



# The Yemen Review

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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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**Cover photo:** Pro-Houthi protesters trample on pictures of US President Joe Biden and President-Elect Donald Trump during a demonstration in Sana'a city on January 3, 2025, in support of Gaza and against US strikes in Yemen // Sana'a Center photo

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# Executive Summary

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## Politics and Diplomacy

Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi sought to reposition his movement as the head of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. Israel's destruction of Gaza and attacks on Lebanon's Hezbollah, including the killing of its influential leader, Hassan Nasrallah, have left the alliance weakened, a point underscored by the rapid fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Iran has tried to avoid direct conflict with Israel and the West, leaving the Houthis as the only undiminished group continuing to fight. Abdelmalek has increasingly spoken as if on behalf of the entire alliance, condemning the war in Gaza and chastising Saudi Arabia for pursuing normalization with Israel.

The Houthis dissolved their Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA), transferring its responsibilities to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SCMCHA oversaw humanitarian operations and was notorious for its interference and aid diversion. The move follows the arrest and detention of dozens of humanitarian workers in June, some of whom have since been charged with espionage.

Government infighting and disruption continued to be the norm, as the head of the prime minister's office and the cabinet's secretary-general escalated a dispute over alleged corruption. Both men were dismissed in December along with a third man, alleged to be a known Iranian spy, and are under investigation. Significant tension exists between the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, and rumors of a broader cabinet reshuffle continued.

Efforts to unite the divided anti-Houthi camp gained some momentum. The US-linked National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) oversaw the formation of the National Coalition of Political Parties and Groups, representing 20 pro-government political parties. But the project was boycotted by the powerful Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates secession. However, STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi conducted meetings of his own with the rival Southern National Coalition and a delegation from Islah, a long-time opponent.

The US Treasury Department sanctioned prominent tribal figure Hamid al-Ahmar for funneling funds to Hamas. Al-Ahmar's father was the head of the Hashid tribal confederation, which wielded significant power under the Saleh regime, and his large political network could be affected. Separately, the US also sanctioned the Houthi National Committee for Prisoners Affairs and its chairman, Abdelqader al-Mortada, who is alleged to have tortured prisoners.



## Military and Security

The Houthis shifted their strategy in their confrontation with Israel, shifting attacks from commercial shipping and focusing on targets in Israel proper. The Houthis claimed 24 such attacks over the last quarter of 2024 versus just seven confirmed attacks on commercial shipping, though it has also claimed attacks on US Navy forces. Israeli air defenses have intercepted the majority of Houthi drones and missiles, but a small number have made it through and caused minor damage. Israel has responded by launching airstrikes against energy infrastructure and port facilities, while the US and UK continue to periodically target Houthi armories and missile silos.

Both the Houthis and pro-government forces sent significant military reinforcements to Hudaydah in expectation of a resumption of intense fighting. Troop numbers reportedly doubled in the Hays and Al-Tuhayta districts as the Houthis relocated forces and brought in heavy weapons. There was also military buildup in Al-Dhalea and Lahj, where clashes occurred almost daily. Fighting picked up to the north and west of Taiz city in October and November as Tareq Saleh's National Resistance forces and Islah-affiliated units faced off against Houthi fighters.

Political machinations in the oil-rich eastern governorate of Hadramawt continued to drive military competition. In October, Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces under PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi took over checkpoints along the strategic Al-Abr road to Shabwa, placing them nearer Hadramawt's oil fields and facilities. Nation's Shield forces also ramped up the recruitment and training of Salafi fighters in Hadramawt, Al-Mahra, and Al-Dhalea. This reportedly troubled the STC, which had called for the further deployment of Emirati-backed forces in Yemen's eastern governorates, and Islah, which has affiliated army units based in Seyoun. In December, Al-Alimi replaced two top Islah-affiliated commanders based there. The Hadramawt Tribal Alliance, led by deputy governor Amr bin Habrish, also announced the formation of a new militia, the Hadramawt Protection Forces. Bin Habrish has become a prominent agitator for greater local autonomy and control of the governorate's resources.

Russia has reportedly recruited hundreds of Yemenis to fight in Ukraine, luring young men with promises of well-paid jobs and Russian citizenship and then pressing them into service. In late October, a Russian warship evacuated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Abdul Reza Shahlai, who reportedly held one of the highest positions in the Houthi military structure. A few days later, it was reported that a Russian ship was headed for the Houthi-controlled port of Al-Salif in Hudaydah to deliver wheat.

## Economy

The government's fiscal crisis continued to worsen as a lack of revenues led to the delayed payment of October's public sector salaries, on which many Yemeni households are dependent. The deteriorating economic situation sparked strikes and protests in a number of governorates as massive inflation undermined worker's purchasing power. In December, Saudi Arabia disbursed US\$200 million to the government, the fourth and final tranche of a US\$1.2 billion aid package announced in August 2023, but absent further support, the government's financial position appears untenable.

The new rial, which circulates in government-controlled areas, fell to record lows, trading at more than YR2,000 per US\$. The Central Bank of Yemen in Aden was unable to halt the slide as its foreign currency reserves ran low. Saudi Arabia deposited US\$300 million in the central bank in late December, but the currency continued to fall. Old rials, which circulate in Houthi-controlled areas, remained relatively stable, trading around YR535-YR539 per US\$1.

The government announced an ambitious economic reform plan in November to tackle both its immediate predicament and long-term structural problems. A delegation from the EU, UK, and World Bank visited Aden to explore ways to support the reforms, including securing funding and fixing key sectors, such as electricity. Aden and neighboring governorates have been hit with blackouts of up to 20 hours per day, with the crisis disrupting the provision of other essential services. Divisions in the government, mismanagement, and a lack of resources have hindered previous such attempts at reform.

A Joint Monitoring Report published by UN agencies and the World Bank projected that 17.1 million Yemenis, roughly half the population, will need food assistance in 2025. Currency depreciation, conflict, and economic instability remain the key drivers of hunger, as Yemen is highly dependent on food imports. The report added that more than half the population suffered from inadequate food consumption in September 2024. The outlook is grim, as the country's humanitarian response remains underfunded. The UN's 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan includes a US\$2.5 billion appeal to assist 10.5 million people in need. However, the 2024 plan received just over half the funds requested.



A demonstrator holds up Yemeni rials during a march in Taiz city on July 15, 2024, in support of the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden // Sana'a Center photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

### The Sana'a Center Editorial

## A Last Chance to Tackle Corruption

Yemenis have always known that the country's politics are riven with corruption, but there's nothing quite like scandalous revelations in the press to bring the point home. Tensions between the prime minister and president and a prolonged standoff between two veteran bureaucrats seem to have been the catalyst for a flood of media leaks that have dotted the i's and crossed the t's for observers and ordinary citizens alike on the deep corruption afflicting the state.

News media has **published details** from leaked official reports detailing corruption in the telecoms sector, lavish spending at the consulate in Jeddah and other diplomatic missions, and the establishment of a US\$2.8 billion commercial entity in an Omani duty-free zone by state oil firm PetroMasila. And it's not just the government in Aden – the Houthis have also been hit by **corruption revelations**, including **leaks** by a US-based social media influencer concerning misuse of funds at the central bank in Sana'a.

This is clearly just the tip of the iceberg. In 2023, a government report called the collapsing electricity sector, which cost a whopping US\$2.27 billion to manage in 2022 alone, a "**black hole** swallowing public money as a result of corruption." Government jobs have become sinecures in a quota system in which positions are parceled out to political factions. And some bureaucrats have been able to acquire inordinate power – one of the officials **under investigation** was acting chairman of the Land Authority alongside his main job as director of the prime minister's office, the kind of stacking up of posts that opens the door to cronyism and graft.

Corruption has had catastrophic consequences for both public and donor confidence in the government. One reason Saudi Arabia has tightened funding over the past two years is concern over how its largesse is misspent in Aden and other areas under government control. Over the past two months, donor governments have begun to press for more action on the issue after the prime minister complained to diplomats about financial corruption in the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). As a result, there is now pressure on PLC members to spend more time in Aden, where the public can see them doing their jobs.

Conditions in government-controlled areas are dire, and while there are many factors at play, such as the Houthi blockade on oil exports and the deterioration of the economy, the deepening dysfunction of state institutions visibly impacts citizens in their daily lives. Officials blatantly acting in pursuit of personal gain or out of partisan interest have critically eroded people's faith in the system. Some governorates are considering alternatives as the ship sinks in Aden, with Hadramis now **aggressively pushing** for greater local control.

Perhaps the worst consequence of corrupt governance has been the propaganda win it has handed to the Houthis. Despite the violence meted out to dissenters, the crushing of independent entities, including the judiciary, and the outrageous levels of **revenue extraction** the Sana'a authorities impose on an impoverished population – the corrupt, fractious government in Aden holds little appeal as a viable alternative. Yemenis and donors alike are increasingly losing patience.

Houthi authorities are aware of this, and it's a key reason why they were able to start **talks with Riyadh** in which the government had no say. Faced with the results of their failure to rule, **some members** of the creaky anti-Houthi coalition have tried to use Houthi actions over Gaza to persuade external players to support a return to war. The risk remains that international players will simply lose interest in propping up a corrupt government, leaving an emboldened regime in Sana'a forever threatening a fragmented south.

In short, the government desperately needs to improve its standing if it wants to avoid such outcomes, and the root of the problem is internal corruption. The **PLC tasked** the Central Organization for Control and Accounting with probing the recently revealed corruption cases; it is imperative that these investigations are serious, neutral, and transparent.

From now on, political and bureaucratic appointments must be on the basis of merit. Senior leaders ought to be seen acting above the political fray and in the national interest. The parliament in Aden should be allowed to assume its full supervisory functions. Foreign pressure can do some good by squeezing top officials to make this happen.

With the Houthis boxed in by the Trump administration's **Foreign Terrorist Organization** redesignation, now is the time for the government to step up, clean up its act, and present a real alternative to the group. It's little exaggeration to say that the elimination of corruption is crucial to the future administrative and territorial integrity of the Yemeni state.





Houthi supporters during a demonstration in Al-Sabeen Square in Sana'a city on October 25, 2024, in support of Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon // Sana'a Center photo.

## Politics and Diplomacy

By Casey Coombs

### Houthis Seek to Fill Hezbollah Void, Pressure Riyadh, Stabilize Internal Politics

In response to dramatic regional developments stemming from the Gaza war and domestic pressure inside Yemen, the Houthis (*Ansar Allah*) pivoted on several fronts. Houthi leader Abdalmalek al-Houthi quickly stepped in to fill the **leadership vacuum** atop the Axis of Resistance following the September 27 assassination of his Lebanese ally and mentor, Hassan Nasrallah, which severely weakened Hezbollah in its fight with Israel. Over the next eight days, Abdalmalek delivered three recorded speeches, one mourning Nasrallah, the second following a missile attack on Israel, and the third marking the anniversary of Hamas's October 7 attacks. Abdalmalek argued that among Iran-allied groups, the Houthis are the most capable, most influential, and most willing and able to sustain losses on behalf of the Axis of Resistance. Speaking as if he represented the views of the entire bloc, Abdalmalek was also unusually frank about Iran's role as a supporter of the Houthis: "Iran stands with the Arabs before others do in confronting their Israeli enemy," **he said** in his October 6 speech, which dedicated considerable time to defending Tehran's regional policies.



At the same time, Houthi animosity toward Saudi Arabia flared up again.<sup>[4]</sup> In his October 6 speech, Abdelmalek **attacked Riyadh** for pursuing normalization plans with Israel. Houthi commentators and journalists took the criticism as a cue to ramp up their own attacks. “To the brothers in Gulf states, good hellish evening to you: I advise those who live near oil fields, storage, refineries, and export centers to keep a safe distance,” Houthi war reporter for Al-Masirah TV, Yahya al-Shami, **posted on X**, alongside an image of a Jeddah oil depot on fire after a 2022 Houthi attack. The latest Houthi outbursts against Riyadh also have to do with delays in the implementation of a peace roadmap that the two had tentatively agreed upon prior to the start of the Gaza war. Specifically, the Houthis are eager to cash in on the financial rescue package outlined in the deal – which envisions the disbursement of years of unpaid public salaries, including for Houthi fighters – in order to ease mounting popular resentment against the group. In an October 29 **meeting** with the UN Special Envoy’s office, incoming Houthi Foreign Minister Jamal Amer said that Saudi Arabia was holding back on the implementation of the so-called roadmap due to foreign pressure. A few days later, Houthi-run Saba news agency chief Nasreddine Amer reposted a **photo on X** showing him alongside a little-known Saudi opposition figure called **Nader al-Shammari** speaking in Sana’a in praise of the Houthis.

The anti-Saudi theme continued in a November 4 **editorial** piece, in which the Houthi-run Saba news agency attacked Saudi Arabia for its pro-Western role in the region. “Saudi Arabia is governed by an old monarchy built by the colonial powers to protect their interests, secure the exploitation of oil revenues, and transform Saudi territory into a market for their industrial products,” it said. During the same period, a Yemeni journalist **reported** that dozens of Saudi opposition figures and other nationals wanted by the Saudi government had arrived in Sana’a and Sa’ada over several months with the aim of forming a “military council.” The report claimed the recent arrivals included four figures associated with Al-Qaeda in Yemen, who came to Sana’a via Al-Bayda governorate.

In parallel with Houthi messaging shifts at the regional level, the group’s interactions with the international aid community took a sharp turn. On October 9, Houthi authorities **announced** the abolishment of the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation (SCMCHA) and transferred its responsibilities to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Formed in 2019, SCMCHA was designed to monitor aid operations in Houthi areas and became synonymous with the group’s interference in humanitarian work. Long loathed by humanitarians, SCMCHA’s image hit a new low in June when more than 60 aid workers and civil society members were forcibly disappeared amid fabricated spy allegations.

The sudden fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime in early December dealt another blow to the Axis of Resistance. Government leaders, including Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi, welcomed the fall of the Assad regime, calling it a “**historic moment**” for the rejection of foreign influence in the country and for Iran to end its influence in Yemen.

The unexpected regime collapse in Syria fueled speculation that the Houthis might be vulnerable to the same fate. Although there is rising dissent within Houthi ranks and among the population they govern, Houthi authorities still command a large fighting force driven largely by ideological conviction. However, widespread economic suffering in Houthi areas and **infighting** among the political and security apparatus and other elements of the ruling structure may be revealing cracks in the Houthi edifice. Houthi authorities arrested a number of people who celebrated the

<sup>4</sup> In early July, Abdelmalek al-Houthi threatened to target Saudi infrastructure for allegedly supporting Yemeni government efforts to shut the Houthis out of the international banking system. Riyadh quickly intervened and pressured the government to reverse course.

events in Syria. While it is still too early to gauge the fallout from the end of the Assad regime, both Yemen and Iraq seem set to rise in importance for the Iran-led Axis.

The Houthis' escalatory rhetoric and actions in the final months of 2024 can't be understood without considering the looming threat posed by the incoming Trump administration. Although theories on Trump's approach to Yemen and the Houthis are speculation at this stage, there are signs of a hardline stance, such as the **reinstatement** of the Foreign Terrorist Organization designation that the Biden administration removed in 2021. Given Trump's aversion to costly military conflict shown in his first term, it is plausible that the incoming administration may give Israel the green light to spearhead attacks against the Houthis with US logistical support, but also possible that he would try to hold the Israelis back from a major escalation.

## Government Infighting Reveals Dysfunction

Intrigue and dysfunction continue to grip the PLC and government, undermining efforts to tackle fuel shortages, provide electricity, pay salaries, and curb rampant inflation in southern governorates. The situation was exemplified by a personal rivalry between two veteran bureaucrats – cabinet secretary-general Mutea Dammaj and the prime minister's office head Anis Baharitha. On October 27, Dammaj **complained** to Prime Minister Ahmed bin Mubarak that Baharitha had stormed a cabinet meeting to demand an explanation for the disappearance of a number of checks from the Department of Financial and Administrative Affairs. On November 2, Bin Mubarak sided with Baharitha and **ordered** the government's financial accountability apparatus to investigate the corruption accusations. Bin Mubarak has struggled to impose his authority since taking office in February, and speculation is already swirling that the PLC hopes to replace him as part of a broader cabinet reshuffle, which could include up to 10 ministers.

Baharitha, a powerful Islah-backed political veteran, long occupied a number of sensitive positions contemporaneously, including at the investment authority. Dammaj is affiliated with the Yemeni Socialist Party and is known to have good standing with journalists and intellectuals, as well as support from senior officials, who saw an opportunity to remove Baharitha. The tensions came to a head on December 18 when the PLC issued a **decree** dismissing both men along with a third figure, Ali al-Nuaimi,<sup>[2]</sup> an assistant to Baharitha. The decision, which came from a committee headed by PLC member and Giants Brigades leader Abdelrahman "Abu Zara'a" al-Muharrami, added that corruption investigations concerning all three would be completed within a month.

The reporting period also witnessed some political openings. On October 29, Southern Transitional Council (STC) chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi **met with** prominent businessman Ahmed al-Essi in Abu Dhabi. Al-Essi is one of the wealthiest men in Yemen and is **intimately involved** in politics, having founded the Southern National Coalition in May 2018 as a political counterweight to the STC. On November 22, an Islah delegation **met** Al-Zubaidi in Aden under the slogan of uniting ranks in the face of "the Houthi Imamate project" and restoring the state. Following Al-Zubaidi's talks with PLC member and National Resistance forces leader Tareq Saleh in the summer, the STC chief's appearances with Al-Essi and Islah build on a trend over the past year of unifying parts of the anti-Houthi coalition.

To that end, on December 5, in Islah-dominated Taiz city, the Political Bureau of Tareq Saleh's

<sup>2</sup> The government dismissals brought Ali al-Nuaimi to public attention for the first time. According to regional intelligence sources, Al-Nuaimi is a known spy for Iran, who was kept in his post and secretly monitored over the past two years. Originally from Nehm district in Sana'a, he has at least one relative who worked with the Houthis. Why the **decision to oust** Al-Nuaimi was made now isn't clear; STC forces in Aden are believed to have seized him briefly, but he was later permitted to leave for Cairo, where he has family.

National Resistance forces and the Taiz branch of the General People's Congress (GPC) party commemorated the seventh anniversary of the December 2 uprising, when forces loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (along with his nephew Tareq) battled their former Houthi allies. It was the first time that the Islah party in Taiz city allowed commemoration of the uprising, and events featured the participation of several Islah officials. In Marib, unidentified gunmen opened fire on a delegation from the Political Bureau of the National Resistance forces that was traveling to Marib city, which is also controlled by Islah, to commemorate the uprising. Although it would be presumptuous to call any of these developments political breakthroughs, the fact that longtime foes are meeting each other in public is a sign that a willingness to work together – however minimally – may be gaining traction.

These were not the only initiatives seeking to foster cooperation. American efforts to unify anti-Houthi political ranks produced the National Coalition of Political Parties and Groups in November. Spearheaded by the US government-linked National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the new anti-Houthi bloc consists of more than 20 political parties aligned with the internationally recognized government and is led by former prime minister Ahmed bin Dagher. The STC refused to join, seeing it as a dilution of its dominant position in the south and a threat to its ability to deliver on its promise of an independent southern state. Other groups seeking greater autonomy from the government, such as the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, refused to sign on as well, believing the coalition was too hastily arranged to win genuine buy-in from the various political factions.

## Other Developments

**October 3:** The US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on prominent tribal figure and Islah-affiliated businessman Hamid al-Ahmar for funding Hamas's military and governance activities in Gaza through a vast network of businesses and charitable organizations he owns in Yemen and abroad. Given the Al-Ahmar family's legacy and established patronage networks – Abdullah al-Ahmar was the paramount sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation and a major player in Yemeni politics during the Saleh era – the sanctions may impact the political landscape, alienating some factions while consolidating support among others.

**October 14:** Thousands of people gathered in Hadramawt's Seyoun city for the 61st anniversary of the October 14 Revolution, which celebrates the uprising against British rule in Aden. Local media reported that STC branches across Yemen encouraged their constituents to travel to Seyoun for the celebrations in an effort to strengthen the STC against the Islah party, which is influential in the city.

**October 15:** Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas – former prime minister of south Yemen, prime minister after unification in 1990, and prime minister of the brief breakaway southern state in 1994 – returned to Aden for the first time in 30 years. Al-Attas was accompanied by PLC chief Al-Alimi in what looked like another Saudi-choreographed message to the STC that it will not be able to impose its agenda on the south.

**October 15:** A Russian delegation led by the director of the MENA department of the Russian foreign ministry, Alexander Kinshchak, met separately with Prime Minister Bin Mubarak, Aden Governor Ahmed Lamlas, and STC National Assembly President Ali Abdullah al-Kathiri to discuss the reopening of the Russian consulate in Aden. All the Yemeni representatives promised to support the consulate's return, but it was notable that the move came amid reports that Russia may be considering a weapons deal with the Houthis.

**November 11:** The Aden office of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor threatened to suspend the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate's (YJS) work in the interim capital until it moves its headquarters to Aden. The move came as part of a larger ministry initiative to force unions to relocate from Sana'a. The YJS **criticized** the move as part of what it called "arbitrary and illegal measures" to target syndicates and unions. Prime Minister Bin Mubarak instructed the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor to **cancel** its suspension of the YJS, saying the government must respect its "historic symbolism."

**November 19:** Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and Yemen envoy Mikhail Bogdanov **met** with Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, son of Yemen's late former president. The two reportedly **discussed** the UN-led peace process and humanitarian and security efforts. In late July, the UN **removed** Saleh, who lives in the UAE, from its sanctions list. In December, he traveled to Cairo to **meet** with the exiled Yemeni leadership of the General People's Congress (GPC).

**November 19:** Representatives from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and China met in Riyadh to **reaffirm** the Beijing Agreement, a 2023 Chinese-brokered deal that **restored relations** between the two Middle Eastern powers following seven years of severed ties.

**November 25:** Ali Hussein Badreddine al-Houthi, a son of the movement's founder, was **appointed** head of the Sha'ab Football Club in Sana'a. The move appears intended to use sports to create a support base among Yemeni youth for the younger generation of the ruling Houthi family.

**November 26:** The Swedish government **announced** its intention to end development aid to Yemen due to what it called the Houthi group's "destructive actions" – a reference to continued attacks on commercial vessels and the mass detention of employees of the UN, INGOs, and their local affiliates. Development aid to Houthi-controlled territories will end as early as the start of 2025 and be phased out in government-held parts of the country by June.

**November 30:** Dozens of cities in southern Yemen commemorated South Yemen's Independence Day, marking the withdrawal of British forces from Aden in 1967 and the establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Demonstrators in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra **demand**ed the removal of what they called Saudi and UAE "occupiers."

**December 2:** Canada **added** the Houthi group to its list of terrorist entities, making it illegal for Canadian citizens or parties to knowingly interact with or provide resources to the group in any way.

**December 9:** The US Treasury Department **sanctioned** the Houthi National Committee for Prisoners Affairs and its chairman, Abdelqader al-Mortada, for human rights abuses in Yemen. The designation noted that Al-Mortada, who represents the Houthis in UN-brokered prisoner release negotiations, has been directly implicated in the torture of prisoners. Upon release from a Houthi prison in 2023, Yemeni journalist Tawfiq al-Mansouri accused Al-Mortada of fracturing his skull during an interrogation.

**December 12:** Socotra's STC-leaning national assembly **declared self-rule** with what it said in a statement was the UAE's blessing, adding it would pursue talks with the PLC in that regard. The UAE placed military forces on the archipelago during the war, making it the de facto power there, although Saudi Arabia is also known to maintain a small presence.

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Broken glass at Sana'a International Airport on December 27, 2024, following Israeli airstrikes // Sana'a Center photo

## Military and Security

By William Clough

### Bases Over Boats: Houthis Shift Missile Strategy

The final months of 2024 – bookended by the assassination of Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in late September and the announcement of a Gaza ceasefire in January 2025 – were undoubtedly a period of redefinition for Houthi military leadership, as the group once again shifted its strategy in targeting Israel, the United States, and their strategic interests in the Red Sea. While Houthi missile and drone barrages continued throughout the quarter, attacks shifted away from commercial shipping to focus instead on military bases and infrastructure within Israel itself.

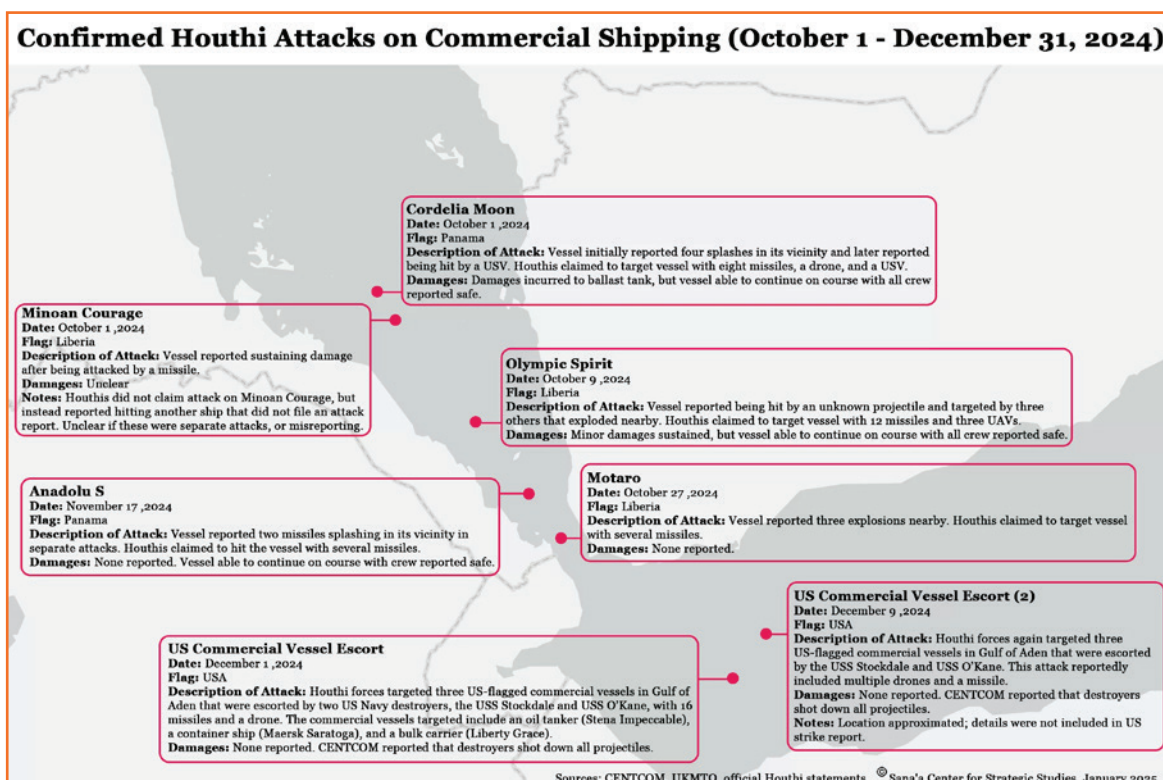
The decision to target Israel is not new – the Houthis made headlines in July after a drone **crashed** into a residential apartment near the US Embassy in Tel Aviv. Since then, the group has launched numerous projectiles, particularly in coordination with Iran-backed Iraqi militias, targeting southern Israel with relatively little success. A rise in such strikes against Israel this quarter indicates that this has become the preferred mode of attack, in a shift from a strategy that had prioritized targeting commercial shipping.

Houthi forces claimed to directly target Israeli territory on at least 24 occasions in the past three months, compared to only seven confirmed attacks on commercial shipping in the same period. Of these, nearly two-thirds occurred in December alone, as the group attempted to increase pressure to advance a ceasefire deal.

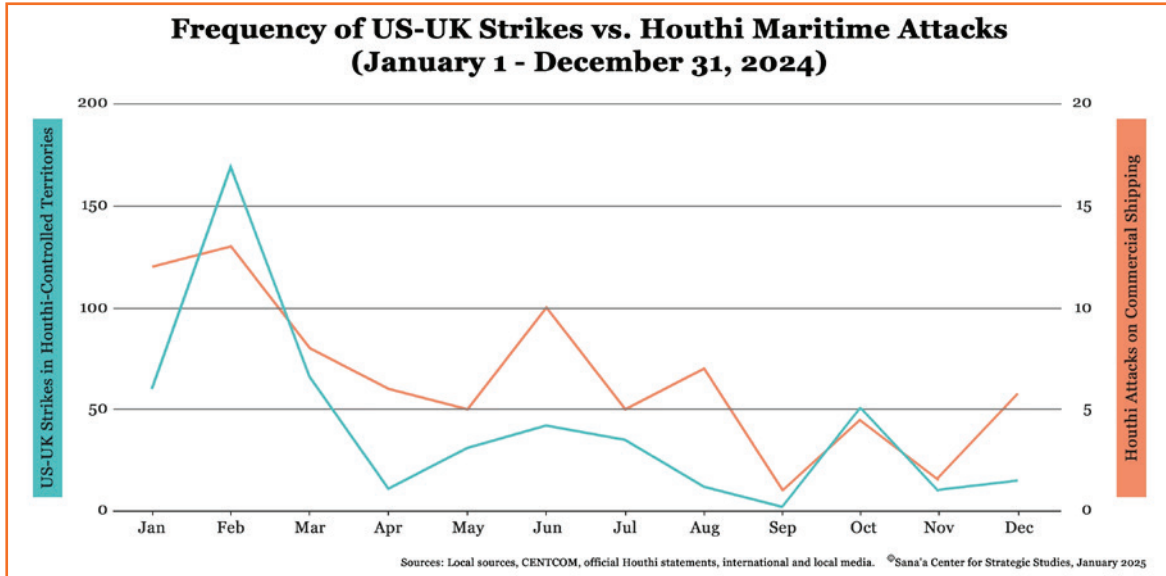


Targets of the attacks included a variety of buildings in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa metropolitan area, as well as the southern port town of Eilat and the city of Ashkelon. Along with numerous UAVs, dozens of *Palestine 2* and *Zulfikar* missiles targeted Israeli military bases and energy infrastructure, as well as the Ben Gurion International Airport and the Israeli Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv.

The vast majority of these attacks were thwarted by Israeli air defense systems – a reminder that the Houthi arsenal, while it has “shocked” experts with its rapid development and sophistication in recent months, is still limited in its capacity to inflict significant damage against Israel. This is largely because Houthi attacks have been isolated in nature – often, no more than three or four projectiles were fired at a given target. This makes them easily detectable for an air defense system designed to simultaneously down hundreds of projectiles.

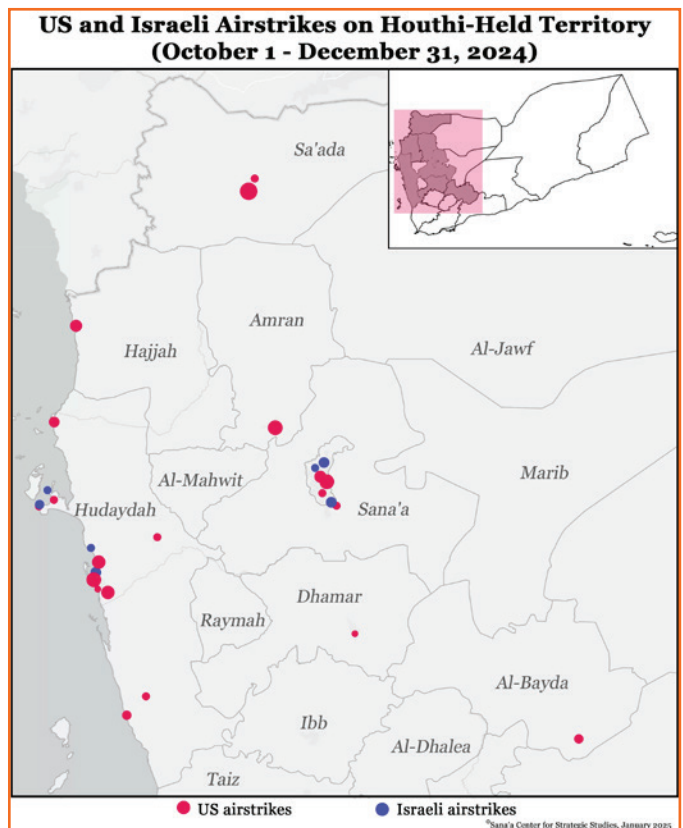


But that is not to say that the Houthi threat to Israeli territory is not legitimate. Israeli military officials have repeatedly complained of the difficulty of deterring such attacks, which have kept warning systems on high alert. A number of projectiles have bypassed Israeli defenses in recent months, inflicting damages to residential areas and causing minor casualties. Projectiles struck a private residence on December 9 and a school building on December 19, while a fuselage from a downed missile damaged a home on December 16. On December 21, a missile purportedly targeting a military site wounded at least 14 people. While the Houthis attributed these “successes” to jamming software and evasion techniques, Israeli forces often chalked them down to human error.



The focus on Israeli land interests has meant that Yemen’s sea lanes are the quietest they have been since the Houthis began targeting ships in November 2023. Of the seven confirmed Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, nearly all occurred in the weeks following Nasrallah’s death; only one attack was verified in November and two in December (both of which were convoys of American-flagged vessels escorted by US warships). The Houthis increasingly took aim at **US military vessels**, alleging multiple hits on both the *USS Abraham Lincoln* and *USS Harry S. Truman* aircraft carriers – claims which the Pentagon categorically denied. On one instance, Houthi spokesman Yahya Sarea even **claimed credit** for the downing of two US Navy pilots over the Red Sea on December 22, which the Pentagon reported was due to a **friendly fire** incident. Both men survived after ejecting from their F/A-18 aircraft, one with minor injuries.

US and Israeli responses to Houthi attacks remained relatively unchanged, though Israeli retaliatory strikes have kept pace with the surge in Houthi projectiles. As in previous months, Israeli strikes targeted **energy stations, infrastructure, and ports**, drawing **sharp criticism** for their proximity to civilian areas. For their part, US forces continued to target Houthi weapons storage facilities, which they claimed were used to target US military and commercial ships. Notably, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) diverged from its typically detailed reporting of targets destroyed, choosing instead to report only major developments and strikes (a trend that seems **likely to continue** under the Trump administration). Among more routine strikes, operations included the use of **B-2 stealth bombers** to target underground facilities for the first time in Yemen on October 16 and the launching of **Tomahawk missiles** from US destroyers on December 31.



## Hadrami Groups Recruit New Troops, Restructure Units

Multiple security sources have reported that the Saudi-trained Nation's Shield forces, formed in 2023 and put under the direct control of PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi, have received significant funding from Riyadh to draw in Salafi recruits in recent months. To this end, the group has reportedly established major bases for military training and Salafi indoctrination in Hadramawt and Al-Dhalea. Reports also suggest that Saudi officials have prompted the PLC to recruit Salafis in Al-Mahra as part of a special "Al-Mahra Shield" unit of the Nation's Shield. Saudi forces stationed at Al-Ghaydah Airport are reportedly overseeing this recruitment and have already received funding to establish a training center.

Unlike other groups in Yemen, the Nation's Shield is paid directly and in cash, meaning they are not subject to the long salary delays that afflict other government-affiliated units. Saudi funds are supplemented by revenues the group extracts from the Al-Wadea border crossing with Saudi Arabia, which it **took over** in August. The promise of regular salary disbursement amid deteriorating economic conditions, along with its ideological appeal, have contributed to the group's rapid growth in the past two years, allowing it to compete with more well-established groups like the Security Belt forces and the Giants Brigades – two UAE-funded groups from which the Nation's Shield has been aggressively recruiting Salafi fighters.

The Shield's October **expansion**, taking over military checkpoints and watchtowers along the Al-Abr road, which connects Hadramawt with Shabwa, led to concerns and rumors that the group could also be eyeing the PetroMasila oil fields or the Al-Dhabba oil terminal in Hadramawt. Feathers were ruffled not only in the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which has been calling for the more extensive deployment of the UAE-backed Hadrami Elites in the governorate, but also among the leadership of the Seyoun-based Islah-affiliated 1st Military Region, which previously controlled the Al-Abr road. Such tensions reflect the delicate nature of military politics in Hadramawt – a balancing act that was on full display in December after Al-Alimi's appointment of new commanders to lead the 1st Military Region. Saleh al-Juaimilani replaced **Saleh Taimas** as the top commander, and Ali Yahya al-Adbai replaced Yahya Abu Awaja, the region's de facto head, as commander of the Seyoun-based 135th Infantry Brigade, regarded as one of the most powerful in the Yemeni army.

Not wanting to be left out, the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance (HTA) announced the formation of a new militia in December, the Hadramawt Protection Forces, which will reportedly operate outside the state's military command and control structure. The HTA, led by Hadramawt deputy governor Amr bin Habrish, has been challenging Governor Mabkhout bin Madi's authority since the summer. Time will tell if the Protection Forces take any real responsibility in the governorate or, like numerous Hadrami groups before them, succumb to the fray of partisan politics. Regardless, the PLC's promise to **matriculate** thousands of Hadramis into the government armed forces and security units will likely ensure that competition in the eastern governorate will not resolve anytime soon.

## Frontlines Remain Active

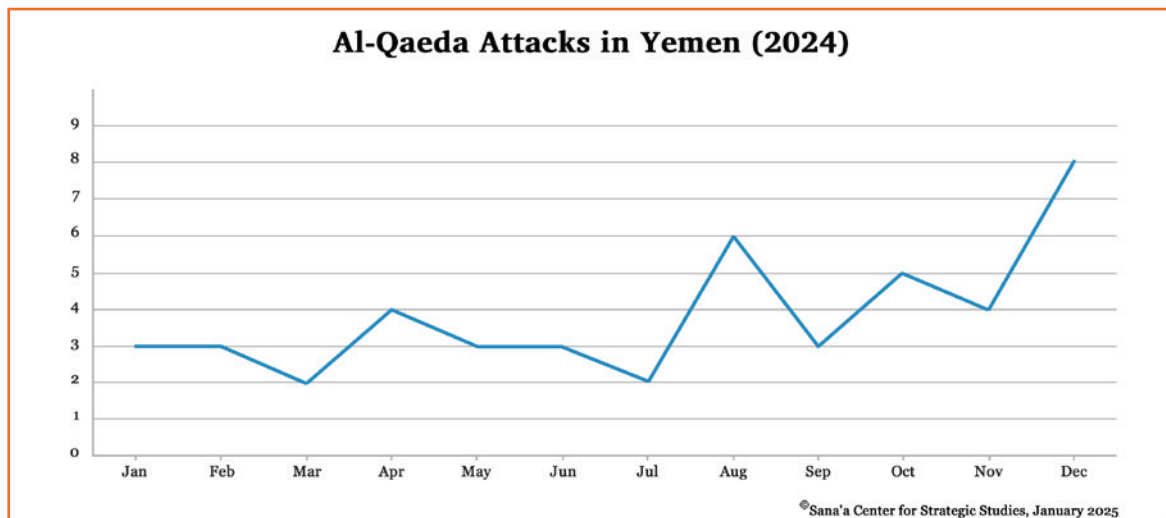
Uncertainty over the Houthis' shifting role in the Axis of Resistance sparked a flurry of military buildups and redeployments in late October that saw massive numbers of troops flock to Hudaydah. A Houthi-affiliated security source in Al-Jawf reported that the group withdrew from nearly 70 percent of security and military sites across the governorate in anticipation of the supposed renewal of hostilities in Hudaydah. Redeployments, which in Al-Jawf included strategically important areas and border regions with neighboring governorates, also occurred in Al-Bayda and Ibb. According to local sources, Houthi- and government-aligned forces mobilized an "unprecedented number" of troops to key frontlines in coastal Al-Tuhayta district and areas surrounding Hays district to the east. Troop numbers nearly doubled in these areas, and Houthi forces reportedly brought in rocket batteries, heavy artillery, and guided missiles.

Areas to the north and west of Taiz city were particularly active this quarter as well, as Tareq Saleh's National Resistance forces and the Islah-affiliated Taiz Military Axis worked to fight off Houthi incursions. In particular, the Al-Kadha front and its affiliated Barah Axis to the west of Taiz city in Al-Maafer district have seen a steady increase in fighting. Saleh's forces reported dozens of Houthi casualties there in at least seven battles between October and November. In late December, an unidentified truck carrying two vehicles equipped with missiles was observed in the Barah area, sparking fears that the Houthis could be mobilizing forces to target frontlines in neighboring districts.

Troop buildups have also continued in Al-Dhalea and Lahj, where fighting is now an almost daily occurrence. In mid-December, significant Houthi military reinforcements in the form of soldiers, equipment, and salaries arrived at the Bab Ghalaq, Murais, and Al-Fakher fronts, where Ahmed al-Marani, a commander from Sa'ada governorate, has been called on to lead the mobilization efforts.

## Al-Qaeda Attacks Increase

As with previous months, Al-Qaeda operatives presented a constant threat in Abyan's Omayran Valley and Shabwa's Al-Saeed district, where the group has planted landmines and launched attacks against STC-affiliated and UAE-backed groups. A spike in operations since late October has rekindled **old questions** about how the group may try to reposition itself in Yemen as regional dynamics shift.





## Other Developments in Brief

**October 22:** Houthi forces carried out Operation “**Sadden Your Faces**,” in coastal areas of Hudaydah, which included four military exercises, including naval, desert, mountain, and urban warfare maneuvers. Major naval exercises were also conducted on November 23 in the Ibn Abbas Sea off the southern coast of Al-Munira district and Al-Luhayah district.

**October 24:** Iran and Saudi Arabia held **joint naval exercises** in the Sea of Oman, a major step forward for the two rivals with regional tensions escalating and maritime safety becoming a key concern. Reuters earlier **reported** that Iran had also conducted exercises with Russia and Oman, with Saudi Arabia as an observer.

**October 30:** The Wall Street Journal **reported** that a Russian warship evacuated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Abdul Reza Shahlai from the port of Hudaydah in April. Shahlai was recently **identified** by a UN Panel of Experts report as the “Jihad Assistant” of the **Houthi Jihad Council**, effectively one of the most senior positions in the Houthi military system. Shahlai, who allegedly directed a failed plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the US in 2011, reportedly arrived in Yemen later that year to build up Houthi military capabilities.<sup>[1]</sup>

**November 3:** A Ukrainian journalist **reported** that the Russian-flagged bulk carrier *Zafar* was making a second trip to the Houthi-controlled port of Al-Salif in Hudaydah to deliver wheat from Sevastopol in Russian-occupied Crimea. The vessel reportedly received approval from the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM) in Djibouti, where it was located at the time of reporting. A similar shipment was made in July, as reported in a **joint investigation** by Bellingcat and Lloyd’s List, raising concerns about the potential transfer of Russian arms to Yemen.

**November 24:** The Financial Times **reported** that since July, Russia has recruited hundreds of Yemenis for its war in Ukraine, in a further sign of growing ties with the Houthi movement over the past year. The report said the men, traveling via Oman, were dragooned into the Russian army after being lured by promises of well-paid work that would lead to Russian citizenship. The main recruiter cited in the piece, Abdulwali Abdo Hassan al-Jabri, is a well-known General People’s Congress (GPC) figure from Taiz who has been ostracized by its Sana’a-based branch for his close alignment with the Houthis in recent years.

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<sup>1</sup> While the WSJ did not provide the specific dates of the alleged evacuation, the Sana’a Center recorded the arrival of the Russian frigate Marshal Shaposhnikov to the Eritrean port of Massawa on March 28, accompanied by a cruiser, the Varyag, on a surprise mission in which Eritrea was not announced as a destination. The Shaposhnikov stayed at Massawa for more than a week.





Humanitarian food aid is distributed at a camp for displaced persons in the Al-Bireen area of Al-Maafir district in Taiz governorate on September 29, 2023 // Sana'a Center photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

# The Economy

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By the Sana'a Center Economic Unit

## Government's Financial Woes Deepen

Yemen is experiencing a severe economic downturn as it tries to navigate long-term fiscal challenges. A [World Bank report on Fiscal Vulnerabilities in Low-Income Countries](#) released in late November highlighted Yemen's dire fiscal situation as among the worst in the world. The [World Bank's Yemen Monitor for Spring 2024](#) noted that the current crisis is caused by plummeting oil and customs revenues, which had long been the backbone of Yemen's economy. The government has also forcefully cut down fiscal expenditures, limiting the provision of essential services and jeopardizing sustainable economic development and growth.

Despite attempts to address these challenges by centralizing financial control, the government's fiscal health remains precarious. Many employees have received their salaries late. Limited Saudi support, tainted by political interference, has compromised the Yemeni government's autonomy. In addition, the Houthi group's grip over key lucrative markets, including imports of food and humanitarian goods, and their reckless engagement in regional military conflicts have further hindered economic recovery.

The government has engaged in diplomatic efforts with several international actors to secure further support. In **discussions** at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank's Annual Meetings in Washington in October, officials explored possible solutions to contain the escalating economic and humanitarian crisis. The meetings also emphasized the imperative of emergency support programs to address food insecurity and curb rampant inflation. However, as evidenced by the lack of significant progress on the issue during the most recent **UN General Assembly**, the international community has shown limited interest in addressing the economic crisis in Yemen.

In late November, the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden's (CBY-Aden) board of directors **warned** of potential social unrest due to the dire economic situation and urged the PLC to take immediate action, as the government was unable to pay public sector salaries for the month of October. The Ministry of Finance, responsible for managing government finances, was forced to suspend salary disbursements due to a lack of liquidity within CBY-Aden treasuries.

Over the last two years, the CBY Aden's contractionary monetary measures have proven unsuccessful. Furthermore, its secondary open market policy, including the issuance of noninflationary public debt instruments to offset the fiscal deficit, has failed due to deteriorating public confidence in these investments, both among Yemeni banks and the general public.

The economic crisis has significantly worsened throughout the year. Existing issues like the disruption of oil exports, the government's primary revenue stream, and inconsistent and insufficient external aid, have contributed to and been compounded by dwindling foreign exchange reserves. The resulting severe inflation has led to an erosion in citizens' purchasing power. Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak traveled to Riyadh in November in an effort to secure **emergency financial support from Saudi Arabia**.

Delays in salary payments and the government's failure to provide basic public services have sparked protests in several regions. Unions have **issued** calls for general strikes to exert pressure on the government to fulfill its fiscal obligations. Public sector workers, particularly teachers, have struggled to meet their basic needs with the reduced purchasing capacity of their wages standing at below US\$50 a month.

**Accusations** of corruption and illegal hard currency exports have further worn public trust. The ongoing economic downturn and lack of transparency in managing fiscal resources have contributed to the perception that senior government officials are maximizing their own interests at the expense of the needs and welfare of citizens. Persistent internal divisions within the PLC also threaten social cohesion in areas under the nominal control of the government and hamper collective action to address the ongoing crisis.

In early December, the government belatedly paid October salaries to members of security, military, and administrative units in governorates under its control. This followed widespread **protests and general strikes** in several governorates over rumors that it planned to disburse only half the wages. The Ministry of Finance confirmed its commitment to paying salaries in full in an attempt to curb growing public discontent, but the delay pushed many in government-held areas closer to poverty and famine.

## Rial Plummets to Record Lows

The new Yemeni rial continued its steep decline throughout late 2024 in government-controlled areas, aggravating Yemen's already precarious economic and humanitarian situation. After a period of relative stability following the arrival of US\$300 million in Saudi financial support in June, the new rial hit a record low and was trading at more than YR2,000 per US\$1 by mid-October. The CBY-Aden's attempts to stabilize the currency proved largely ineffective, with low foreign currency auction subscription rates and significant gaps between official and market exchange rates.<sup>[1]</sup> In contrast, old rials, which circulate in Houthi-controlled areas, remained relatively stable, hovering around YR535-YR539 per US\$1.

Several compounding factors have contributed to the rial's freefall. The CBY-Aden's limited foreign reserves, due to the suspension of hydrocarbon exports and insufficient Saudi aid, have significantly weakened its ability to stabilize the currency. The bank's **weakened influence on financial governance** has also allowed unlicensed money exchange outlets to engage in speculation and profit from rial fluctuations, further undermining the currency market.

The CBY-Aden announced two new debt auctions in late October, hoping to raise YR15 billion through the sale of **one-year treasury bills** at an 18 percent interest rate and **three-year government bonds** at 20 percent interest; both offered semi-annual interest payments. However, the bank's struggles to stabilize the rial—despite foreign currency auctions and fiscal interventions—have deepened investor skepticism. Yemeni banks have had little incentive to participate, as they have been struggling with substantial frozen investments in public treasury bills dating back to late 2016. The CBY-Aden's lack of transparency regarding the level of banks' subscriptions to issued debt suggests significantly low demand.

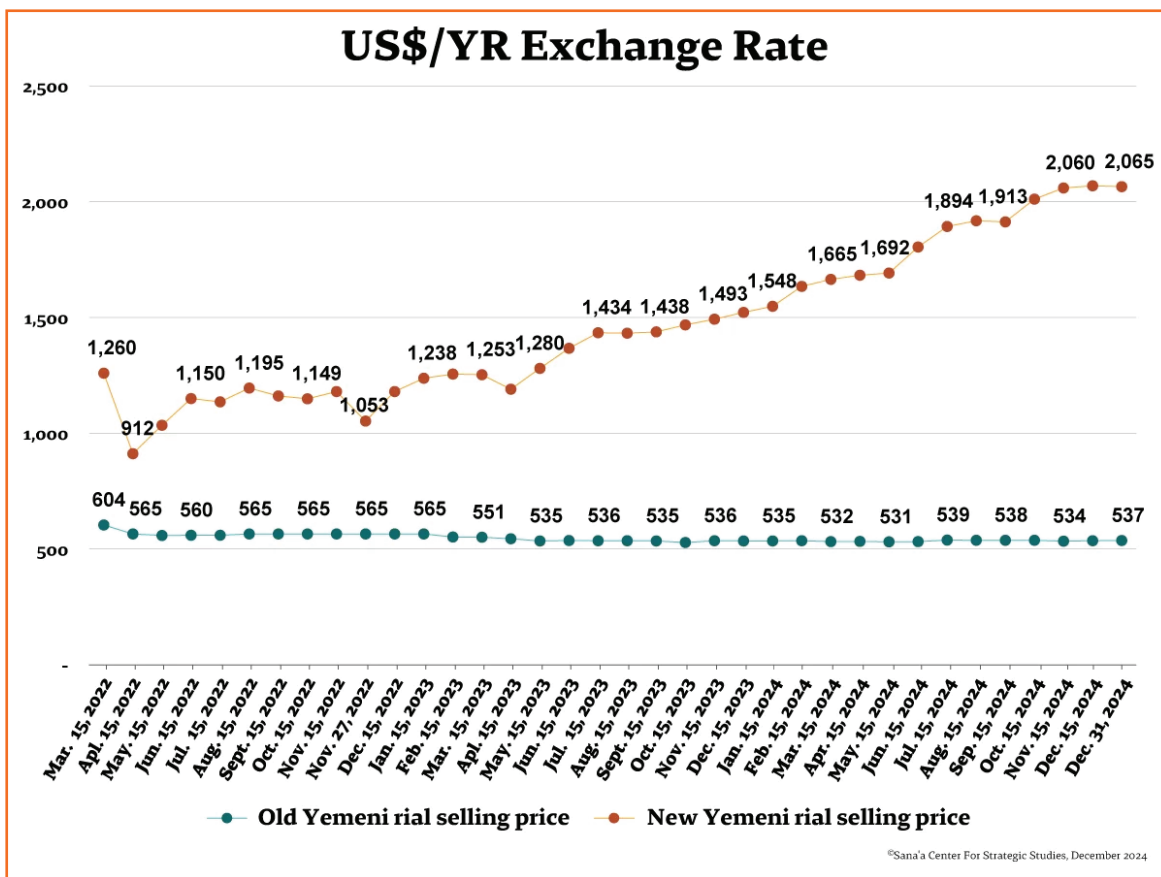
The central bank's abdication of its regulatory role in the face of escalating Red Sea tensions has also fueled mounting anxiety in the commercial and industrial sectors. Fearing disruptions to the supply of essential commodities, Yemeni traders have significantly increased their demand for hard currency to secure liquidity and stockpile imports, further draining the market. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has occasionally intervened in Yemen's financial affairs, undermining the CBY-Aden's ability to implement independent financial and monetary policies. Under Saudi pressure, the CBY-Aden was forced to reverse several key decisions aimed at isolating Houthi-controlled financial institutions. This weakened the central bank's leverage, leaving it in a vulnerable position, unable to fully assert its authority over the fragmented banking sector.

Throughout November and December, the new rial remained near record lows, consistently above YR2,060 per US\$1, marking an 8 percent decline since early October and a 33 percent drop since the start of 2024. A long-awaited US\$500 million Saudi disbursement in late December, including a US\$300 million deposit in the CBY-Aden and US\$200 million for the government's budget deficit, provided some respite but is unlikely to address the deep-seated economic issues.

The US\$200 million represents the fourth and final tranche of a US\$1.2 billion Saudi aid package **announced** in August 2023. Without a strategy to resume oil exports, ensure monetary policy independence, and implement sound fiscal policies, the rial's freefall is likely to continue, pushing Yemen further into economic and humanitarian crisis.

<sup>1</sup> This was highlighted by the **12th auction of the year**, with US\$50 million on offer. The central bank only managed to sell US\$25,247 million, well below its target. The significant gap between the official exchange rate of YR1,965 per US\$1 at the time of auction and the current market rate, which has surged to over YR2,000 per US\$1, indicated the significant volatility of the rial in the money market. The next auction in late October also managed to sell only US\$18,446 million of the US\$30 million offered at an exchange rate of YR2,007 per US\$1, a concerning 62 percent coverage rate.





## Government Announces Economic Reform Plan

In mid-November, the government **announced** an ambitious economic reform plan to tackle immediate financial priorities and long-term structural challenges. Finance Minister Salem bin Breik held a **ministerial meeting** outlining the plan to strengthen fiscal management, tackle corruption, streamline the government’s handling of domestic resources, and establish a specialized committee, including representatives from key ministries and the CBY-Aden. The reform agenda also entails broader efforts to strengthen partnerships with the private sector.

One of the central goals is to address the financial instability caused by the Houthi blockade of oil exports, which accounted for a significant portion of the government’s revenue. The blockade, combined with limited support from international donors, has laid bare the need for a coordinated fiscal strategy to minimize future reliance on foreign aid and maximize the use of limited domestic resources. In November, a delegation of the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the World Bank **visited** Aden to explore pathways to support the government’s economic reforms, including securing the necessary funding to address the crisis and stabilize key sectors such as electricity.

The political divisions within the PLC and between various factions in the government continue to impede the implementation of economic reforms in government-controlled areas. The effectiveness of the new strategy will depend largely on the government’s ability to reconcile its internal divisions.

## Climate Change Threatens Economic Recovery

In its [Country Climate and Development Report](#) released in November, the World Bank estimated that Yemen's GDP could drop by as much as 3.9 percent by 2040 due to a worsening climate, causing declines in agricultural and fisheries production, labor productivity, and public health and infrastructure. In the most pessimistic scenarios, the organization warned that increased temperatures could worsen droughts and cause infrastructure damage, further destabilizing the economy.

The agriculture sector is already constrained by limited arable land and water shortages. Domestic agriculture currently accounts for about 15-20 percent of Yemen's food needs. Although Yemen is self-sufficient in certain cereals, such as sorghum and millet, it is heavily dependent on wheat, rice, oil, sugar, and milk imports. Cultivable areas are limited, accounting for only 2-3 percent of Yemen's land. More than 96 percent of agricultural land is threatened by desertification, which already affects nearly 90 percent of farming regions.

The report projected that fish stocks could decline by up to 23 percent between 2041 and 2050 due to rising sea temperatures and changes in marine ecosystems. The logistics and transport sectors also face threats, as the country's rural population relies on unpaved dirt roads to access essential goods. The report projected that damage to transport infrastructure will jump by 45 percent by 2050 due to increased flooding and landslides.

Extreme weather events have already contributed to vast displacement, increased prevalence of waterborne diseases, and the loss of livestock and agricultural land, outcomes that are expected to continue. The report notes that "half of Yemenis, about 16.7 million people, are exposed to at least one climate hazard of either extreme heat, drought, or flooding, exacerbating the multidimensional elements of poverty, with strong regional concentrations."

The World Bank advocated developing a regional response plan to adapt to the changing environment. Specifically, it recommended funneling investments toward water and food security, infrastructure development, including localized renewable energy, and human development, particularly the empowerment of women and youth. Sustainable practices and better resource management are vital for strategic investment in climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and fisheries. However, Yemen accessing climate finance remains a significant challenge due to weak institutions and perceived investment risks.

## Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis Worsens

Yemen is mired in a catastrophic humanitarian crisis driven by economic collapse, recurrent violent conflict, climate shocks, and funding shortfalls. These converging crises have pushed millions of Yemeni citizens to the brink of starvation and created alarmingly severe food insecurity across many parts of the country. A [report by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network \(FEWS NET\)](#) warned that nearly 19 million people in Yemen could require urgent humanitarian assistance by February-March 2025. The report highlighted the devastating impact of the country's deepening economic crisis, which has pushed millions into poverty and food insecurity.



In September, local authorities in Shabwa **voiced** their disapproval of the WFP's decision to drop 8,076 cases from the aid program. Families **appealed** to the World Food Programme (WFP) to reinstate their names on the beneficiary list for its food security project. They have called for a thorough reevaluation of the beneficiaries through the WFP's local partner, the Humanitarian Solidarity Association, and for holding them accountable for any adverse consequences. Residents complained that cutting down aid assistance would lead to an alarming increase in malnutrition, poverty, and disease among the most vulnerable populations, including the sick, displaced, widows, and orphans.

In early October, UNICEF **announced** the delivery of cash transfers to 1.43 million vulnerable families. Later in the month, **Saudi Arabia gave US\$25 million** to the WFP for emergency food aid in Yemen, aiming to reach over 546,000 individuals and support community resilience. The WFP **assessments** indicated that 64 percent of Yemeni households were experiencing inadequate food consumption – the highest rate recorded during the conflict. This renewed crisis is driven by deteriorating economic conditions, delayed humanitarian aid, and limited livelihood opportunities, and **compounded by severe flooding** in recent months that has particularly affected vulnerable communities. Suspensions of food aid since December 2023 have left approximately 9.5 million people facing acute food insecurity.

By late November and early December, reports from the FAO and other UN agencies highlighted an increasingly grim picture. The **Joint Monitoring Report** projected that 17.1 million Yemeni citizens (about 49 percent of the population) will need food assistance in 2025. This projection includes 12.4 million in Houthi-controlled regions. Driven by currency depreciation, conflict, and economic instability, the report states that more than half of Yemenis suffered from inadequate food consumption in September 2024.

In government-controlled areas, rial devaluation, weak fiscal policies, and limited revenue streams have triggered a severe inflationary cycle. In Houthi-controlled areas, a severe currency shortage has exacerbated market dysfunction. While food prices in Houthi-controlled territory remain relatively stable due to a strictly applied fixed foreign exchange rate regime and price controls, households have limited access to regular income. By contrast, areas under the control of the government are experiencing significant spikes in food prices, particularly for staples such as wheat flour, rice, beans, and cooking oil. The cost of the Minimum Food Basket (MFB) in government areas has risen to YR130,364 (US\$68), a 25 percent increase from the previous year. Even in areas under Houthi control, the average cost of an MFB rose by 2 percent from 2023 to YR46,247 (US\$87). The resulting food insecurity has led 52 percent of Yemeni households to resort to extreme coping mechanisms, such as reducing meal portions, seeking out cheaper alternatives, begging, and selling personal belongings. Displacement, particularly in the governorates of Hudaydah, Marib, and Taiz, has compounded the crisis and added pressure on already fragile local economies with limited resources.

In government-controlled areas, a drop in fuel imports by 31 percent between August and October disrupted public services and led to electricity shortages and challenges in the logistics and transportation sectors. While fuel imports via Red Sea ports in Houthi-controlled areas have increased by 50 percent since September, food imports across Yemen decreased by 30 percent in the same timeframe. Diesel and petrol prices are significantly higher in government-controlled areas but remain relatively stable in other parts of the country. In November, diesel and petrol prices in government areas were 7-14 percent higher compared to the same month last year and up 29-31 percent over the three-year average. These increases were also driven by the rapid devaluation of the Yemeni rial, which depreciated by 26 percent over the course of 2024.

Yemen has been grappling with a critical shortage of funding for the country's Humanitarian Response Plans. In early December, Yemen's Permanent Representative to the UN **urged** the international community to secure funding for Yemen's 2025 plan. The UN's 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan includes a US\$2.5 billion appeal to assist 10.5 million people in need. However, the 2024 plan was underfunded, with only 48.5 percent of the requested US\$2.71 billion secured.

The Houthis have continued their aggressive campaign to detain UN and international agency staff, further exacerbating the humanitarian situation in Yemen. In a joint **statement**, representatives of Western nations and Yemen condemned these arbitrary detentions and emphasized that such actions hinder the delivery of essential aid to millions in need. In concert with Western donor countries, the UN announced it would curtail operations in Houthi-controlled areas, **prioritizing** only lifesaving and life-sustaining initiatives. This was followed by the Swedish government **announcing** its suspension of development aid to northern Yemen by the end of 2024 due to the Houthis' continuing attacks on ships in the Red Sea and detention of UN staff. It also stated that it would phase out development assistance in government-held parts of the country by June 2025. The Swedish government said it had considered the ripple effects on humanitarian work in Yemen and did not rule out that the 80 million Swedish kronor (equivalent to US\$7.3 million) in development aid could be transferred to humanitarian fields.

## CBY-Aden Faces Scrutiny Over Billions of Dollars Sent Abroad

The CBY-Aden's shipment of vast amounts of hard currency out of Yemen sparked widespread criticism in November. A **document** titled "A report to the attorney general regarding the central bank smuggling money in sacks through official outlets and under the signature of the governor," was widely circulated on social media. The report claimed that the government and CBY-Aden had smuggled billions of dollars out of the country in 2023 and 2024.

Fadi Baoum, a member of the STC presidium, **repeated** the allegations in a now-deleted Facebook post alongside documents detailing the amounts withdrawn. According to the claims, approximately US\$690 million in 2023 and 2.4 billion Saudi riyals in 2024 were exported through Aden International Airport. Fears that illegal transactions could further destabilize the currency and contribute to economic collapse led to calls for an immediate and transparent investigation.

The CBY-Aden, however, strongly condemned and denied accusations of illegal activities in an **official statement** issued on November 20. Describing the allegations as baseless and misleading, it stated that all transfers sanctioned by the bank are subject to strict legal procedures, including anti-money laundering and counterterrorism checks by its Information Collection Unit and Banking Supervision Sector. It specified that the amounts in question were legal transfers by licensed Yemeni banks necessary to finance the import of crucial goods like **food and medicine**. The statement further called into question the motivation for the claims, demanding accountability and prosecution.

## CBY-Aden Announces Launch of IBAN System

On December 11, 2024, the CBY-Aden launched the International Bank Account Number (IBAN) system, an internationally agreed method of identifying bank accounts to facilitate cross-border transactions with a reduced risk of transcription errors. The CBY-Aden first initiated procedures to activate the system and discussed the plan with banks last April.

The CBY-Aden acknowledged the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in its efforts. The IBAN system is essential for connecting Yemen to the Arab financial system and enhancing its financial inclusion while ensuring compliance with international financial regulations. However, the Houthi group has banned banks in areas under its control from connecting to the system, further exacerbating the division of Yemen's financial landscape and hindering efforts to modernize the banking sector and integrate it into global networks.

## Aden Faces Energy Crisis Amid Fuel Shortages

Aden and neighboring governorates have been plagued with persistent power outages lasting **up to 20 hours a day**. The power crisis has disrupted the provision of essential services like water, healthcare, and waste management. The Aden Electricity Corporation has warned that without new fuel supplies, even the few operational power plants, such as the Al-Haswa and Al-Mansoura stations, are at risk of shutting down. **Despite repeated calls from the electricity corporation and local authorities**, the limited government response has left citizens frustrated and vulnerable.

While solar power projects, such as the **UAE-funded solar plant in Aden**, offer long-term hope, they can't meet immediate energy demands. The 120-megawatt solar facility cannot cover growing demand, and its reliance on daytime power generation leaves the city vulnerable during off-peak hours. The energy crisis in Aden underscores broader governance failures and a lack of coordination between local authorities, energy companies, and fuel suppliers. As the situation worsens, the risk of social unrest grows, with the population increasingly dissatisfied with the government's inability to provide reliable energy. Without swift, comprehensive action to secure fuel supplies and invest in energy infrastructure, Aden's energy crisis will continue to fuel instability across government-controlled areas.

Elsewhere, the Yemen Gas Company has launched efforts to address another pressing energy issue: damaged gas cylinders. The company is **replacing and refurbishing 160,000 gas cylinders across government-controlled governorates**, including Aden. The initiative aims to ensure the safety of users by replacing 60,000 damaged cylinders and refitting **100,000 others with high-quality Italian valves**. The campaign, which follows the completion of a training course for 17 technicians, is part of the company's broader goal to enhance gas safety and supply.

## Fuel Tanker Drivers Protest Illegal Levies

Truck drivers who haul domestically produced gas initiated an open sit-in at the Hassan checkpoint in Abyan governorate in October. The protesters complained about security checkpoints established along routes connecting Aden, Abyan, and Shabwa governorates that were reportedly collecting illegal tolls.

**Al-Masdar Online** reported that the drivers were coerced into paying large fees – YR40,000 per tanker – in "improvement taxes." Such tolls persist despite directives issued by PLC member Abdelrahman al-Muharrami to curb the practice. The truckers state that they have been prevented from entering the interim capital, Aden, without complying with the demands for payment. The imposition of illegal tolls highlights the fragmented resource mobilization landscape in government-controlled areas. It also reflects a broader pattern of corruption and mismanagement that plagues local governance in Yemen.

## Hadramawt Diesel Prices Cut

In late October, Hadramawt Governor Mabkhout bin Madi **issued** a decree reducing diesel prices in the governorate by 45 percent, from YR1,450 to YR800 per liter. PetroMasila, the state-owned oil company, said it would allocate 350,000 liters of diesel per day to meet the needs of the local market at the new subsidized price. In August, the Yemen Petroleum Company in Hadramawt **announced** an increase in diesel prices, citing the need to import fuel to meet local demand after the temporary shutdown of PetroMasila's first diesel distillation unit due to "force majeure." Diesel prices rose by over 29 percent, from YR1,200 to YR1,550 per liter.

The decision to lower prices followed widespread protests and escalating tensions between the government and local tribes over the transfer of Hadrami hydrocarbon production to other government-controlled areas. Several cities in Hadramawt have experienced protests fueled by near-total electricity blackouts and the plummeting currency. The demonstrations were led by the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance (HTA) and the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference, both led by tribal leader and deputy governor Amr bin Habrish.

Local authorities, PetroMasila, and the HTA have been locked in a blame game. While the government and PetroMasila attribute the electricity crisis to HTA-driven fuel shortages and technical issues, the tribal alliance has accused them of intentional manipulation and corruption. Tribal forces allied with the HTA have seized oilfields and set up roadblocks, preventing the transport of locally sourced oil and gas outside the governorate as a means of pressuring the government to address their demands, which include lower fuel prices and a larger share of oil revenues.

## PetroMasila Opens New Refinery

On November 24, state-owned PetroMasila announced the successful opening of a new heavy fuel oil (mazut) refinery in Hadramawt. The news came amid the governorate's ongoing electricity crisis and fuel shortages and as the government struggles to import sufficient quantities due to the continuing economic crisis and currency devaluation.

The company **confirmed** it was able to produce experimental quantities of mazut, which will be allocated to support power plants across the governorate under the supervision of local authorities. The CEO of the PetroMasila Company, Mohammed bin Sumait, **said** the aim was to provide the government with hard currency by locally refining fuel.

In a **separate statement**, the Hadramawt Valley Electricity Corporation noted that severe shortages of imported fuel and necessary maintenance on a main gas station turbine were also responsible for increased power outages in the governorate.

## US Intensifies Pressure on Houthi and Hamas Financing Networks

In a coordinated approach, the US Treasury Department has issued a series of sanctions targeting both the Houthi war machine and Hamas' financial networks. These actions come in parallel with the renewal of existing UN sanctions and Canada's designation of the Houthis as a terrorist group and collectively aim to intensify international pressure.



In early October 2024, the Treasury Department launched a two-pronged sanctions campaign. The **initial round** targeted Houthi arms smuggling networks operating in Yemen, Iran, and Oman. The US decision to freeze the assets of implicated individuals and entities aims to disrupt the supply of weapons to the Houthis and degrade their military capabilities. While these sanctions may close certain supply routes, the group could likely find alternative means of acquiring weaponry and resources.

In mid-October, the Treasury Department **imposed** new sanctions on a network linked to Sa'id al-Jamal, a key financier for the Houthi group. These sanctions targeted eighteen companies, individuals, and vessels involved in transporting illicit oil, the proceeds from which are used to fund Houthi military operations. The sanctions highlight the Houthis' dependency on Al-Jamal's network to facilitate the sale of Iranian petroleum and reflect ongoing US efforts to counter Iranian support for the Houthis. Although the sanctions may temporarily hinder specific operations, again, the Houthis' adaptability indicates that further measures will likely be necessary.

A **second round** of sanctions targeted Hamid al-Ahmar, a prominent Yemeni tribal figure and Islah-linked businessman, for allegedly channeling millions of dollars to Hamas's military and governance activities in Gaza. The Treasury's announcement accused Al-Ahmar of managing a portfolio of over US\$500 million in assets as the head of the Jerusalem International Foundation, an organization purportedly involved in facilitating funding for Hamas's military and governance activities in Gaza through a web of businesses and charitable organizations across various countries, including Turkey, Algeria, and Qatar.

Al-Ahmar has deep-rooted connections with various political factions, including the Islah party. This made him a key player in the political landscape even after he left Yemen following the Houthi military takeover of Sana'a. Notably, various Houthi leaders **expressed support** for Al-Ahmar and denounced the designation. Given the family's legacy as paramount sheikhs of the Al-Hashid tribal confederation and established patronage networks, the designation could significantly affect Al-Ahmar's political influence within Yemen, alienating some factions while consolidating support among others.

On November 13, the United Nations Security Council unanimously **extended** sanctions through Resolution 2758, renewing travel bans and asset freezes on Houthi-linked individuals and entities. These sanctions, first imposed in 2014, aim to pressure the Houthis into peace talks and limit their military capabilities. The resolution also extended the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts, which is tasked with monitoring the sanctions and reporting on the illicit transfer of weapons and materials used by designated individuals or groups in Yemen. While the US welcomed the UN's decision, it expressed disappointment over a lack of additional measures, particularly those **recommended** by the Panel of Experts to address Houthi aggression in the Red Sea and weapons transfers to the group.

On November 14, the US Treasury Department **imposed** sanctions against 26 individuals and entities linked to the Al-Qatirji Company, which it accused of facilitating Iranian oil sales to Syria and the Houthis. Adding to the pressure, on December 2, the Canadian government **designated** the Houthi movement a terrorist entity. The Houthis were determined to have met the definition of a terrorist group under the Canadian criminal code, which prohibits terrorist financing, travel, and recruitment. The government cited the Houthi insurgency against the internationally recognized government and attacks on civilian and naval vessels in the Red Sea and other waterways, as well as their targeting of Israel.

## Houthis Move on Tobacco and Other Economic Sectors

The Houthis continue to extend their control over Yemen's most lucrative economic sectors. In early October, they brought the Kamaran Tobacco Company under their effective control. The state-controlled firm, manufacturer of the well-known Raidan brand, has remained in Sana'a throughout the war despite the Aden-based government being its majority owner.

British American Tobacco reportedly holds a 31 percent stake in the company, which opened a factory in a [Jordanian free zone](#) in 2019. Now, Houthi authorities have imposed a [new general manager](#) and appointed at least two other senior figures to the company. Kamaran Tobacco Company's Aden branch denounced the changes as illegal.

## Houthis Draft Law for Salary Payments

On December 1, the Houthi-affiliated Supreme Political Council [issued](#) a new draft law aimed at addressing public sector salary payments and the plight of small depositors in the banking sector. The day earlier, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, chaired a meeting to [discuss](#) austerity measures aimed at solving the Houthi government's banking and salary payment crisis. Attendees included the speaker of the Houthi-affiliated House of Representatives, prime minister, and ministers of finance, economy, and industry. The law, referred to as "a temporary exceptional mechanism," was ratified by the Sana'a-based House of Representatives on December 3. While ostensibly intended to address the economic hardships of hundreds of thousands of public sector employees working and living in Houthi-controlled areas, the potential impacts of the law and the underlying motives for the legislation raise serious concerns.

The new law contains four chapters detailing the funding sources for salaries, as well as a mechanism for disbursing payments. It states that some money will be drawn from independent special funds, most notably the [Teacher's Fund](#). The law also proposes mobilizing additional funds from independent institutions, which may include telecommunication companies and other revenue-generating government-owned entities. These institutions would be required to make extra fiscal contributions outside of regular taxes and zakat. The law stipulates that these fiscal contributions would not be considered loans and debts owed by the government. The Ministry of Finance may, however, consider repaying the contributions if the country receives future compensation, likely in a post-conflict scenario. Beyond concerns that the depletion of these resources could lead to a broader collapse of the entities involved, the benefit to recipients is also questionable. The draft grants the Houthi Minister of Finance, Abdeljabbar al-Jarmouzi, the prerogative to determine which funds to draw from and how much should be taken from any government, private, or mixed-ownership bank.

Chapter 3 of the law outlines a disbursement mechanism for salaries, with state employees divided into three categories. The first includes senior officials in institutions such as the House of Representatives, the Shura Council, the judiciary, and others who would receive full salaries. However, salaries in this category represent less than 5 percent of the total public salary wage bill in Houthi-controlled areas. The second category includes employees of public institutions that do not have sufficient revenue streams, who will be paid half a salary per month. The third category would receive half a salary every three months and includes employees of government entities that have revenues or operating expenses funded by the general government account, such as the tax authority and finance ministry.

According to the draft law, the disbursement will be linked to a unified salary statement, drafted by the Houthi authorities and approved by the civil service, according to which thousands of employees would not qualify for salary payments if they were considered “absent” from their work – many public sector employees have been forced to search for other job opportunities due to their reduced income. Bonuses and incentives will also be scrapped. **Three anonymous members** of the Houthi-run parliament stated that they were briefed on a mechanism that would pay half salaries every three months in exchange for a significant increase in taxes, customs, and fees for social service provisions such as healthcare.

Having drastically cut and delayed the payment of salaries of civil service employees for more than seven years and made their provision a cornerstone of their negotiations with Saudi Arabia, Houthi authorities face growing popular resentment in response to the economic recession in areas under their control.



Pro-Houthi protesters symbolically execute effigies of US President Joe Biden, President-Elect Donald Trump, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a demonstration in Al-Sabeen Square in Sana'a city on December 6, 2024, in support of Gaza // Sana'a Center photo

## Commentary

# The Houthi-Israel Confrontation

By Abdulghani al-Iryani

For over a year now, the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) kept the world staring in amazement as they defied all odds and challenged the US, Britain, and a host of Western navies as they enforced a debilitating siege on the Israeli port of Eilat. With the announcement of a [ceasefire in Gaza](#), the Houthis have pledged to continue targeting Israeli vessels until all phases of the deal are complete, and the group's undiminished capabilities provide a constant threat of new attacks.

Houthi missile and drone attacks on Israel caused little material damage and minimal casualties, but their economic and psychological impact is significant. The Houthis struck targets deep into Israeli territory – missiles and one-way drones have hit Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Ashkelon. Given these must fly approximately 2,000 km from Yemen to Israel, their payloads are reduced, but their message is still profound. An armed group from one of the world's poorest countries has breached what is arguably the most advanced air defense system in the world, shaking an image of invincibility that Israel has crafted over decades. The Houthis have now taken the battle to Israel for much longer than any other member of the "Axis of Resistance," including Iran.



## Israel's Response

Unlike the US and Britain's targeted attacks on launch sites and weapons depots, Israel's response has been closer to what it has been doing in Gaza for fifteen months, striking civilian infrastructure to punish the people of Yemen. However, its attacks were still measured. In its **first strike** on the port of Hudaydah, it destroyed some of the gantry cranes. An attack on fuel storage tanks near the port was the same; it spared some for future strikes. Israel apparently hoped to climb the ladder of escalation slowly to allow the Houthis the opportunity to reconsider. This has not worked. Israeli media has reported the frustrations of both the government and the people with the lack of progress in ending Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping and Israel proper. It generally **presents** four options, each difficult to implement and each with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The first is a complete siege of Yemen, blocking all trade to and from it. The second is direct Israeli action to decapitate the Houthi movement by killing its leadership. The third is supporting individual Yemeni partners, presumably armed groups supported by the UAE, to fight the Houthis, and the last is encouraging the internationally recognized government to do so.

A siege would mean a Gaza model – starving the people of Yemen. But Houthi leaders would not starve, and a famine in Yemen would not weaken them. On the contrary, it would make it **easier** for the Houthis to recruit young tribesmen. This approach might ultimately force more Yemenis to stand with the Houthis.

The second option, decapitating the Houthi movement, would be equally disastrous. In Gaza, Israel **deemed it acceptable** to kill and injure hundreds of civilians to eliminate just one Hamas leader. Knowing the vindictive and bloodthirsty nature of the Israeli leadership, it's unlikely it would be hesitant to carry out similar attacks in Yemen. The Houthi movement is **several** times larger than Hamas or Hezbollah, so even if Israel managed to kill many commanders - and likely thousands of civilians in the process - it would not destroy the group.

Supporting Yemeni factions is more complicated but equally foreboding. The first impulse of Israel and its Western allies was to contact the West Coast forces led by Tareq Saleh. He was even invited to London to **discuss** the Houthi Red Sea attacks and the possibility of a new government offensive. Southern Transitional Council (STC) leader Aiderous al-Zubaidi has also **asked** for support to stop the Houthis. But the popular backlash among Yemenis to the idea was strong. To fight the Houthis on behalf of Israel so as to stop them from coming to the aid of the people of Gaza was too much to stomach, even for the group's most ardent enemies. Supporting subnational armed groups to gain ground and perhaps take the port city of Hudaydah would further weaken the already divided internationally recognized government and make the imbalance between it and the powerful and unified Houthi movement even greater. Such support would, in the end, serve the Houthis. Even taking Hudaydah would mean little in military terms, as forces there would be sitting ducks for Houthi fighters in commanding positions on the western escarpment overlooking the city.

Apparently, cooler heads in the US and Britain saw the pitfalls of these approaches and started talking with the internationally recognized government instead. However, this comes with its own set of problems. Government forces are badly divided. When Houthi forces closed in on Marib city four years ago, Al-Zubaidi **announced** that Houthi victory would be the ticket to achieving his group's secessionist objective: the restoration of the Peoples' Democratic Republic

of Yemen. Elements of Tareq Saleh's National Resistance forces believe that defeating the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah forces, a large component of the national army, is a prerequisite to defeating the Houthis.<sup>1</sup> To expect that an amalgamation of such divided forces operating under the banner of the government, which cannot even agree on a joint command mechanism, could conduct a sophisticated and sustained offensive and defeat a disciplined and agile military force many times its size is absurd.

The consequences of this option could be even more disastrous than those of the first three. A return to all-out war against Houthi forces that have scaled up their military capabilities and acquired new, advanced technology would result in numerous casualties. Western or Israeli support would result in the disruption of food and humanitarian supplies and could trigger a famine. And any offensive is likely to fail. The US and its Western and Arab allies will ultimately throw their hands in the air and acknowledge the facts on the ground, as they did in Afghanistan, and work out a deal that will be good for the Houthis and their own interests, but not for the people of Yemen. Yemenis who advocate this approach should keep in mind that the defeat of the Houthis is not necessary to achieve the objectives of Israel and the US. It is enough to keep the Houthis busy for a year or two while they sort out the situation in Palestine. At the end of the fighting, Yemen will be further fragmented, weaker, and still dominated by the Houthis and other armed groups.

## A Better Option

While Houthi military capabilities are impressive, their economic situation is dire. Their draconian rules, their extortionist tax regime, and the milking of businesses, both to support their war effort and for personal gain, have drained the economy and caused major capital flight, emigration, and displacement. For the past few years, the Houthis' unadvertised economic plans were anchored on gaining control of the oil and gas resources in government-held areas. Their inability to take these areas illustrates a valuable lesson. For the government, defense is easier than offense. Defense in place requires sophisticated logistical support but can survive, at least for a while, the divisions in the top command. Houthi offensives on the oilfields in **Marib** and **Shabwa** were broken, often by one or two separate components of pro-government forces.

The reason this failure didn't push the Houthis to accept negotiations for peace is that they saw opportunities yet to come. They saw the lack of a plan on the government side, and this weakness gave rise to hopes for another chance to take the oilfields. Then, the Saudis started talking to them and telling them that they were fed up with the corruption and incompetence of the government and wanted to make a deal. Just prior to October 7, the Houthis were anticipating **signing a deal** with the Saudis that would let Riyadh extricate itself from the conflict and leave its allies to their fate. In a way, October 7 has given the government another chance.

A stick-and-carrot strategy anchored on defense might bring the Houthis to the negotiating table. Such a strategy would involve making government forces a credible deterrent to the Houthis, so they know that they cannot retake the oilfields. The first step is unifying the anti-Houthi military command structure. Since the underlying cause of division is competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which has made such unification impossible, the US must convince the two to cooperate in good faith in such efforts. Emirati obstructionism, while unfortunate for Yemen, is driven by legitimate security concerns, which only the US can allay. The second step would be to provide defensive capabilities to government forces. It is enough for these forces to

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a top National Resistance forces leader, July 2022.

stand their ground and break the inevitable Houthi offensive.

In the past, the Houthis have not demonstrated goodwill in negotiations or accepted sharing power with fellow Yemenis. But a radical change in the dynamics on the ground in the form of a unified government defense force and increased pressure on the group could make them realize that this is the only way to survive. Faced with a deteriorating economic situation and a military stalemate, the Houthis might be receptive to the carrot of funding from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council for reconstruction and putting Yemen on a track of economic viability. The Houthis know that the bulk of the population under their control survives on remittances and humanitarian assistance from their Arab and Western enemies. Once their grandiose plans of conquest are set to rest, they might see the wisdom of giving up some control of a failing part of a failed state and agree to a power-sharing agreement that offers a chance of viability.

The Houthis' honorable effort to support the people of Gaza will not stop until the genocide stops, and the ceasefire in Gaza remains tenuous and incomplete. But Western concerns about the Houthis retaining the capability to disrupt Red Sea shipping can only be allayed by other Yemeni parties.

The weakness of the government, its lack of a unified military command, and the competition between its two main backers, Saudi Arabia and UAE, give the Houthis hope for future military expansion and control over Yemen's hydrocarbon resources. Were these obstacles to be overcome, the Houthis might have no choice but to enter into serious negotiations with other Yemeni parties for a peace that will bring in funding for reconstruction and economic development. Creating the conditions for a power-sharing agreement with other Yemenis is the most feasible way to check Houthi military adventurism and put the interests of the Yemeni people first.

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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.





Yemeni women © Sana'a Center 2025

## Analysis

# A Year in Patriarchy: Key Setbacks in Yemeni Women's Rights in 2024

By Bilqees al-Lahbi, Rim Mugahed, and Lara Uhlenhaut

Away from the Red Sea crisis that dominated the headlines of 2024, the space for female political and social actors in Yemen has continued to shrink, largely unchecked. Today, the distinction between the repression in areas controlled by the Houthis and those under the internationally recognized government is becoming increasingly blurred. In Houthi-controlled areas, a campaign of terrifying arrests of civil society actors that started last June and continues to date has seen various female activists and peace workers targeted, some of whom are languishing in prisons incommunicado under dire conditions. In areas under government control, polarization and conflict among the various political factions are primarily to blame for undermining women's rights. Political partisanship and a policy of divide and rule have meant that women have sometimes been instrumentalized in such oppression, targeting other women and the very organizations that serve them. Meanwhile, the harassment and intimidation of women has also spilled over from the physical realm to the online world, where the surge in online harassment, extortion, and blackmail, primarily targeting women, is receiving more attention. Below are some key developments in the field of women's rights observed in 2024.<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Sana'a Center spoke with several female activists for this article. They have been granted anonymity to preserve their safety.



## A Brutal Campaign of Intimidation and Arrests, Extending to Women

Panic spread among Yemenis last June after a frenzied campaign by Houthi security forces targeted employees of international and aid organizations, accusing them of collaborating with foreigners. According to [Amnesty International](#), in early July, the number of detainees was estimated to be 27, among whom were four women. The actual number of those forcibly detained is likely to be much higher. Families may refuse to report the arrests for fear of Houthi retaliation and the *shame* that could arise if details of the arrests are made public. Some activists speaking to the Sana'a Center claim that a much larger number of women were arrested, some of whom were released due to the political and social influence of their families or because their families paid large amounts of money in exchange for their release.

Some were not as lucky. The case of Sarah al-Faeq, arrested [in June](#) alongside other targeted employees working for international organizations, underscores the tragedy of these detentions. Sarah, a civil society activist and Executive Director of the Civil Coalition for Peace, remains in custody, cut off from communication with her family. In [January, her mother passed away](#), unaware of what fate awaited her daughter. Multiple requests were made to the Houthi-run Security and Intelligence Service for Sarah— [still being held without legal process](#) — to see her mother, but to no avail. Forced disappearances and the wave of arrests in Houthis-controlled areas extend beyond civil society actors accused of colluding with foreigners. They are also carried out to silence any voice of dissent. In a society that prides itself on the “protection” of women and that has put in place various measures to “safeguard” them, women are not spared the inhumane treatment reserved for anyone daring to question the status quo.

On September 10, media figure Sahar Abdullah al-Khawlani was arrested by the Houthis. Popular among her followers, Sahar criticized the Houthis' repressive policies and was vocal on social media about the dire economic situation in Houthi-controlled territories, the withholding of salaries, and the widespread corruption. She publicly and repeatedly requested payment for her salary as an official radio and television employee. Moammar al-Iryani, Yemen's Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism, [accused](#) the Houthis of torturing her to the point of losing consciousness before she was transferred to the hospital in critical condition. In January of this year, [several members of her family](#) were also allegedly detained, including her mother, sister, and young children, in a move that local rights organizations deem as collective punishment by the Houthi authorities.

In the aftermath of the arrests and the ensuing intimidation campaign carried out across Sana'a and other areas under Houthi control, many activists chose to flee. For women, the fear of sexual assault is both threatening and justified. In the lead-up to the September 26 revolution anniversary, Houthi authorities took steps to [suppress celebrations](#) commemorating the overthrow of the imamate. Speaking confidentially to the Sana'a Center, a female activist said the authorities approached her in August, warning her against participating in celebrations as she had done the year before. She went into hiding after being intimidated and receiving threats, including ones of sexual assault, which prompted her to leave Sana'a in secret.

## Divide and Conquer: A Bad Year for Women Organizations

As repression continues to reign supreme in areas controlled by the Houthis, fragmentation and polarization continue to undermine government-controlled areas. The divisions crippling Yemen's internationally recognized government have permeated the realm of women's rights, where partisan agendas take precedence over collective efforts to fight inequality. Last May, in two separate incidents on the 13th and 26th, the Southern Transitional Council (STC)-backed Southern Women's Union, together with a group of armed men, forcefully took over the Aden headquarters of the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU). The YWU, one of Yemen's largest and oldest civil society organizations dedicated to advancing women's rights, operates in various governorates and has a membership of 1,400,000 nationwide. It is also home to Aden's only shelter for female victims of gender-based violence. The shelter was subjected to a siege that lasted several days, during which STC-armed forces attempted to impose their dominance on the YWU. "Instead of guaranteeing the safety of women fleeing violence and strengthening the work of civil society organizations providing protective services, STC authorities have exposed them to further violence," said Amnesty International. Headquartered in Sana'a, the YWU has been affected by the same divisions impacting various Yemeni entities in recent years, including the Central Bank and the Yemeni Journalists Syndicate. Women affiliated with the STC contend that the word «Yemen» in the Yemeni Women's Union contradicts their demands for southern independence.

Rivalry among women's organizations, compounded by the lack of institutional and financial support, undermines the collective strength of Yemeni women, hindering efforts for meaningful change. This unfortunate reality is becoming increasingly more evident. On December 1, 2024, Aden hosted the 7th Women's Summit, organized by the Wogood Foundation for Human Security and attended by one of the authors of this paper. In the opening speech, Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak affirmed the government's commitment to empowering women, noting that women's political and economic empowerment is a "top priority" for the government and a "fundamental pillar for societal advancement." The reality backstage, however, was far from smooth. In the lead-up to the event, a two-day workshop was held with over 80 participants from various governorates across Yemen to discuss economic negotiations, road openings, the forcibly disappeared, and civil space. While the first day proceeded as planned, the second day was brought to an unexpected halt by an intervention from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. Approximately 50 women signed a petition addressed to the Governor of Aden, expressing concern that these meetings could threaten the southern cause.

## Virtual Abuse: A Rise in Blackmail, Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

As the physical space for women shrinks and further implodes, the virtual world offers little respite. While the Internet has opened unprecedented opportunities for Yemeni women to express themselves and engage in political activism, it has also led to various forms of abuse. Digital harassment, cybercrime, and blackmail are on the rise in Yemen, which has no current laws safeguarding users from abuse in the digital world. Women who express opinions that deviate from social norms can face vehement attacks, and online violence is often worse for women with a public presence. Last year, the Sana'a Center published a report highlighting the challenges women face heading women's associations in Hadramawt. On top of the bureaucratic hurdles imposed on some of these female leaders, including the withdrawal of institutional

support and the demand for them to vacate their premises, many have also reported experiencing online harassment. Abusive comments, personal attacks, and trolling led to many reconsidering their public and professional lives. Some revealed distressing experiences with cyber sexual harassment, including unsolicited sexual advances, inappropriate content, and privacy violations, such as sharing their pictures and data without their consent. In a traditional and conservative setting such as Yemen, such actions can have devastating consequences on women's lives and the reputation of their families. Harassment in this form is often the most effective tactic to intimidate women in the spotlight, leading them to step down or scale back their efforts. A [recent report](#) shedding light on electronic crimes in Yemen indicated that the number of victims reporting cybercrime, mostly extortion-related, reached 2,400 cases in the first half of 2024. Women represented 98 percent of that statistic.

## The Cost of Inequality

That 2024 was another challenging year for women in Yemen is an understatement. [Movement restrictions](#) on women continue unabated and are pervasive across the country. Authorities in both government-controlled and Houthi-controlled areas continue to hinder women from traveling between governorates and, in some cases, from traveling abroad without a male guardian's permission or being accompanied by an immediate male relative. Displacement remains widespread, exacerbated by climate change and extreme weather events that continue to devastate Yemen, as demonstrated in last [summer's deadly floods](#). Of the 4.5 million displaced in the country, [80 percent](#) are women and children. They endure harsh living conditions in areas lacking basic necessities, where the humanitarian sector often overlooks their [specific needs](#) and fails to integrate gender concerns into humanitarian programs adequately. 5.5 million women needed reproductive health services last year, and 2.7 million pregnant or breastfeeding women required treatment for acute malnutrition. Only one out of five healthcare facilities in Yemen offers maternity assistance and childcare.

The rise in [food insecurity](#), primarily caused by deteriorating economic conditions and pauses and cuts in food assistance, is severely affecting women and girls, who are overwhelmingly on the sharp end of exploitation and sexual abuse. The case of [Ghalib al-Qadi](#), exposed last summer, shocked Yemenis and illustrates the tragedy of power imbalances in desperate times. Ghaleb acted as a liaison between Yemeni expatriates residing in the US and the Gulf and poor families in Yemen. He devised a fraudulent donation scheme to target vulnerable families on the breadline and entered a string of marriages to sexually exploit and abuse several women, including minors, in exchange for providing them with aid. Activists claim that this is not an isolated incident and that cases of food aid being used to exploit women in vulnerable circumstances are not uncommon. For women who belong to ostracized and marginalized communities such as the *muhammasheen*, the vulnerability is even worse. A recent Sana'a Center [report](#) notes how cases of *muhammashat* subjected to harassment or sexual abuse have risen since the war began as perpetrators act with increasing impunity.

## Beyond “Resilience”

Year after year, the war in Yemen continues to create thousands of orphaned girls, widows, and displaced women. Many shoulder the responsibility of providing for their communities under dire economic conditions, even harder security conditions, movement restrictions, and gender-based violence. The prevailing atmosphere in Yemen is filled with both desperation and anger, which weighs heaviest on those deprived of power who try to adapt and accept what is imposed by those who hold it. In conditions where there is an increased lack of electricity, lack of water, lack of roads, no jobs, no security in the streets, no purchasing power, limited education for kids, violence surrounding them from all angles, and a local and regional reality that only exasperates, talk of women's resilience adds insult to injury. It is true that Yemeni women miraculously succeed in creating a parallel reality and manage to create **new ways of living** to save themselves, their families, and their communities. But as we leave last year behind, the protection of Yemeni women's rights remains as critical as ever. Those with the leverage to put women's rights and living conditions back on the table must ensure that the international focus on Yemen's role in regional conflict does not overshadow critical local concerns. Without global oversight, there is a significant risk that further encroachments on Yemeni women's rights go largely unchecked.

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*This analysis is part of a series of articles examining the role of women working in various fields in Yemen, including education, diplomacy, journalism, and civil society. It was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.*





A child holds a gun during a Houthi-organized demonstration in support of Gaza in Al-Sabeen Square in Sana'a city on December 13, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo

## Analysis

# How Yemeni Religious Groups Recruit Fighters

By Hussam Radman

*This article was originally **published** by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).*

Conflict in Yemen over the past two decades, including the war since 2015, has been dominated by parties with ideologies rooted in religion. Religious ideologies play a key role in the policies adopted by these movements toward the recruitment of fighters into their ranks. There are four main groups in question: the Sunni Islamist Islah party, the Zaidi Shia Houthi movement, the Salafi jihadists of Al-Qaeda, and government-allied Salafis fighting in paramilitary groups backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

These four currents have flourished in Yemen for decades, initially influenced by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Afghanistan jihad in the Eighties. Yemen proved to be fertile ground where they could capitalize on the fragility of the state and the inherently conservative nature of its society.

With Saudi backing, the Salafi current made significant inroads from the 1980s, developing an extensive network of religious institutions, including in Zaidi regions of north Yemen. This helped galvanize the growth of the Houthis as a Zaidi revivalist moment in the 1990s. In that decade, Islah was also able to garner a sizable support base as the Socialist Party in the south lost ground following the 1990 unification. Meanwhile, Al-Qaeda established roots in mountainous regions of the south in the late 1990s and early 2000s, helped by its leader Osama bin Laden's Saudi and Hadrami origins.

Marginalization in a vast, impoverished, and geographically diverse country favored the flourishing of these groups. The Houthi movement in Sa'ada in north Yemen was able to tap into deep-seated resentment toward the central government in Sana'a, turning the surrounding governorates into a formidable stronghold. In a parallel strategy, Al-Qaeda built on similar feelings of alienation in southern and central isolated areas of Abyan, Shabwah, Al-Bayda, and Marib governorates, transforming them into safe havens beyond the reach of central authority.

Prior to the current war, Yemeni Islamic movements displayed three key strategies for recruiting members: First, personal outreach, involving direct individual engagement through educational initiatives conducted in mosques and both formal and informal religious educational institutions. Second, social welfare networks, established by charitable organizations run by Salafi groups and the Islah party, providing essential services to communities, and sometimes using covert networks.

The third method involved the dissemination of ideological propaganda through print media, cassette tapes, and, since the 2000s, online platforms. Al-Qaeda in particular has used this propaganda strategy to spread its revolutionary message to youth opposed to the communist ideologies that were well-established in the south from the 1960s. In the era of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Intifada against Israeli occupation in 2000, the September 11 attacks in 2001, and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the jihadist movement shifted its messaging toward calls for action against "Crusaders and Jews," meaning Western targets and local entities seen as supporting them.

## **The Civil War: A Surge of Mujahids and Jihadists**

The 2011 uprising against the regime of longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh created a political crisis that left a substantial security vacuum for these religious movements to exploit. By 2014, the turmoil had escalated into a full-fledged civil war after the Houthis seized control of Sana'a. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia formed the Arab Coalition with the UAE in an effort to reinstall the internationally recognized government, which had fled to Aden.

While the uprising allowed these groups to broaden their popular support base, the events of 2014-2015 enabled them to transform these bases into large armed movements by focusing on mass rather than individual recruitment. Sunni factions capitalized on grassroots opposition to Houthi incursions into predominantly Sunni areas. Conversely, the Houthis successfully mobilized a diverse and extensive popular base by framing their cause as a struggle against Sunni extremists – dubbed as takfiris, who denounce other Muslims as infidels – and a defense against a foreign war led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Approaches toward radicalization and recruitment have varied. Some Sunni Islamists and Salafis focused primarily on military training, while others such as Al-Qaeda emphasized ideological indoctrination to cultivate committed jihadists. Meanwhile, groups like the Houthis adopted a hybrid approach, combining both tactical training and ideological indoctrination in their recruitment processes.

It is important to differentiate between the concept of the mujahid and the jihadist. A mujahid is an individual compelled by circumstances to engage voluntarily in combat, primarily motivated by religious convictions rather than a revolutionary political agenda. These individuals are typically willing to operate within a structured, state-affiliated framework, effectively transitioning from their role as a mujahid, or resistance fighter, to that of a regular soldier. Importantly, they are generally prepared to relinquish their arms once their combat responsibilities have been fulfilled. In contrast, a jihadist is driven by the concept of perpetual revolution, perceiving combat not as a temporally or geographically limited mission but as an eternal duty. This endeavor extends beyond local conflicts, encompassing global efforts to establish their envisioned Islamic state and challenge Western hegemony. Jihadists consistently favor operating through clandestine armed organizations to pursue these objectives.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Sunni Mujahideen and Resistance Fighters

The intensification of the civil war, combined with the deepening sectarian polarization between Yemen's Sunnis, who are predominantly of the Shafi'i legal school, and Zaidi Shias has resulted in a complex interplay of motivations for resistance. Since 2014, political factions opposing the Houthi group have issued calls for popular resistance. Local communities have invoked religious jihad and tribal solidarity to mobilize citizens, encouraging them to take up arms in defense of their cities and villages.

In this scenario, official military units loyal to the government fought alongside diverse groups of volunteers driven by various motivations: some were politically inspired, identifying themselves as "resistors," while others were religiously motivated, calling themselves "mujahideen." Frequently, these motivations were not mutually exclusive, with many volunteers driven by a complex blend of political and religious convictions.

Sunni combatants, particularly those adhering to puritanical Salafi doctrine, which emphasizes obedience to authority, found it relatively easy to assimilate into the state's military and security structures. They readily pledged allegiance to the government and maintained cordial relations with the Saudi and UAE-led Arab Coalition supporting it. Many of these fighters have opted since around 2020 to resume their pre-conflict roles, either in Islamic outreach or various professional sectors. For them, jihad was a transient obligation that ended once the immediate Houthi military threat to their regions was neutralized.<sup>[2]</sup>

At the beginning of the war, these combatants integrated themselves into the "popular resistance" movement. As the war progressed, they evolved into an essential component of the military units aligned with the Aden-based government. Now, the landscape is characterized by military forces whose leadership and a significant portion of their membership adhere to Salafi religious doctrine while operating within the broader framework of the national armed forces.

<sup>1</sup> See Azmi Bishara, *The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Daesh): A General Framework and Critical Contribution to Understanding the Phenomenon* (Beirut: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2018), chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Lahji emerged as a prominent figure among the notable leaders, playing a crucial role as a field commander in the liberation of Aden and Lahj governorates in southern Yemen. In 2020, he resigned from his military position since active combat operations against the Houthis had effectively ceased, returning to his work as the imam of the Sahaba Mosque in Aden.

## The Mobilization of Salafis: Three Distinct Pro-Government Groups

The Salafi bloc that has fought in Yemen is now integrated into three distinct military structures loyal to the government's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC):

1. The National Army forces: stationed in Marib and Taiz, they are politically aligned with the Islah party but officially operate under the Ministry of Defense.
2. The Giants Brigades: Deployed across Shabwah, Abyan, western coastal areas, and parts of Marib, these brigades played a pivotal role in resisting Houthi advances in Marib, Shabwah, and Hudaydah. They are led by Brigadier General Abdulrahman Al-Muharrami, a prominent southern Salafi leader from Abyan and a member of the PLC who has good ties with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Since 2023, Al-Muharrami has also been a vice president in the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates for the independence of southern Yemen. The Giants Brigades serve as the primary strike force within the anti-Houthi coalition, with arms and funding from the UAE.
3. The Nation's Shield forces: Present in Hadramawt, Al-Dhalea, Lahj, and Aden, these brigades were established by Riyadh in 2022. Modeled on the Giants Brigades, they are led by Salafi leader Brigadier General Basheer al-Mudrabi.

The mobilization of Salafi fighters has been relatively straightforward, as large numbers of volunteers sign up for formal military training within regular brigades, though the exact regions and districts where this is happening are unclear. Their combat doctrine combines a government-directed national orientation with sectarian animosity toward the Houthis.

The Giants Brigades, which also incorporate sympathy for the principle of southern independence, have a pitch for winning young recruits that extends beyond their combat doctrine, since they have built a reputation for steadfast opposition to the Houthis and a refusal to engage in the disputes between the government and STC. They have also been involved in STC-led counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda in Abyan.

The Nation's Shield has also emerged in recent years as a formidable force on the government side. With reliable salaries provided by Riyadh in Saudi riyals, it offers more economic benefit to recruits than other military entities (such as the National Army or STC forces).

## The Salafi Jihadists

The formation of a jihadist element rarely results from mass mobilization efforts. Rather, it typically involves a meticulous, individualized process of indoctrination and training, with sometimes rigorous loyalty tests and assignments as extreme as suicide missions.

From 2014 onwards, Al-Qaeda's leadership strategically shifted its focus to recruiting a substantial number of young volunteers, both from within Yemen and abroad, to combat the expanding Houthi forces. Integrating them into the organization's clandestine structure also created a pool of potential operatives for the organization's broader jihadist agenda against the government, which it viewed as apostate and illegitimate, as well as Western interests and their regional allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE.



By relaxing its rigorous recruitment measures, Al-Qaeda in Yemen took a risk that was to prove costly. The influx of new recruits included infiltrators who compromised the organization's security, leading to the assassination in 2015 of its leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi and other key founding figures in a US airstrike.

In 2018, Al-Wuhayshi's successor Qasim al-Raymi took measures to stop the infiltration and return to stringent recruitment standards. The organization came to realize the inherent challenges in reconciling its rigorous jihadist indoctrination process with a broader and more inclusive strategy aimed at appealing to a wider pool of potential mujahideen. The Houthis, meanwhile, were to be more successful in this approach, using their position as effective ruling authority over a wide area.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Houthi Shia Jihadists

The Houthi group employs a rigorous recruitment process to cultivate dedicated mujahideen, whose ideological commitment is similar to that of the Salafi jihadists. These individuals undergo intensive doctrinal and psychological training from a young age, with a strong preference for those from the Hashemite class who claim direct descent from Prophet Mohammed, as opposed to the majority of Yemenis who are of tribal origin. Most of the recruits hail from Sa'ada, the birthplace of the group's founder, or other northern regions. The Preventive Security Agency, a specialized branch within the Houthi structure, is tasked with monitoring and evaluating the loyalty of fighters appointed to the group's security apparatus or elite military units, which operate under the direct command of the group's current leader, Abdelmalek al-Houthi.

Faced with an urgent demand for combat-ready personnel across multiple fronts, the Houthis resorted to large-scale recruitment efforts. In contrast to the Sunni fighters allied with the government, the Houthis employed coercive recruitment tactics, imposing quotas on allied tribal leaders and requiring them to provide specific numbers of volunteers. Moreover, the Houthis exploited humanitarian needs by conditioning access to food and aid on the volunteers to engage in combat.

The Houthi movement does not prioritize specialized doctrinal training for their combatants. Instead, they subject these fighters to "cultural courses," which are essentially brief military orientation sessions. These rudimentary preparations are conducted prior to integrating the recruits into infantry or reserve units. Combatants are often dispatched to the front lines without adequate training.

In Houthi areas, a popular distinction is made between long-standing members of the Houthi group, referred to as "Houthis," and recent recruits, known as "Mutahawwitheen," or those who have "become Houthi". The group has faced significant challenges in maintaining its fighting force in recent years, partly due to its reliance on human wave tactics in combat. Consequently, the group has increasingly turned to recruiting children, viewing them as more malleable and easier to command. This strategy also serves a long-term purpose, as it aims to cultivate a new generation of devoted fighters from a young age, ensuring the creation of a new generation of Houthi fighters.

<sup>3</sup> It is too early to tell what impact the success of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria might have on Salafi jihadist groups in Yemen and elsewhere. The Syrian group was formed as a rebranding of the Al-Qaeda branch called the Nusra Front in an effort to signal moderation to foreign actors, including the United States. Its jihadists replaced transnational idealism with pragmatism focused on the local context in Syria.

## October 7 and the Revival of Jihadi Recruitment

In 2023, Al-Qaeda and the Houthis were encountering substantial challenges in their efforts to mobilize, recruit, and enlist new members. These groups even began to experience internal dissent and rebellion among their lower-ranking members. However, the Israeli war against Gaza provided these organizations with a lifeline, reinvigorating their recruitment brand.

Notably, the Houthis established dozens of training camps in their regions under the name “Al-Aqsa Flood” – the same name as the Hamas operation carried out on October 7 against Israel– to welcome young volunteers. Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi claimed that around 300,000 fighters had been recruited in 2024. After closing its open-door policy in 2018, Al-Qaeda cautiously resumed accepting young volunteers, motivated by the daily scenes of violence against Palestinians.

## Conclusion

Yemen has long provided armed religious groups with fertile ground for recruitment, but the ongoing war and the past year of escalating political crises in the region have given them renewed momentum, spurring a new wave of mobilization. The growing number of combatants will be a major obstacle to future peacebuilding in Yemen and pose an extra set of challenges for efforts to reduce the attraction of militia life and to reintegrate some of their ranks into civil society. This is where understanding the difference between the mujahid and jihadi becomes crucial, since while the mujahid is prepared for rehabilitation according to circumstance and interest, the jihadist is too committed to ideology to compromise utopian dreams for a political settlement.

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A rally in Aleppo on December 13, 2024, celebrating the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria // Photo credit: Medyan Darieh / Alamy

## Commentary

# An Unlikely Syrian Scenario in Yemen

By Maysaa Shuja al-Deen

The rapid and unexpected advance of opposition forces in Syria in late 2024, culminating in the **overthrow of the Assad regime**, has raised hopes in the anti-Houthi camp that a similar scenario could unfold in Yemen and deal another significant blow to the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. Yemenis see several parallels between their situation and that of Syria. Both the Houthis and the Assad regime were primary belligerents in a devastating civil war. Both were major allies of Iran and other Iranian-backed regional actors, such as Hezbollah. From their respective capitals, Sana'a and Damascus, both adopted a strategy that relied on specific social groups to govern and fight while excluding or marginalizing other social and political factions.

However, despite these apparent similarities, the contexts of the two countries are fundamentally different, and it is unlikely that Yemen will witness a surprise collapse like the one in Syria. The Assad family maintained power for over five decades, long enough for the regime to stagnate and become an aging authority devoid of a strong ideological foundation. Bashar al-Assad inherited power from his father, Hafez, in 2000 without having to exert any significant effort to seize or defend it. When the country broke out into civil war, Assad was forced to rely on external actors such as Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia to maintain his position.



By contrast, the Houthis represent a first-generation movement with a strong ideological foundation. Although relatively young, they compensate for their lack of experience with passion and determination to protect the power they have recently acquired. The Houthis have thousands of devoted followers who are prepared to fight to the end.

Yemen's geographical divisions and the historical legacy of the Zaidi Imamate in northern Yemen play a critical role in shaping the limitations of any military action against the Houthis. They maintain tight control over the rugged terrain between Sa'ada and Sana'a, which serves as a natural fortress. Even though they lack widespread popularity, including among many Zaidis, the Houthis represent one of the country's distinct regional identities, and defeating them in their northern heartland would represent a significant challenge.

The anti-Houthi camp in Yemen also differs significantly from the opposition forces that seized power in Damascus. While there were divisions within the Syrian opposition, these were largely confined to the Kurdish component in the northeast of the country in recent years. In Yemen, multiple regional players with conflicting agendas are involved, chief among them Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser degree, Oman and Qatar. The struggle for influence and control in Yemen is thus far more complex than in Syria, and has become a new battleground for regional rivalries.

Additionally, the Houthis pose a real threat to both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as demonstrated in its past targeting of infrastructure in both countries. Therefore, any move to escalate the conflict in Yemen against the Houthis would carry significant risks of renewed missile and drone attacks, which would likely be seen as unacceptable in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

Another Houthi strength has been their centralized decision-making, which has enabled them to manage internal conflicts without escalating and threatening the cohesion of the overall group. The nexus for this decision-making is Abdelmalek al-Houthi, who holds absolute political and spiritual authority. While the group has expanded its dominance over the past decade to new areas of Yemen, the Houthi inner circle has not grown proportionately and still relies on a small circle of loyalists from the Sa'ada wars (2004–2010). This centralization may now represent a critical vulnerability if targeted action is taken against the group's leadership, particularly Abdelmalek. For example, when former Supreme Political Council head Saleh al-Sammad was **killed** in a Saudi-led coalition strike in 2018, Mahdi al-Mashat was appointed as his successor. However, Al-Mashat has generally failed to fill the void left by Al-Sammad, particularly in maintaining tribal alliances and carrying out key organizational duties.

Yemen is very sensitive to regional developments and is easily influenced by them. The Houthis' involvement in the regional conflict that followed October 7 and the outbreak of war in Gaza have positioned Yemen at the heart of these significant regional transformations. It is currently unclear whether Houthi attacks against Red Sea shipping and Israel will continue after a **cease-fire was agreed** in Gaza. Yemen is also not necessarily a top priority for regional actors, so this could lead to efforts to freeze the conflict.



While further changes will undoubtedly occur, they will ultimately be shaped by Yemen's unique context, so comparisons hold only limited value. One of the most significant concerns remains the weak and divided state of the anti-Houthi camp. Regional and international powers are unlikely to favor a potential power vacuum in Houthi-held territories or further fragmentation that could destabilize the region. As a result, any approach to addressing the Yemeni situation by escalating against the Houthis militarily will likely be seen as coming with heavy risks and costs but with limited potential for meaningful gains.

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This commentary is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of The Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



Drones displayed at an exhibition organized by the Houthis group in Sana'a city on December 18, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo

## Analysis

# Israel's Calculations in Responding to the Houthis

By Salah Ali Salah

Tit-for-tat operations have seen a surge in missile and drone attacks launched by the Houthis toward Israel as part of what the group calls **the fifth phase of escalation** in support of Gaza. The conflict has cast a wide net over both parties and continues to evolve gradually. Israel has carried out retaliatory airstrikes inside Yemen in response to Houthi attacks. Yet the efficacy of their airstrikes thus far has failed to have any tangible impact, as the Houthis have gained considerable experience in withstanding aerial targeting in recent years.

The nature of Israeli targets in Yemen also differs significantly from those struck by the United States and the United Kingdom. While US and UK strikes have predominantly focused on military targets, such as mobile missile launchers, radar sites, weapons storage facilities, and workshops for manufacturing missiles and drones, Israel has hit a broader range of targets, including economic infrastructure. Israeli forces have **targeted** the ports of Hudaydah and Al-Salif, oil storage facilities in Ras Issa, and power stations in Hudaydah and Sana'a. They also **struck** Sana'a International Airport and targeted **eight of the port of Hudaydah's 15 tugboats**, which are used to maneuver large vessels. On January 10, Israel expanded its targets to include

the **Presidential Palace** in Sana'a. This suggests that Israel's constraints on the types of targets it will engage are less stringent than those of its Western allies, as numerous political and security challenges continue to grip the region.

#### The Strategic Dimensions of the Conflict

The Houthis have emerged as a pivotal force within the Axis of Resistance, especially following Israel's success in neutralizing Hamas and Hezbollah, the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and the decline in operations by Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Simultaneously, Iran, anticipating further confrontation with Israel and the US, seeks to preserve the Houthis as a group capable of threatening Israeli and Western interests, including maritime shipping lanes. This makes the Houthis a valuable asset to Tehran as a line of defense. Iran's concerns have intensified with the return of President Trump to office, who carried out a **maximum pressure** strategy against Iran during his first term. Israel, meanwhile, may see an opportunity to strike Iran directly in the future, assuming backing from the Trump administration, and will undoubtedly exploit escalating tensions with the Houthis to underscore the threat posed by Iranian influence in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has asserted that Israel's operations against the Houthis not only protect Israel from the Iran-backed rebel group but also **the world at large**.

The conflict between Israel and the Houthis has taken on multiple strategic dimensions. For Israel, it's a matter of safeguarding national security and economic interests threatened by Houthi activities. The Houthis, conversely, have leveraged the conflict to bolster their image as a resistance movement confronting both Israel and the United States. Iran, meanwhile, strategically utilizes the Houthis to project regional influence, impose significant costs on its adversaries, and enhance its leverage in diplomatic negotiations.

The exchanges of strikes between Israel and Houthis are gradually evolving into a war of attrition, a prolonged conflict that benefits neither side. Beyond the security and political implications, this protracted conflict is inflicting significant economic damage on both the Houthis and Israel. The Houthis are **losing vital financial resources** as their infrastructure and facilities are destroyed. Conversely, Israel incurs **substantial costs** to intercept Houthi missiles and drones.

#### Challenges Facing Israeli Operations

There is a divergence of opinions within Israel regarding the appropriate response to the Houthis in Yemen. A review of comments by Israeli experts and officials in both Israeli and international media gives an indication of how the conflict may evolve in the future. Dr. Nachum Shiloh, a research fellow at Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC), has **suggested** that "the Houthis may be making calculations figuring that they can sustain an Israeli retribution once every few months while continuing to attack Israel," noting the complexity of conducting airstrikes in Yemen, which is some 2,000 km away. Shiloh concludes, "In their cost-benefit analysis, [the Houthis] want to implement their anti-Israeli, anti-American ideology while taking into account that Israel's ability to hit them is limited," adding that "Yemen's impoverished population and under-developed economy make for very few valuable military targets to Israel."

The geographical distance and exorbitant costs are not the sole challenges confronting Israeli operations in Yemen. **Differing views** among Israeli policymakers persist here too. Director of Mossad, David Barnea, has proposed directly targeting Iran in response to Houthi attacks. Israeli military intelligence favors a more restrained approach, arguing against direct strikes on Iran. Netanyahu appears to lean towards the assessment of military intelligence.

Beyond geographical constraints and exorbitant costs, Israeli operations in Yemen face significant intelligence challenges. Despite the Houthis' prolonged activity, it would seem that Israel has historically prioritized other threats and **has not invested heavily** in intelligence gathering on the Houthis. While Netanyahu has **vowed** to target Houthi leadership, and Defense Minister Israel Katz has **declared**, «We will hunt down all of the Houthis' leaders, and we will strike them just as we have done in other places,” the paucity of reliable intelligence remains a significant hurdle. Yemen's underdeveloped communications infrastructure also serves as a hindrance to Israel's intelligence-gathering capabilities. Ironically, this deficiency has become a crucial element of the Houthis' defensive strategy. Israel has utilized communication surveillance in its conflicts with Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. However, in Yemen, where the communication infrastructure is weak and internet speeds are slow, this approach is less effective.

Beyond direct military action, Israeli policymakers are exploring an alternative strategy centered on building an international coalition encompassing Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other regional players. This approach recognizes that the Houthi threat transcends Israel's national security interests and poses a regional challenge. To this end, the Israeli Foreign Ministry is **actively lobbying** for international designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar has instructed Israeli diplomats in Europe to secure this designation from as many governments as possible. While Israel, the United States, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, and Malaysia have already designated the Houthis as a terrorist entity, only a limited number of European nations have done so.

There is also a disagreement among Israeli security experts on how to categorize the Houthis: as a state or as a terrorist organization. Giora Eiland, former head of the Israeli National Security Council, **advocates** for considering the Houthis as a state, given their control over the capital, Sana'a, and large swathes of northern Yemen. He argues that this would allow Israel to apply conventional laws of war and justify broader military operations. However, this view has raised concerns about regional alliances, as potential allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE might hesitate to support an outright war against a neighboring state. Some prefer to maintain the Houthis' designation as a terrorist organization within Israel's broader framework of countering Iranian proxies to avoid alienating international allies.

## A New Reality

The confrontation between the Houthis and Israel marks a new development in the region's intricate and expansive conflict. While Israel undeniably possesses far superior capabilities, the Houthis have thus far managed to sustain themselves as a significant short- and long-term threat. Israel has yet to find a silver bullet to unilaterally resolve the conflict. It appears both parties will continue to refine and bolster their strategies. The recent engagements are far from the final chapter of this complex confrontation – both sides seem locked in a costly war of attrition, the outcome of which remains uncertain unless new factors emerge to significantly alter the prevailing dynamics.

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UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg exits Sana'a International Airport during a visit to the Yemeni capital for talks with Houthi officials on January 6, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo

## Analysis

# Navigating Yemen's Ongoing Quest for Peace: Key Challenges and Prospects for 2025

By Alexandra Nikopoulou

A year of war across the Middle East has profoundly reshaped the region, shifting power dynamics and redrawing the lines of local conflicts. For Yemen, the Gaza war and its repercussions have served as an intensifier to the conflict, driving peace to a stalemate and exacerbating local divisions. The end of 2024 saw an increase in fighting on several fronts, a further escalation in Houthi-Israeli tensions, and renewed hope for a Houthi retreat within the anti-Houthi camp. International efforts toward a peace settlement continued, with the process following a familiar yet flawed approach in search of a still-elusive breakthrough.

## The International Approach: A Recipe for Failure

In the past three months, little has changed regarding the international community's approach to achieving peace in Yemen. The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) remains weak and divided, serving merely as a vehicle for its members to promote their own agendas. In response, local actors are increasingly meeting with international officials on their own. Afrah Nasser, a non-resident Fellow at Arab Center Washington DC, underscored the council's weakness, saying, "The PLC does not have autonomy. It always goes back to what the Saudis and the Emiratis want, and it stays because its sponsors want it to stay. It is the most convenient actor for the two countries... it is counterproductive and makes the Houthis more confident that there is no strong anti-Houthi camp."

In November 2024, a new coalition of Yemeni parties was formed under the auspices of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The US-led initiative, consisting of 22 political parties, was boycotted by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the powerful secessionist party led by PLC member Aiderous al-Zubaidi. Although more inclusive than previous such efforts, this new formation exemplifies the international community's flawed approach to Yemen – a reliance on urban-based political parties and the absence of representation from key players on the ground, such as tribes and the STC, underscores the weakness of the initiative.

Saudi-Emirati competition remains a key obstacle to uniting the anti-Houthi camp and Yemen's peace process. Abdulghani al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Sana'a Center, noted that "as long as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are competing in Yemen, the possibility of forming a united command is almost impossible." Farea al-Muslimi, a research fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme, noted that the divergence in priorities between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh is reflected in how they have engaged in ongoing peace efforts. "As long as Saudi Arabia's borders are secure, Riyadh does not care about the Houthis and believes [it has] neutralized the Houthi threat. They have rebranded themselves as peacemakers and find themselves increasingly busy in other contexts, such as Syria."

Yemen has historically been perceived as a potential threat to Riyadh, and the need to contain it has driven Saudi involvement in the country for decades. This view may partly explain the lack of Saudi support for its allies in the government to counter the Houthi threat.

## America's Non-Policy

With the Trump administration taking over in January, the US's non-policy toward Yemen remains an issue. The United States had quietly backed direct Saudi-Houthi negotiations, hoping they would lead to a resolution of the conflict. Once the Houthis started attacking ships in the Red Sea, however, the Biden administration had to reevaluate its approach, eventually leading to an enhanced sanctions policy with direct strikes against strategic Houthi targets. Operation Prosperity Guardian, inaugurated in December 2023 to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea, was supported by a new "deter and degrade" strategy announced in October 2024. Overall, the US campaign has focused on targeting Houthi military capabilities. November and December witnessed numerous reported strikes against Houthi facilities, but they did not deliver a decisive blow to the group's capabilities.

So, what are US President Donald Trump's options for Yemen and the Houthis? To begin with, the new president has come forward with an agenda to end all wars in the Middle East and focus on domestic issues, similar to his first term in office. On the foreign policy front, this continuity will also likely include a return to maximum pressure against Iran, which will, in turn, affect the Houthis. In January, the White House redesignated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and said it was reviewing UN partners, NGOs, and USAID contractors in Yemen for potential links to the group. However, given the new administration's stated intent to reduce its involvement in the Middle East, there is a possibility that it may pursue a political solution rather than a military one. Engaging in military action would require interacting with an already weak and divided government, which could ultimately benefit the Houthis. Nasser argued that a more aggressive military approach targeting Houthi leaders could lead to a "power vacuum that will allow other terrorist groups to take advantage of the situation - such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS - since the pro-government camp is weak on many levels." Al-Muslimi agrees that military strikes will not change Houthi behavior. "The US is waiting for the Gaza war to be over to talk about Yemen, even if it is not a good approach," he said.

## Escalation between the Houthis and Israel

Meanwhile, the past few months have witnessed significant regional developments, the most prominent of which was the fall of the Assad regime after more than 50 years of rule in Syria. Al-Muslimi says the loss of another valuable Iranian ally has left the Houthis as "the last standing horse" in the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance. "This will make [the Houthis] more reckless," he said. "The Houthis don't depend on Iranians as much as we think anymore, except in smuggling matters. If smuggling routes with Iran are disrupted, they could be weakened, but it will take a lot of time until it makes an actual difference."

Houthi aggression has become more evident in recent months, which saw a considerable uptick in attacks against Israel. In response, Tel Aviv targeted vital infrastructure and facilities in Houthi-held areas, including Sana'a airport and the port of Hudaydah, but its response was rather restrained, considering December saw the most Houthi attacks against Israel since the beginning of the war in Gaza. This may have been due to Israel waiting for the new US president to take power, aiming to coordinate and bolster its pressure on the Houthis with the support of a more favorable administration in Washington. Meanwhile, there are renewed hopes in the anti-Houthi camp that continuing conflict between the group and foreign powers could result in the critical weakening of Houthi military capabilities.

## The Path Forward

While peace in Yemen remains elusive, experts agree there are ways to reach a resolution. However, these require newfound flexibility from all actors engaged in the conflict. A crucial step in this direction would be to lower Houthi expectations of what they can achieve on the ground, particularly when it comes to seizing control of Yemen's oil and gas resources. "The Houthis do not show any interest in having serious conversations with Yemenis," says Al-Iryani. "They just want to deal with Saudi Arabia and then turn their attention to destroying competition." A potential way to change this dynamic would be to put forward a reconstruction and economic recovery plan to incentivize them to come to the negotiating table.

For Nasser, “Yemen is closer to war than peace. The civil war is coming back with a second phase, where the anti-Houthi camp wants to take back Sana’a.” Al-Iryani is more optimistic and believes that with the “ceasefire being announced in Gaza, the Houthis will stop [attacks on Israel and the Red Sea].” For Al-Muslimi, “In the long term, the Houthis will have to either sign a peace agreement or [face] their end. An inclusive peace is possible, but it is up to them.”

Engaging all Yemeni actors in the process and putting forward local solutions to the country's myriad problems is key to securing a lasting settlement. For this to happen, the Saudis and the Emiratis need to make concessions to one another, abandon their rivalry, and adopt a more constructive approach.

Meanwhile, Iran's loss of influence, the election of a new US administration, and the Gaza ceasefire are all critical developments that will shape Yemen's future in 2025. For now, the country remains stuck in a precarious equilibrium between war and peace, but drastic action could push it toward one direction or the other.

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Photo from the Saudi Project for Landmine Clearance in Yemen (MASAM) // Photo credit: Saudi Press Agency

## Commentary

# Landmines Exact a Heavy Toll on Yemeni Civilians

By Abdelnasser Aqlan

The story is familiar. Dina,<sup>[1]</sup> an eight-year-old girl, lost both her legs after stepping on a landmine designed to detonate under a weight exceeding eight kilograms. She had been eagerly awaiting her return to her home, situated close to a frontline between government and Houthi forces in Al-Durayhimi district, Hudaydah. Her father had assured her they would return home and that the fighting would cease following the [Stockholm Agreement](#) in December 2018. However, her home and its garden had been transformed into a deadly playground, littered with anti-personnel landmines cunningly disguised as innocuous objects – rocks, household items, and even toys.

Civilians in Yemen, including women and children, have been displaced from their homes and farms, only to find themselves in areas contaminated by mines and unexploded ordnance. Lacking any knowledge of the tactics used by parties to the conflict, they are vulnerable to these deadly hazards, which are often indiscriminately planted during military withdrawals. The [internationally recognized government](#) alleges that the Houthis have planted **two and a half**

<sup>1</sup> The names of child victims mentioned in this article are fictitious to protect their identities.

million landmines in areas affected by the conflict since March 2015. Compounding the crisis is the ongoing refusal of the warring parties to provide maps of these minefields to specialized agencies, as required by the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC), which Yemen signed in 1998.

Despite entering its third year, the truce in Yemen and subsequent dearth of major offensives has failed to halt the deadly toll of landmines and unexploded ordnance. These insidious devices, often referred to as “silent killers,” lie in wait. A single misstep can prove fatal for the victim. Yemen now ranks third globally in terms of landmine and cluster munition victims, with over 9,500 civilians, mostly women and children, killed or injured since March 2015, according to the Yemen Executive Mine Action Center (YEMAC) in Sana’a.

Yemen’s landmine crisis dates back to the 1980s, when 12 million mines were transferred from Libya to Yemen. Many were planted in the border region between North Yemen and South Yemen. In 2007, a Yemeni lawyer filed a lawsuit against the then-leader of Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, demanding compensation for the damage and injuries caused to Yemeni civilians. The legacy of this chapter of Yemen’s history continues to plague countless civilians today, particularly farmers and herders who fall victim to mines that litter farms and pastoral areas. Witness accounts gathered by Human Rights Watch, along with evidence collected by local human rights organizations, indicate that Republican Guard forces planted anti-personnel landmines around their camps in Bani Jarmuz area near Sana’a in 2011. In August 2023, sources within the 2nd Military Region in Hadramawt reported that an engineering team had dismantled a network of landmines and explosive devices planted by Al-Qaeda.

The majority of landmine victims are civilians. Women and children are vulnerable as they engage in activities such as collecting firewood and water and tending to livestock and may lack the experience to identify or avoid mines. Children are particularly vulnerable because they are often out playing. Ibrahim, a boy from Al-Jawf, was only eight when a mine claimed his life. The object resembled a pen – conflict parties often disguise these deadly weapons as everyday items.

In 2018, as a result of the war and the division of government institutions and bodies between the north and south, the Yemen Executive Mine Action Center (YEMAC) in Aden was formed as an independent entity from the main center in Sana’a, which was established in December 1999. The Center had heavily relied on a specialized unit of mine-detection dogs, but they were tragically bombed by the Saudi-led coalition in October 2021, further exacerbating the challenges of identifying and clearing war remnants and mined areas.

The clearance of land, farms, and roads from mines and explosive remnants of war not only safeguards civilians from direct injury but also facilitates the free movement of goods and people, enabling access to essential services, employment, education, and other aspects of life. However, despite multiple rounds of peace talks, both regionally and internationally brokered, the warring parties in Yemen have refused to provide clear maps of minefields. Instead, they wield these life-saving resources as bargaining chips to advance their respective agendas. Given that landmines can remain active for decades, there continue to be regular reports of civilian casualties, including fatalities, survivors left with “permanent disabilities,” and victims of psychological trauma, as well as social and economic losses.

An employee with the Yemen Association for Landmines and UXO Survivors in Sana’a said that the NGO has recorded nearly nine thousand survivors of incidents involving landmines or unexploded ordnance. The care provided to them is limited to post-injury medical attention,



physical rehabilitation, and locally made prosthetics, wheelchairs, and crutches. The number of victims represents just those recorded by the main office in Sana'a, and these survivors have no representation in the ongoing peace negotiations to advocate for their rights and needs. Any settlement that does not include compensation and rights for these victims risks leaving them in the lurch.

Mine survivors, many of whom have suffered limb amputations, require comprehensive and sustainable care. This care should be provided right after the occurrence of the incident and should continue until survivors can resume their lives as fully as possible. Such an endeavor necessitates a well-coordinated system and sustained efforts and support to heal the wounds of these victims and empower them to seek appropriate compensation.

Abdelnasser Aqlan is the founder of the Hope Organization for Limb Amputees (HOLA) and a member of the Yemen Peace Forum. He advocates for the rights of people with disabilities and has participated in numerous conferences, workshops, and seminars on this topic. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Commerce and Economics from Sana'a University.

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*This commentary was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.*



Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's new president following the overthrow of the Assad regime // Photo credit: SANA

## Analysis

# Will Al-Qaeda Change Tack After the Jihadist Victory in Syria?

By Abdelrazzaq al-Gamal

The sudden collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and rise to power of Islamists marks a pivotal turning point in the regional landscape. The new government is headed by the former rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, previously known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Before forming HTS, Al-Sharaa was a leading Al-Qaeda commander in Syria who had also fought in Iraq alongside radical figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. With his transformation into Syria's head of state, he represents a new model of post-Al-Qaeda Islamism and raises fundamental questions about the group's future direction.

## Al-Qaeda's Global Brand: Facing an Uncertain Future

HTS' unexpected success in Syria, after spending years holed up in the northern province of Idlib, can be attributed to several factors, including external support from regional powers. But both during the war and now in government, the group has also demonstrated an exceptional ability to adapt to Syria's complex political and social environment by forging broad alliances with



diverse factions, often transcending the traditional ideological boundaries of its predecessor, Al-Qaeda. In this way, Al-Sharaa was able to garner significant popular support, especially in areas ravaged by war, by positioning himself as a liberator rather than another oppressor. This strategy marks a departure from the rigid approach that Al-Qaeda and its various global branches have stuck to through thick and thin. Al-Sharaa's ascent also coincides with a period of significant decline for Al-Qaeda globally. The death of Osama bin Laden in 2011 and of his successor Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2023, and the grinding impact of constant international pressure on the organization, including drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen, could now compel Al-Qaeda's leadership to reassess its strategy.

HTS's success in Syria could inspire leading figures in various branches to seek new ways to survive and expand, or emulate Al-Sharaa's approach in setting aside global jihad to impact local politics. Will the organization undergo a strategic shift, adopting more flexible and adaptable approaches to local contexts, or will it adhere to its traditional ideology, regardless of the cost? Moreover, which Al-Qaeda branches are most likely to be influenced by this model? In the aftermath of Syria's stunning turnaround, these are the most pressing questions for the group.

## **AQAP in Yemen: Could Al-Sharaa be an Inspiration?**

Al-Sharaa's flexible model emerged from a period of intense rivalry between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (ISIS) and deep disagreement over the brutality of the latter and the Al-Qaeda branch in Iraq from which it emerged. ISIS declared its caliphate in 2014 after breaking away from Al-Qaeda, prompting Al-Qaeda to reassess many of its tactics in an attempt to differentiate itself.

In Yemen, for example, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) abandoned many of the tactics for which ISIS became notorious, such as public beheadings. AQAP has also disavowed attacks on Shia mosques and other sectarian acts focused on exploiting social and religious divisions. These shifts in AQAP's strategy were a direct response to the widespread criticism leveled against ISIS and the perception that excessive violence was destined to erode public sympathy.

Al-Sharaa's model in Syria represents a new paradigm for Al-Qaeda that combines ideological rigor with tactical flexibility. Al-Sharaa achieved significant gains on the battlefield by adopting unconventional strategies, such as forging alliances with groups outside HTS's ideological sphere and presenting himself as the liberator of the Syrian people. Similarly, AQAP's direct involvement in popular resistance against the Houthis represents a significant strategic shift in the organization's approach. In 2014, the group threatened attacks inside Saudi Arabia. Having previously viewed the kingdom as an arch-enemy alongside the United States, AQAP recalculated and joined forces with anti-Houthi factions backed by Riyadh. Al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen has acknowledged its involvement in battles against the Houthis on 11 different fronts, underscoring the magnitude of this shift. According to one former jihadist, Al-Qaeda opted to cooperate with its adversaries to confront the greater threat it perceived from the Houthis, which it saw as a challenge to its own ideology.

AQAP has since shifted positions in Yemen again under the new leadership of Saad al-Awlaqi, making the government and UAE-backed southern separatists its main targets. The group is clearly capable of consolidating relationships with other factions and cooperating against what it perceives as a common enemy.

Al-Sharaa's success in Syria demonstrates that similar groups might also possess the ability to adapt and evolve in response to emerging challenges. The Syrian model is likely to spark a wide-ranging debate within Al-Qaeda about its future and may prompt leaders to reassess their strategies. This could produce fundamental changes in the group's nature and aims in the Gulf region.

## **Somalia's Al-Shabaab: The Branch Most Likely to Change?**

The Al-Shabaab group in Somalia is the branch of Al-Qaeda perhaps most likely to follow the HTS model. It is currently the most powerful branch of the organization, controlling large areas of Somalia via an autonomous administration. "Al-Shabaab has been seeking for some time to talk to the United States, similar to Washington's past consultations with the Taliban in Doha that resulted in the complete withdrawal of the US army from Afghanistan and the group's subsequent assumption of power," said Amjad Khoshafa, a Yemeni researcher. "Al-Shabaab views the Taliban experience as one it can emulate to consolidate its power in Somalia. It also envisions an effective Qatari mediation role."

Still, HTS may be seen by some extremist groups as having gone too far, offering too many concessions to Western liberalism in return for meager political and economic gains. Attempts by Al-Qaeda leaders to blur ideological lines and change organizational structures will run some risk of stoking internal tensions and creating a backlash. In such a scenario, branches in Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere might revert to their ideological underpinnings to avoid internal crises.

The United States, too, will face some stark choices. If current strategies are deemed as having failed in recent years, Washington may be minded to reassess its options on the counterterrorism front. Positive signals from Al-Qaeda could prompt interest in foreign policy, security, and defense agencies in new strategies of recognition and integration.

## **Conclusion**

Al-Sharaa has arguably shown more strategic flexibility in Syria than the leader of any other jihadist organization since the 1980s. Through his ability to adapt to local contexts and forge alliances that transcend ideological nuances, HTS was able to make significant gains on the ground that culminated in the overthrow of the Assad regime.

HTS's extraordinary success amid the challenges facing Al-Qaeda at the local and global levels could now prompt Al-Qaeda's leaders to reassess their strategies. However, any rapid and fundamental transformation could also be met with internal resistance and sow divisions, threatening the group's cohesion and existence in its various local operating environments.

Further, external factors should not be underestimated. For all his innovative approaches and skill in managing jihadist politics, Al-Sharaa and HTS were unlikely to survive or succeed without the help of actors such as Turkey and Qatar. For Al-Qaeda's other branches, any hope of emulating Al-Sharaa will require careful attention to the regional actors that dominate their worlds.

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Abdelrazzaq al-Jamal is a Yemeni journalist and researcher specializing in Al-Qaeda in Yemen since 2006.

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

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