Marib governorate, through the heart of Shabwa, to the Belhaf facility.

[107] "A Total site, used as a prison in Yemen [French]", Louis Imbert, Le Monde, November 7, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/11/07/un-site-de-total-utilise-comme-prison-au-yemen_6018350_3210.html?fbclid=IwAR3wLKEwKwVaHKtD6TkBqSrBJa1Q5Xmfy9pPp2b7JS4ibINzWAGWqLsOluM.

[108] "Yemen LNG Update," Total, November 07, 2019, <https://www.total.com/en/media/news/press-releases/yemen-lng-update>

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