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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.

Cover photo: The Old Port in Mukalla, April 19, 2024 // Sana'a
Center photo by Abubakr Balfagih

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Executive Summary

The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council's (STC) December takeover of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra precipitated a massive shift in Yemen's political and security landscape. After nearly a month of failed negotiations, Saudi-backed forces counterattacked and, aided by local tribesmen and air support, found quick success. STC-affiliated forces were forced to retreat to Aden before ultimately ceding control of the interim capital. STC leader Aiderous al-Zubaidi has reportedly fled to the UAE. The government has now charged him with high treason, and the dissolution of his organization was announced from Riyadh.

Political tensions in Hadramawt intensified over the fall as a rivalry escalated between the STC and pro-government and local tribal forces. The ensuing fighting triggered both a domestic political crisis and a regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Riyadh now enjoys a dominant position in Yemen's south and is reorganizing the government and military ahead of an upcoming intra-south dialogue. UAE-backed National Resistance forces leader Tareq Saleh and Giants Brigades leader Abdelrahman "Abu Zara'a" al-Muharrami have been brought into the fold. The latter has been charged with securing Aden.

Frontlines remained fragile but stable throughout the autumn, with fighting taking place in Taiz, Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Shabwa, Abyan, and Hudaydah. In Al-Jawf, intermittent clashes were recorded between pro-government forces and the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) throughout November, but did not result in any major territorial changes, and casualties remained low. In late December, fighting broke out for the first time in ten months along the Aqabat Halhal front in Abyan's Lawdar district, possibly triggered by the redeployment of Nation's Shield forces.

The Houthis continued their campaign to kidnap, detain, and issue death sentences to UN staff, aid workers, and members of civil society working in northern Yemen. The total number of UN detainees is now more than 70. International concern continues to grow over the detentions and the escalation of espionage accusations and show trials.

On December 23, the UN announced a preliminary agreement between the Houthis and the government to exchange more than 2,900 abductees and prisoners. The agreement reportedly includes the release of Islah-affiliated politician Mohammed Qahtan, a key demand in previous negotiations. It is unclear whether Qahtan is still alive.

Gulf officials indicated that Saudi Arabia is interested in reviving talks with the Houthis following the ceasefire in Gaza. Bilateral negotiations in 2022 and 2023 aimed at normalizing relations before transitioning to broader intra-Yemeni negotiations. On October 30, chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam stated that talks had begun with UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg regarding the implementation of the Saudi-Houthi roadmap. It is unclear how the reorganization of the government will impact talks.

The UN's Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan faced its largest funding gap in a decade. OCHA reported that the 2025 aid plan received only US\$687.9 million, equivalent to 28 percent of the requested US\$2.48 billion.

According to the World Food Programme, 61 percent of surveyed households in Yemen struggled to meet their minimum food needs in November, 35 percent of which faced severe food insecurity. Thirty-two percent of households in Houthi-controlled areas reported moderate to severe hunger, up 6 percent year on year, compared to 25 percent in government-controlled areas, down 8 percent.

A severe gas shortage impacted Aden and other cities under government control from late November through December. The disruption resulted in long queues of cars and buses at the few stations that remained open.

The price of the new rial remained stable, trading around YR1,628 per US\$1. The price of old rials circulating in Houthi-controlled areas also remained flat, at YR536 per US\$1.

The Sana'a Center Editorial

After Hadramawt: An Opportunity to Reset Yemen's Political Track?

The Southern Transitional Council's (STC) seizure of Yemen's southeastern governorates of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in early December marked a dangerous turning point, plunging Yemen into a political crisis with far-reaching regional implications. The STC's rapid expansion – backed by the UAE and driven by its long-standing ambition to declare a southern state – posed a direct threat to the security of neighboring Saudi Arabia and Oman, at a particularly sensitive moment for the region. The move stoked anxiety among most regional states, already wary of the rising tide of fragmentation.

Yemen appears to have avoided the worst-case scenario of becoming the scene of a long-term regional battlefield between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The swift military resolution of the situation in early January has lifted the threat of another war in a country already worn down by a decade of conflict. The challenge now for the Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia is how to turn this rapid resolution into sustainable stability.

Recent years have taught us several lessons. Foremost among them is that a state of stalemate, accompanied by fragility, insecurity, and political divisions among government factions, is not a viable formula for managing or resolving the conflict. The time has come to move beyond reactive policies of containment and crisis management and tackle the underlying structural issues fueling the conflict.

The latest developments have laid bare how closely Yemen's fate is intertwined with that of its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, given their long, shared border and deep social and historical ties. The Kingdom's standing as an influential regional power and a guarantor of regional security has been tested in Yemen, which has effectively fallen entirely under its sphere of influence in the wake of recent events. What comes next will be a decisive test of Riyadh's leadership and its ability to navigate regional realignments, a task that can only be met by drawing from past lessons.

Saudi Arabia has historically wielded extensive influence over Yemeni politics by leveraging a wide-reaching network of tribal and social ties. Yet the confrontation with the UAE, and its unprecedented implications for Saudi regional influence, have exposed the limits of this approach. Relationships with patronage networks and non-state actors have proven to be liabilities rather than assets. Investing in Yemeni state institutions to protect them from fragility is ultimately a strategic necessity for both Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The present moment, therefore, demands a reframing of the Saudi-Yemeni relationship, grounded in realistic expectations that safeguard the interests of both nations and enhance the cohesion and efficiency of the Yemeni state.

Despite ongoing risks, the current situation presents a crucial opportunity to empower and unite the Yemeni government, whose political and economic capacities were deeply undermined by the divide between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This divide left Yemen with a fractured and dysfunctional government, and the UAE's sudden departure has now created a political vacuum while numerous political, security, and economic issues remain unaddressed. If these are not managed effectively and taken into account when drafting political settlements, they could become flashpoints for future conflict, jeopardizing stability, security, and social cohesion.

The situation in the southern governorates remains precarious. The STC continues to command a large popular base, particularly in its strongholds in Al-Dhalea and Lahj, including the Radfan and Yafea regions. Beyond the STC, a broader southern constituency spans all governorates, with varying degrees of support for secession, including in the East. This segment of the population harbors deep anxieties about the marginalization and the perceived liquidation of the Southern Cause. The hasty decision to dissolve the STC from Riyadh has fueled fears of exclusion, political marginalization, and even retaliation, reviving past southern grievances.

The planned South-South dialogue conference in Riyadh presents a crucial opportunity to dispel these fears, provided the Southern Cause is approached with care. Southern actors and concerns must not be dismissed, marginalized, or subjected to retaliation. Nor should the conference become a platform to negate the cause or favor one perspective over another. Instead, it should affirm Southerners' right to determine their future peacefully, without hindering the process of a comprehensive Yemeni settlement.

More broadly, the recent developments appear to have brought an end to the divisions that long paralyzed the government. But this must not open the door to the return of unilateral governance. It is essential that all existing factions are represented and have a role in decision-making. At the same time, power-sharing arrangements should not come at the expense of the government's ability to effectively manage state affairs and people's livelihoods. Any future political arrangement must be anchored in clear legal and constitutional frameworks and uphold constitutional legitimacy – not only to regulate its functions, but to mark the boundary between state and non-state actors. Empowering and supporting official institutions requires resisting the temptation to create new political or bureaucratic structures. Instead, appointments should follow established legal frameworks and administrative practices, supported by robust oversight and accountability mechanisms to combat corruption.

However, reform cannot succeed in isolation from economic recovery. Yemen needs substantial economic support from its allies—delivered through official institutions rather than parallel or external frameworks. Improving the living conditions in government-controlled areas is not only a humanitarian imperative but a key prerequisite to restoring public trust. A functioning model of stability and service delivery in these areas would not only ease public frustration but also send a powerful message to Yemenis in Houthi-controlled areas, demonstrating the difference between state authority and the governance of non-state groups.

To restore its credibility as a useful vector for financial support, the Yemeni government must seize this golden opportunity to improve its performance, fulfill its responsibilities towards its people, end internal divisions, and curb corruption and the negative practices that have plagued it since the start of the conflict. Doing so will solidify its position as an indispensable principal actor in Yemen's conflict and its resolution.

These efforts must also contend with the UAE's withdrawal from Yemen, which has left significant gaps in the security, military, and service-provision sectors across vast areas, including in counterterrorism. Ensuring that UAE-sponsored military forces are integrated and their salaries paid, alongside maintaining the operation of services previously funded by the UAE, such as hospitals in Socotra, Shabwa, and Al-Makha, is crucial to the country's stability.

Yemenis are ultimately all too familiar with the risks of political transition, as evidenced by the tumultuous experiences of 1990–1993 and 2012–2014. Periods of transition come with both the potential of a better future and the risk of descending into greater turmoil. Yemen stands at such a crossroads today. If the Yemeni actors leading this transition fail to demonstrate the competence and accountability required, the country's narrow escape from the conflict that loomed just a month ago will be short-lived. Ultimately, national survival depends on the willingness of all Yemeni forces to engage at this pivotal moment and commit to the resurrection of inclusive state institutions capable of addressing the longstanding grievances of their constituents.



STC loyalists rally at the Khormaksar Parade Grounds in Aden in support of an independent southern state on December 21, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo

Politics and Diplomacy

Casey Coombs

Political Developments in Hadramawt and Southern Yemen

Political tensions in Hadramawt intensified over the course of the fall, as the rivalry between the Southern Transitional Council (STC), backed by the UAE, and the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance (HTA), led by Amr bin Habrish, escalated into crisis. At the end of November, public statements by STC figures **framed** the council as the only legitimate representative of southern political aspirations and rejected the authority of rival Hadrami political formations. STC rhetoric increasingly emphasized southern self-determination and portrayed other local autonomy initiatives, such as those led by Bin Habrish, as illegitimate. The governorate was already on edge. In late July, longstanding **grievances** over poor governance, including chronic power outages, culminated in the storming of a local authority building and the Munawwira electricity plant in Mukalla. Though neither the STC nor Bin Habrish appeared to be behind the protests, both camps tried to capitalize on the unrest. The HTA **voiced** support for the protests and criticized government corruption, while the STC **blamed** local and national authorities for deteriorating services.

Bin Habrish responded to the STC's late November escalation by mobilizing tribal leaders, calling for unity among Hadrami constituencies and appealing to regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, to intervene. Bin Habrish was able to tap into long-standing grievances over governance, control of natural resources, and the delay in appointing a new governor for Hadramawt.

The dispute over the governorship became a focal point of political contention. Although the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) agreed in principle to appoint Deputy Prime Minister Salem al-Khanbashi to replace embattled governor Mabkhout bin Madi, regional disagreements—particularly between Saudi Arabia and the UAE—delayed confirmation. This paralysis reinforced perceptions of institutional weakness within the internationally recognized government and highlighted the degree to which external actors shape Yemeni political outcomes.

As the crisis unfolded, the STC portrayed its actions as part of a broader political project to consolidate its control of the south ahead of symbolic milestones, including the anniversary of Britain's withdrawal from South Yemen on November 30, 1967.

The PLC struggled to assert its authority. Al-Alimi called for restraint, but this was widely seen as reactive and ineffective. The government's inability to prevent unilateral action by one of its own members (STC chief and PLC member Aiderous al-Zubaidi) underscored deep fractures within the executive power-sharing arrangement established in Riyadh in April 2022.

In early December, STC forces advanced into the eastern governorates of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra, triggering both a domestic political crisis and a regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE (see *Military Section*). Riyadh publicly reaffirmed its commitment to Yemeni unity and expressed concern that the STC's unilateral actions undermined both the peace process and Saudi security interests. Abu Dhabi, while denying direct involvement, continued to back the STC's southern project.

International actors, including the UN Security Council, the United States, European states, China, and regional powers such as Egypt and Turkey, repeatedly emphasized their support for Yemen's unity and sovereignty and a negotiated political solution. UN officials warned that unilateral moves risked derailing any prospects for peace and further weakening already fragile state institutions.

Within Yemen, the STC leveraged its momentum to strengthen its political position. Its leadership held executive meetings, courted ministers and governors, and advanced new institutional initiatives, including economic reforms and proposals for independent southern religious and administrative bodies. These steps, which occurred against the backdrop of pro-secession demonstrations in Aden, were widely interpreted as efforts to normalize de facto southern governance and marginalize the remaining state institutions.

Opposition forces, including the Islah party and advocates of Hadrami autonomy, viewed the developments as a significant threat. Although Bin Habrish briefly disappeared from the scene when STC forces overran the governorate, his calls for Hadrami self-rule and local control over resources continued to resonate.

By late December, the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over Yemen had become overt, with Riyadh taking decisive military action against Emirati influence and reaffirming its red lines in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. These moves, including backing the Nation's Shield forces to retake Hadramawt and Al-Mahra and launching airstrikes against STC and UAE positions and equipment, marked a turning point in Gulf relations and reshaped the political landscape of southern Yemen.

On December 30, Bin Habrish reportedly **met** with PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi and newly-appointed Hadramawt Governor Al-Khanbashi in Riyadh, where the tribal leader was taking refuge following his forces' temporary defeat. The visit was widely viewed as part of political efforts to rally Saudi-backed Hadrami figures and push back against the STC's expanding influence in eastern Yemen.

The following day, in response to the Saudi airstrikes and Al-Alimi's **cancellation** of a defense agreement with Abu Dhabi, the UAE began a formal withdrawal from Yemen, ending a decade-long military presence. Abu Dhabi had already reduced its footprint in 2019 following a strategic reassessment after the Stockholm Agreement, while maintaining limited involvement in southern governorates and on islands such as Socotra. Yemeni government officials stated that Emirati personnel were departing the country, marking a significant political shift in regional involvement in Yemen.

On January 2, Governor Al-Khanbashi **announced** the start of a formal handover of STC positions to the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces, presenting the move as a restoration of state authority as they advanced and took control of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. On the same day, at Al-Alimi's request, Saudi Arabia **announced** it would host a comprehensive South-South Dialogue in Riyadh to address southern grievances and political aspirations. The initiative received broad regional and international support, including conditional approval from the STC. At the same time, Bin Habrish returned to Hadramawt and addressed his supporters, reaffirming his role in the governorate's future alongside Saudi-backed structures.

On January 4, UAE-backed PLC members Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara'a) and Tareq Saleh traveled to Riyadh for **meetings with** Saudi officials, in response to a summons by the Kingdom, as it sought to cement control of the situation in southern Yemen. In contrast, the two other Emirati-backed members of the PLC, STC leader Al-Zubaidi and former Hadramawt Governor Faraj al-Bahsani, declined the Saudi invitation, deepening political tensions.

Saudi Arabia **claimed** that Al-Zubaidi had aborted plans to travel to Riyadh and subsequently went into hiding, intensifying speculation about his political future. On January 7, the PLC formally expelled Al-Zubaidi from the council and **charged** him with high treason, accusing him of undermining the southern cause and state authority. Aden's pro-STC Governor Ahmed Lamlas, who reportedly fled with Al-Zubaidi, was **replaced** by Saudi-aligned Abdelrahman Sheikh. On the same day, the STC announced the **closure** of its offices in Yemen and abroad.

The whirlwind changes that emerged from the STC's failed takeover of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra have greatly bolstered Saudi Arabia's position vis-à-vis the UAE in Yemen's south. With the dissolution of the STC, the dominant force in southern politics and a staunch proponent of an independent southern state, the politics of southern governorates will likely align more closely with Saudi interests.

Houthis Escalate Pressure on UN and International Organizations

The Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) continues to kidnap, detain, and issue death sentences for UN staff, aid workers, and members of civil society working in northern Yemen, bringing the total number of detainees to more than 70 since the crackdown began in June 2024. On October 7, UN officials **announced** that the Houthis had detained at least nine UN staffers, and on October 20, Houthi authorities **confined** 15 international and five Yemeni UN staff inside a UN compound in Sana'a following an incursion by Houthi security forces. Communication equipment, including computers, phones, and servers, was confiscated. Twelve staff members were **released** on October 22. The compound houses offices belonging to the WFP, UNICEF, and OCHA. Prior to the incident, Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi accused WFP and UNICEF staff of espionage in a public speech. The UN had already **suspended** aid operations in Sa'ada governorate, and UN Resident Coordinator Julien Harneis recently **relocated** his office from Sana'a to Aden after more than a year of **failed** outreach to Houthi authorities over the kidnappings and other abuses of humanitarian actors.

Houthi rhetoric toward the UN has intensified following Israeli strikes that killed senior Houthi officials, including Prime Minister Ahmed al-Rahawi in August and military chief Mohammed Abdelkarim al-Ghamari, whose death was **confirmed** on October 16. Abdelmalek al-Houthi delivered a **eulogy** on October 21. Houthi media has increasingly accused UN and humanitarian staff of espionage, raising concerns about further action against international organizations.

Between October 25 and 27, Houthi forces **raided** several more UN offices in Sana'a, including those of the UN Special Envoy, FAO, UNOPS, and the UNHCR headquarters. Two female WFP employees were reportedly **detained**, equipment was seized, and additional staff were summoned for questioning.

Houthi authorities **announced** their decision to prosecute WFP employees on espionage charges, accusing them of involvement in the Israeli airstrike that killed Prime Minister Al-Rahawi and other cabinet members. Houthi officials claimed to have evidence and said the case would be referred to public prosecutors.

From early November, Houthi forces expanded their **raids** to other international organizations, including Doctors Without Borders (MSF), Islamic Relief, Action Against Hunger, Human Appeal, ACTED, Oxfam, the International Medical Corps (IMC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Offices were searched, staff were detained or interrogated, and equipment and servers were confiscated. The Houthis also announced trials against alleged espionage cells, claiming links to US, Israeli, and Saudi intelligence agencies and accusing humanitarian organizations of serving as cover.

On November 5, the Houthi-affiliated Foreign Ministry **called on** the UN to pressure its agencies to hand over staff accused of involvement in Israeli strikes. On November 8 and 11, Houthi authorities **announced** arrests and **publicized purported** confessions from alleged spy networks.

On November 9, the Sana'a Specialized Criminal Court **started** trials against alleged espionage networks. Houthi officials described the proceedings as a warning to foreign intelligence cooperation. According to local media reports, one of the defendants in the case **shouted** during the trial, "We are not informants! Pay our salaries, thieves!" On November 22, the court **sentenced** 17 individuals to death on espionage charges, with additional prison sentences handed down to others. In early December, the court started a **trial** of 13 additional defendants accused of spying. The trials and verdicts drew condemnation from Yemeni government officials and Western governments, who described them as illegitimate and politically motivated.

Despite repeated **condemnations** from UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the detentions have continued as part of a broader campaign against UN staff, aid workers, and members of civil society. International concern continues to grow over the detentions and the escalation of espionage accusations and show trials.

Saudi Arabia Signals Interest in Reviving the Yemeni Roadmap and Direct Talks with the Houthis

In the months before the clashes in Hadramawt, Gulf officials indicated in private discussions that Saudi Arabia was interested in reviving the Yemeni political roadmap following a lull in the Gaza conflict after a Trump-brokered ceasefire. Saudi-Houthi talks in 2022 and 2023 were intended to normalize relations between Riyadh and the Houthis before transitioning to broader intra-Yemeni negotiations. A US diplomatic official said Washington was unaware of any concrete Saudi plans and described a return to talks as unlikely.

Houthi priorities in any renewed discussions include the reopening of airports and ports, a demand that has been closely linked to disputes over oil and gas exports from government-held areas.

In late October, well-informed sources privately confirmed that direct negotiations took place in Muscat between Saudi and Houthi representatives. Participants were said to include **Yahya al-Razami** on the Houthi side and Saudi general Mohammed al-Qahtani, who oversees Saudi-Yemeni affairs. Discussions focused on maintaining de-escalation, salary payments in Houthi-controlled areas, the reopening of ports and airports, and humanitarian issues, according to the sources.

UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg also **met** Houthi officials in Muscat on October 27 to discuss the roadmap and the status of detained UN staff. On October 29, chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam **stated** that talks had begun with Grundberg regarding the implementation of the Saudi-Houthi roadmap. Grundberg was accompanied by his former deputy, Muin Shreim, who was tasked with negotiating the release of detained UN employees.

On December 23, the UN **announced** a preliminary agreement between the Houthis and the government to exchange more than 2,900 abductees and prisoners. Houthi media **reported** that the deal stipulates that the Houthis release 1,200 detainees (including seven Saudi nationals and 23 Sudanese nationals) in exchange for 1,700 prisoners held by the government camp. The tentative agreement also includes the release of Islah-affiliated politician **Mohammed Qahtan**, whose case has been a key demand in previous rounds of negotiations. It is unclear whether Qahtan is still alive. The prisoner exchange announcement came just days after the Houthis **detained** an additional 10 UN staff members. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is tasked with implementing the prisoner swap.

Other Developments

October 7: The Indian Embassy **began** operations at its new office in Aden, offering visa services for Yemenis traveling to India, mainly for medical treatment. Then-Foreign Minister Shayea al-Zindani, who was appointed prime minister on January 15, **welcomed** the move, describing it as a sign of growing international confidence in Aden and a step toward the return of diplomatic missions.

October 7: Houthi forces **raided** the Sana'a residence of General People's Congress (GPC) member and MP Ahmed Saghir al-Mazlam, expelling residents and looting the property. Local media later **reported** that several GPC leaders in Sana'a, including branch secretary-general Ghazi al-Ahwal, faced accusations of receiving foreign funding after their August detention.

October 22: Local media **reported** that Houthi forces, including the all-female Zainabiyat unit, **targeted** the homes of Salafis in the Sa'wan neighborhood of Sana'a. Several of those detained were reportedly religious students.

October 25: Houthi authorities **released** Intisar al-Hammadi, a model and artist detained in early 2021 and sentenced to five years in prison on charges of "violating public morals." Media outlets and rights groups reported extensively on the abuse she suffered during her detention.

November 18: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman **visited** Washington for a state meeting with US President Donald Trump. During the visit, the US designated Saudi Arabia a "major non-NATO ally" and held discussions on defense cooperation, energy, and artificial intelligence. President Trump announced an agreement to sell **F-35 fighter jets** to Saudi Arabia. The visit concluded with an investment summit at which Riyadh pledged nearly US\$1 trillion in US investments.

November 20: PLC chief Rashad al-Alimi **received** the credentials of Russia's new ambassador to Yemen, Yevgeny Kudrov.

November 28: Bilqis TV, an Islah-affiliated channel broadcasting from Turkey and led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman, announced its closure. The channel **cited** "overwhelming external circumstances" without providing further details.

November 30: The Sana'a branch of the General People's Congress **appointed** Yahya Ali al-Ra'i as acting secretary-general, as current secretary-general Ghazi al-Ahwal remains in Houthi detention following his August arrest. Al-Ra'i is deputy chairman of the party and speaker of the Houthi-controlled parliament. Houthi forces reportedly **surrounded** the GPC meeting as a show of force.

December 7: UNICEF **announced** that it had officially relocated its headquarters from Sana'a to Aden.

January 4: Senior Houthi officials Jalal al-Ruwaishan and Mohammed Nasser al-Atafi **appeared** publicly at a cabinet meeting in Sana'a, marking their first appearance since reports last year that they had been targeted by Israeli airstrikes.

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A convoy of STC-affiliated forces headed to Hadramawt on December 15, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo

Military and Security

William Clough and Ned Whalley

Saudi Arabia Counterattacks After STC Offensive

The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC)'s lightning push into Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in early December marked one of the most abrupt and consequential shifts in Yemen's security landscape in recent decades. Within weeks, STC-affiliated forces surged into the eastern governorates, were rapidly pushed back, and were ultimately forced to retreat to Aden and then cede control of the interim capital. The episode culminated in the **end** of more than a decade of Emirati troop presence in Yemen, the **expulsion** of STC leader Aiderous al-Zubiaidi from the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and sweeping changes to the southern security architecture.

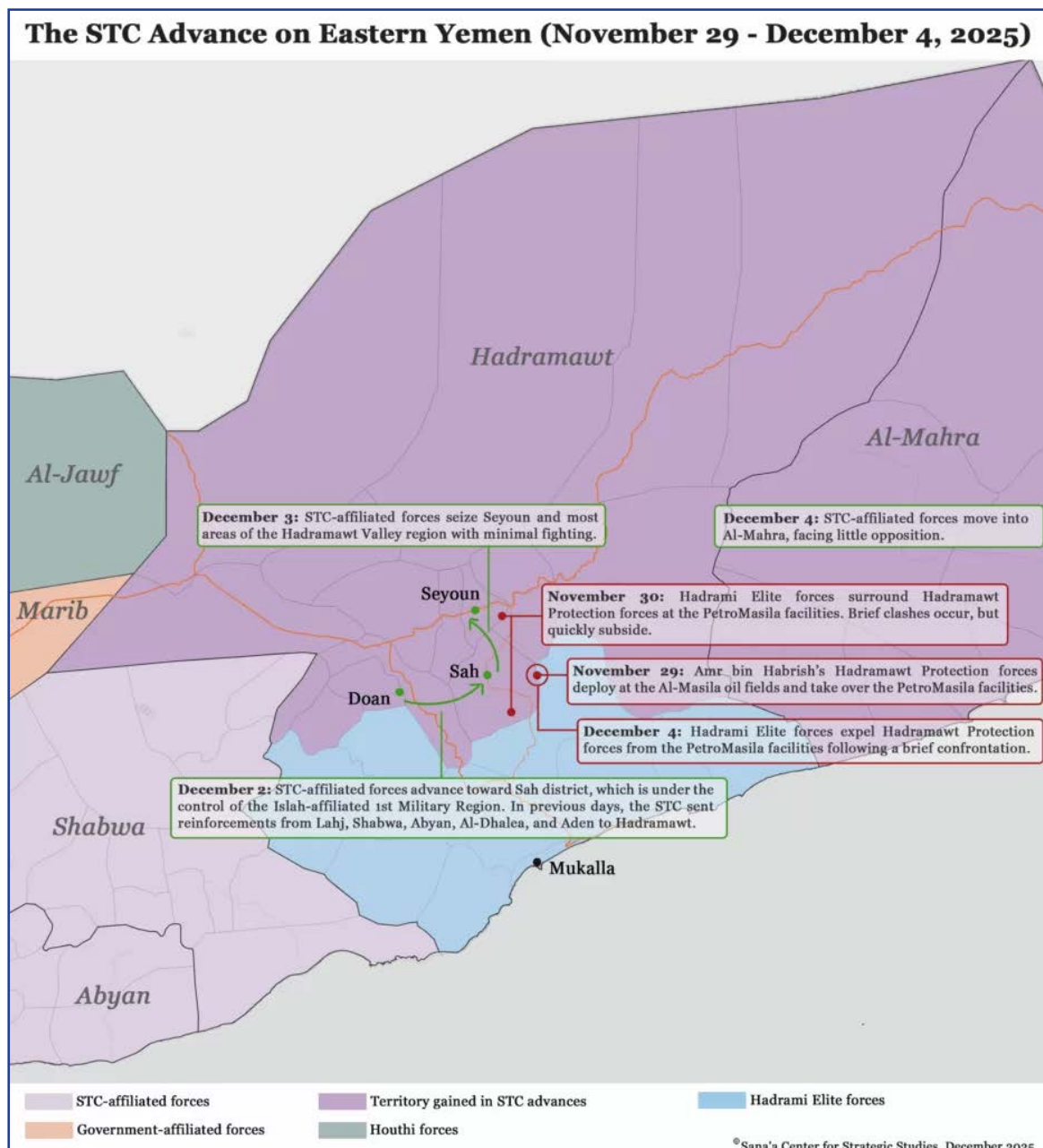
For years, the secessionist STC had been laying the groundwork for a potential expansion eastward, and had steadily increased its military presence in Hadramawt through the Hadrami Elite and 2nd Military Region forces based in Mukalla.¹⁴ Since 2022, Saudi Arabia has worked to counter the STC's growing presence in Hadramawt by building up the Nation's Shield forces, a unit of predominantly Salafi-leaning soldiers trained and funded by the Kingdom and placed under the direct command of Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi. The Nation's Shield, along with Yemen Emergency forces based along the northern border in Sa'ada and Al-Jawf, 1st Military Region soldiers based in Seyoun, and national army forces in Marib, make up the bulk of the pro-Saudi military network in Yemen. Earlier this year, Saudi Arabia also began cultivating ties with Hadrami tribal leader Amr bin Habrish, who had established his own fighting group, the Hadramawt Protection forces, outside government control.

Hadramawt occupies a distinct place in Riyadh's eyes and strategic mindset, owing both to the deep tribal and social ties shared between Hadramis and Saudis and the long border with Saudi territory. To this end, Riyadh has repeatedly made clear that Hadramawt is a matter of national security, not simply of ordinary interest. Despite these warnings, the STC likely believed it was facing a closing window of opportunity in Hadramawt. Summer protests over chronic electricity shortages had eroded public confidence in the STC's leadership in the governorate, while simultaneously fueling the meteoric rise of tribal leader Amr bin Habrish, whose growing influence caught the eye of Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman, the penholder of the Yemen file in Riyadh. For months, STC leaders and affiliated media hurled increasingly pointed warnings at Bin Habrish, whose calls for an independent Hadrami project posed a direct challenge to the STC's goal of recreating a southern state encompassing all of the former South Yemen. Tensions steadily escalated throughout the autumn, as reports emerged of tribal military training camps forming in and around Bin Habrish's stronghold in Ghayl bin Yameen district.

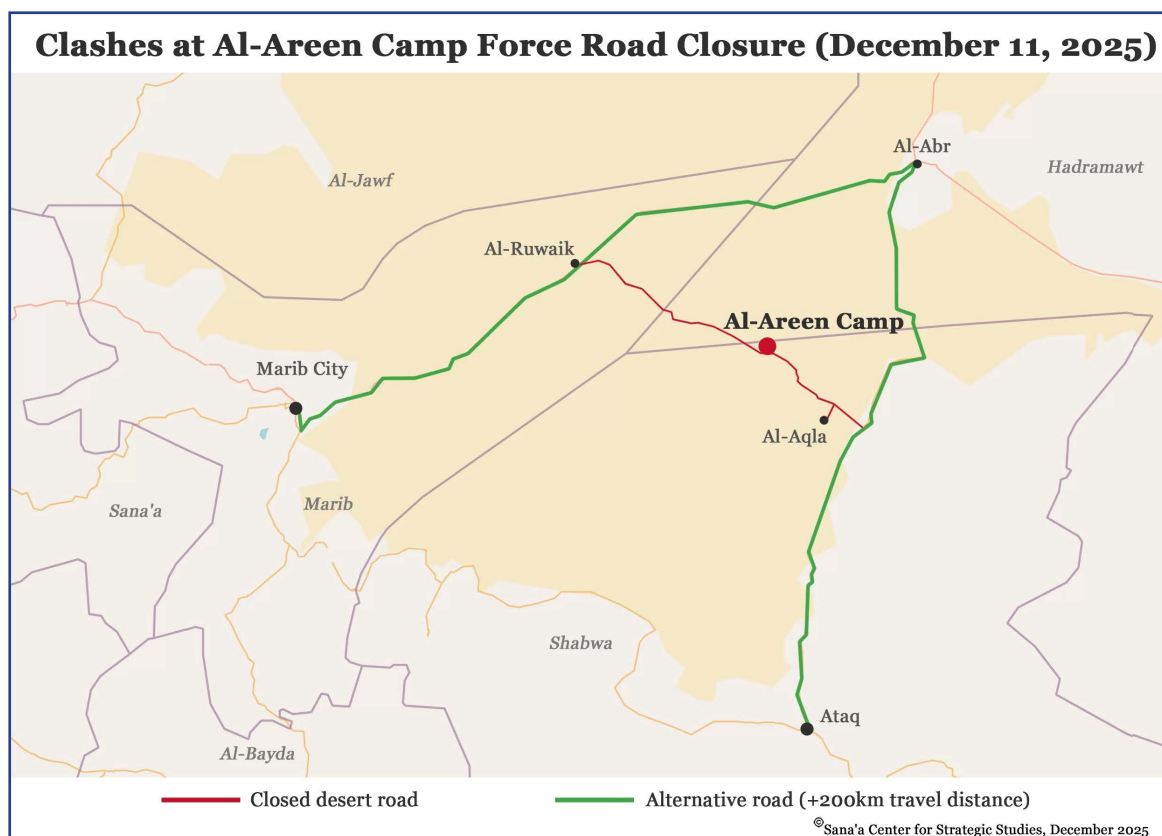
The tipping point came on November 23, when the head of the STC-affiliated Security Support forces, Saleh bin al-Sheikh Abu Bakr, known locally as Abu Ali al-Hadrami, began agitating against Bin Habrish, calling his forces "illegitimate" and vowing to sever their supply lines from the coast. Using explicitly secessionist language, he referred to STC-affiliated forces as the "Army of the Arabian South," while southern media parroted the narrative as a "final warning" to Bin Habrish. STC forces began mobilizing the following day, with units from Lahj, Aden, Abyan, and Shabwa heading toward Mukalla on the Hadrami coast, ostensibly in support of Abu Ali al-Hadrami and to "combat terrorism."

Limited clashes soon broke out between STC-affiliated forces and Bin Habrish's tribal fighters at the gates of the PetroMasila facilities, where the latter were holed up after preemptively occupying the oil fields days earlier. Although the fighting was brief and possibly staged to prevent major casualties, it marked the first armed clashes in Hadramawt since Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was expelled from Mukalla in 2016. To the northwest, STC forces advanced toward Seyoun, entering the city on December 2. While local sources say at least 30 people were killed in the fighting for Seyoun, resistance was limited: 1st Military Region forces handed over the city with only minimal fighting before making their orderly withdrawal toward Marib.

¹⁴ Yemen's anti-Houthi coalition is comprised of a patchwork of forces with various loyalties. The military regions are army operational commands that were reorganized under former president Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi in 2012. The 1st Military Region has been historically affiliated with the Islah party, while the 2nd Military Region has been backed by the UAE and allied with the STC.



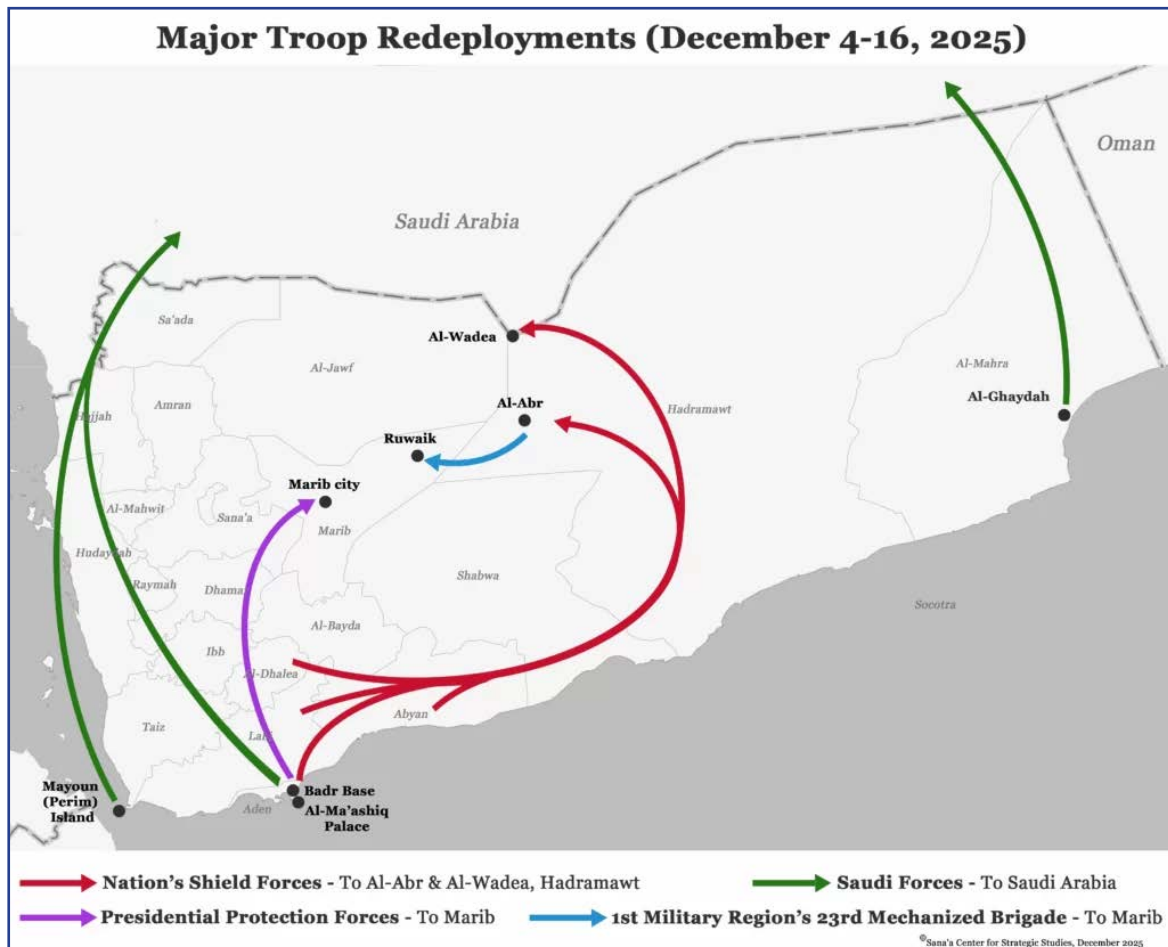
At the oil fields, emergency **mediation efforts** quickly collapsed, and renewed clashes **broke out** between the Hadrami Elite forces and tribal fighters. Bin Habrish, eventually overrun, fled to Saudi Arabia, where he called on his forces to disband and return to their homes. In Shabwa, a **simultaneous surprise attack** from UAE-backed forces dispelled any doubts that a coordinated maneuver was underway. Shabwa Defense forces raided the Al-Areen Camp in the desert region near the border with Marib, expelling Islah-affiliated Ataq Military Axis forces and effectively removing Islah's last foothold in Shabwa after the force's **expulsion** from Ataq in 2022. The subsequent **handover** of the Al-Aqla oil facilities in Shabwa to UAE-backed forces and the uncontested march of STC-affiliated forces into Al-Mahra painted a clear picture: the STC had taken the east.



It is possible that Saudi Arabia tacitly allowed the STC to push out the Islah-affiliated 1st Military Region in Hadramawt, perhaps with the understanding that they would subsequently be replaced by the Nation's Shield forces under the command of PLC chief Al-Alimi. The decision to **fold** twelve Nation's Shield brigades into the 1st Military Region command structure only days earlier also points to some sort of coordination – or at least **prior knowledge** – on Riyadh's behalf. In the following days, it became increasingly clear that the STC had committed a serious overreach by seizing and holding eastern Yemen. Riyadh immediately shifted into a defensive position, **withdrawing** its forces from key bases in Aden, Al-Mahra, and Mayoun (Perim) Island on the Red Sea, and **redeploying** Nation's Shield units toward the Hadramawt border areas of Al-Abr and Al-Wadea.

The military movements triggered a political crisis between Aden, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh. Saudi officials were quick to assert that, while a limited STC move on Seyoun may have been tolerated, the takeover of Hadramawt crossed a firm red line. Despite repeated Saudi **demands** for the STC to stand down, southern units consolidated their positions, while pro-STC protestors took to the streets to demand the declaration of a southern state (see *Politics section*). Riyadh consequently found itself with little room to maneuver and was compelled to act. Through PLC chief Al-Alimi and Nation's Shield commander Bashir al-Madrabi, Saudi Arabia pressed ahead with the repositioning of the forces, who announced their **complete** redeployment on December 19. The sudden return of Amr bin Habrish to Hadramawt from Saudi Arabia, timed to deliver a **forceful and rallying speech** at the Hadramawt Tribal Alliance (HTA)'s ten-year anniversary, signalled that Riyadh was gearing up for a more forceful response.

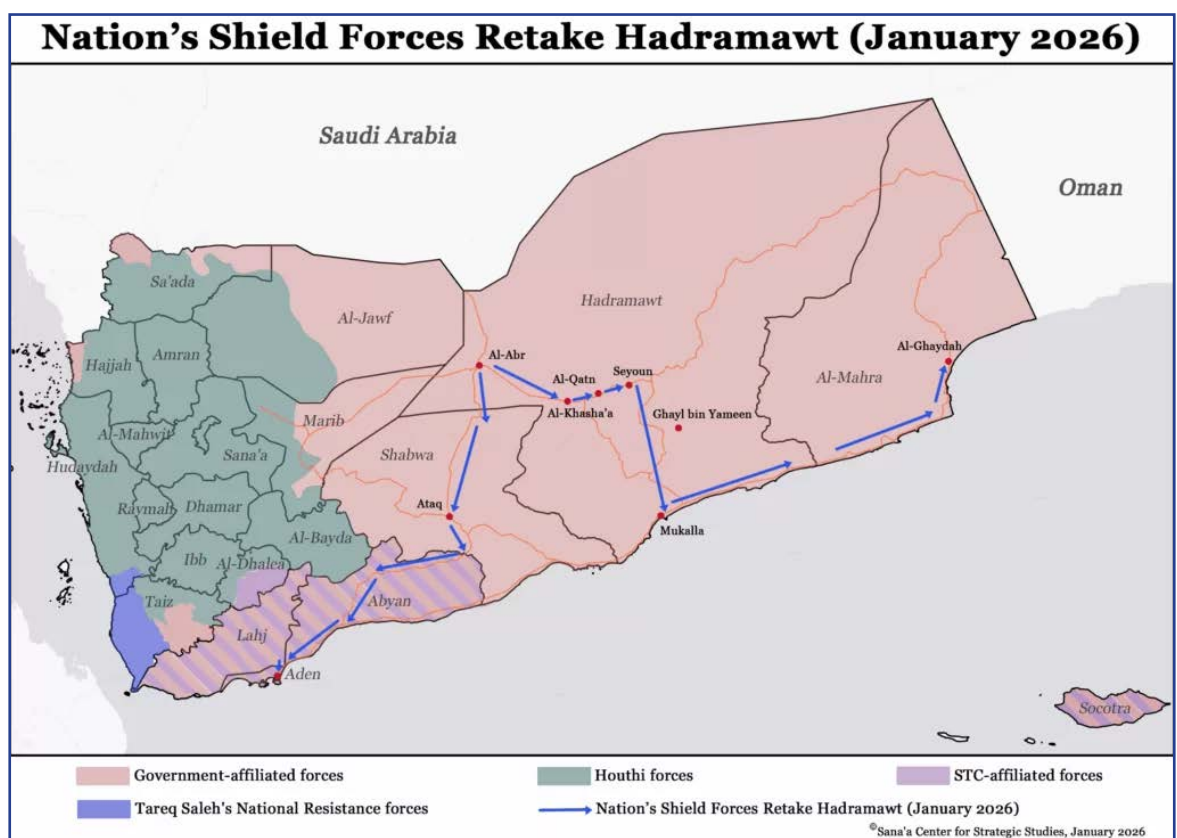
Events came to a head on December 25, when Security Support forces led by Abu Ali al-Hadrami **advanced** on positions held by HTA-affiliated tribal fighters in Ghayl bin Yameen district. In response, Saudi Arabia launched isolated **airstrikes** in the Hadramawt Valley, intended as a final warning to the STC-affiliated soldiers and their backers in Abu Dhabi. Rather than acquiesce, the UAE sent reinforcements: two ships sailed from Fujairah and docked at Mukalla, and **unloaded** military vehicles and weapons reportedly destined for the STC. Saudi Arabia responded in force, targeting the Emirati cargo with **airstrikes**. From Riyadh, Rashad al-Alimi terminated the Joint Defense Agreement with the UAE and formally requested the withdrawal of all Emirati forces from Yemen within 24 hours. Al-Alimi then directed that all Emirati positions be **handed over** to the Nation's Shield and ordered the withdrawal of STC forces to their original positions.



Once Riyadh decided to act, it became apparent that the balance of power on the ground was far different from what it first appeared. Hadramawt's topography provides little cover, and ground forces proved extremely vulnerable to airstrikes. Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces were joined by the Yemen Emergency forces, and with local tribesmen and air support, found quick success. Using Al-Abr as a staging point, Saudi-backed forces branched out, taking back **Al-Khasha'a**, **Seyoun**, and **Al-Qatn**, before advancing toward Mukalla. STC-affiliated forces withdrew from Al-Mahra with little fighting. Nation's Shield forces then moved westward toward Shabwa and Abyan, eventually securing the interim capital and pulling out heavy weaponry there. Saudi airstrikes extended even to Al-Zubaidi's home governorate of Al-Dhalea following the STC leader's refusal to attend a summons to Riyadh.

Following reports of Al-Zubaidi's **escape** to the UAE via Somaliland, the STC **withdrew** forces and heavy weaponry from Aden's Al-Ma'ashiq Palace, and Giants Brigade soldiers under the command of PLC member Abdelrahman al-Muharammi (Abu Zara'a), assumed control of the compound. While Abu Zara'a was directly backed by the UAE and was promoted to overall security director of the STC last year, he appears to have **pledged fealty** to Riyadh and has been placed in charge of Aden's security. His political reversal and those of other UAE-backed actors demonstrate the fluidity of the alliances that characterize Yemen's security sector.

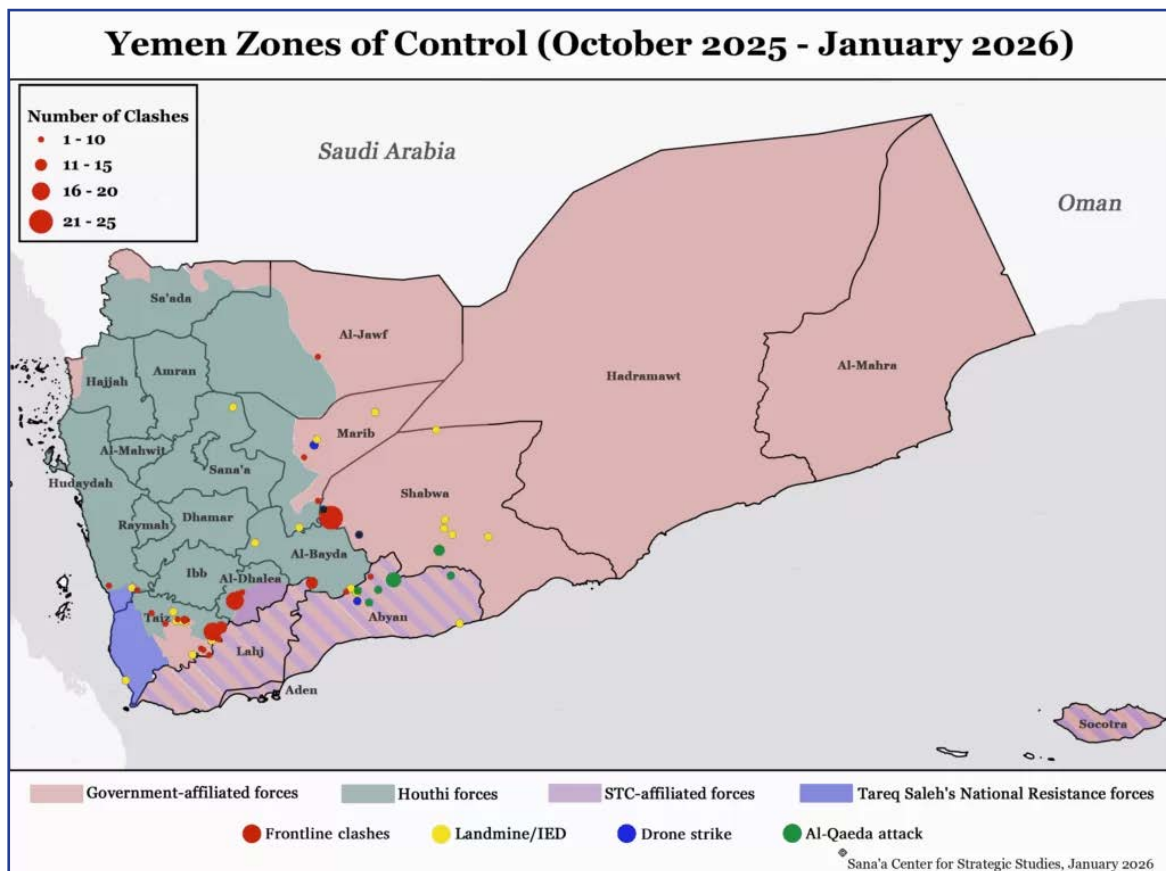
While fighting on the ground has subsided, large changes remain in store for security in the south. Beyond the decision to **dissolve** the government (see *Politics*), a number of pro-STC military commanders in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra have been **sacked** and referred for investigation. This includes the commander of the 2nd Military Region, Talib Saeed Barjash, who was replaced by Mohammed Omar al-Yamani. The government also **announced** a new Supreme Military Council in an effort to bring all forces under a single umbrella.



But the main question for Saudi Arabia will be what to do with the remaining forces that were on the UAE payroll. While the Kingdom had picked up the bill for some southern security forces following the UAE's redeployment from Aden in 2019, Abu Dhabi was reportedly still responsible for regular payments to the Giants Brigades, Shabwa Defense forces, and Hadrami Elite forces – not to mention various security units in and around Aden whose salaries the STC had covered on an irregular basis. Even with the Kingdom's vast wealth, the addition of these new salaries will entail a significant financial outlay and pose a logistical challenge. It also remains unclear how Saudi Arabia plans to ensure the loyalty of former STC fighters, particularly those from Al-Dhalea who share tribal or regional ties with the Al-Zubaidi and are unlikely to accept his defeat.

A related security concern accompanies the withdrawal of Emirati counterterrorism forces, which could create a significant security vacuum. There is serious worry that Al-Qaeda may try to **take advantage** of this period of instability. Beyond the interim capital, fears of insecurity have been particularly high in Hadramawt, where the snap withdrawal of the STC has **led to** looting, banditry, and reported weapons stockpiling. While Nation's Shield forces have conducted a number of **security campaigns** to prevent Bin Habrishi's fighters and other tribesmen from consolidating too many arms, the Saudis will need to be careful to balance the competing interests in Hadramawt. Elsewhere in the south, protests, prison riots, and clashes over military hardware portend an arduous road ahead for Saudi Arabia, which must secure the interim capital before it sends back Yemen's new government from its satellite campus in Riyadh.

As the dust settles in Aden and Hadramawt, one thing remains clear: the events of the past months have reiterated the extent of Yemenis' agency in their own political process. By dissolving the STC and its affiliated forces, leaders in Riyadh have demonstrated their intent to take full control of Yemen's security sector. While this may unify strategic decision-making in the immediate future, particularly regarding any possible military action against the Houthi group (Ansar Allah), it is unlikely to be tenable in the long run. Tensions over security in Aden have demonstrated that many of the longstanding grievances that have underpinned decades of conflict still exist, and the fact that soldiers' pay stubs are signed by a new hegemon does little to address that. But this challenge also presents Riyadh with an opportunity: to tackle security risks on the ground in a lasting and sustainable manner, Saudi Arabia must now genuinely empower Yemeni actors, not sideline them.



Shippers Return to Red Sea, Houthis Put Somaliland in Crosshairs

The Houthis have honored their **promises** to halt attacks on Red Sea shipping, allowing the safe passage of vessels since the announcement of a US-brokered ceasefire in Gaza in early October. The group even **released** the crew of the Eternity C, who had been held captive since their ship was sunk in mid-July. The crew was transported via plane from Sana'a to Oman **along with** a delegation of senior Houthi figures for UN-backed prisoner exchange negotiations (see *Politics*). For now, the Red Sea is calm. Shipping giant Maersk announced a **trial return** to the Red Sea route. Along with other global shippers, it had diverted its maritime traffic around the Cape of Good Hope since early 2024. The EU's Operation Aspides announced in late November that it had **secured the passage** of more than 1,320 commercial vessels since it began operations in the Red Sea in February 2024.

But the risk of a return to Red Sea violence remains a real possibility. Houthi activity in recent months indicates that the group is continuing to mobilize for possible future attacks and building up the arsenal to do so. Reports received by the Sana'a Center indicate that Houthi naval forces conducted amphibious drills along Hudaydah's Red Sea Coast, including simulated landing operations, naval battles, and site captures. The nature of the simulations could indicate Houthi preparations for coastal advances, possibly on one of the Joint Forces-controlled islands. The withdrawal and redeployment of Saudi and Emirati troops on Red Sea islands in recent weeks has likely strengthened these considerations.

Renewed Houthi activity on the Red Sea front could also be aimed toward **Somaliland**. Israel's recognition of the breakaway region, presumably to extend its economic and operational reach in the southern Red Sea, has **angered leaders** across the Arab world and drawn condemnations from the Houthi leadership. Abdelmalek al-Houthi warned that the group would "**not hesitate**" to target any Israeli base built there.

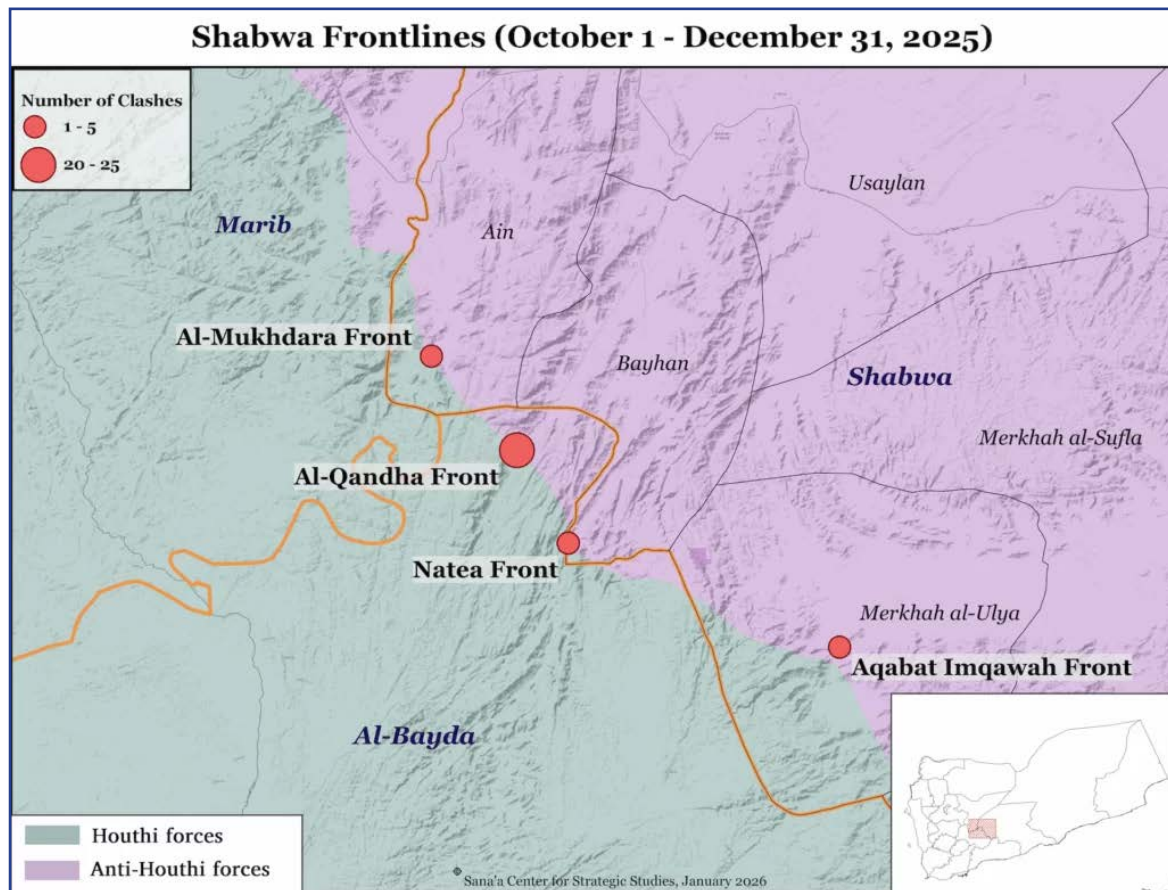
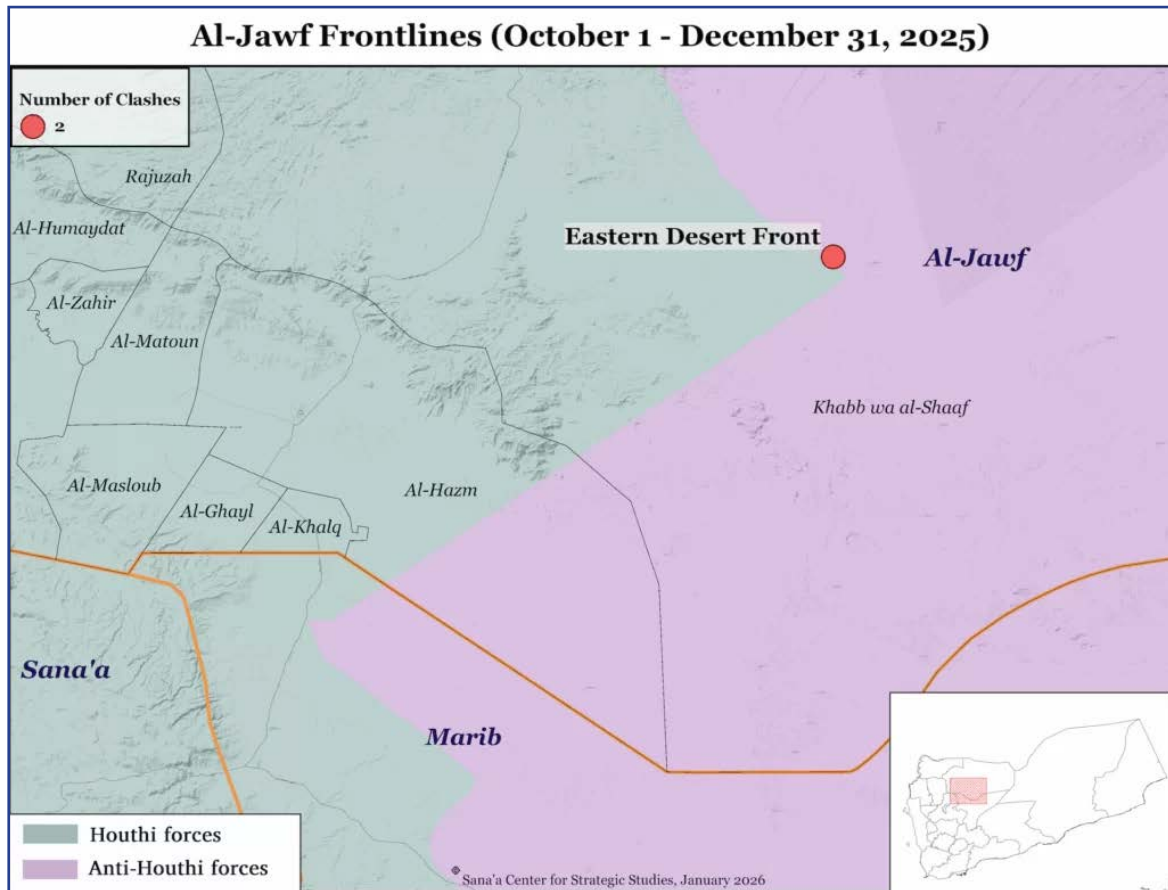
The continued import of illicit arms through both official and clandestine ports in Hudaydah indicates that the group probably has the firepower to back up these claims. Since the beginning of October, the Sana'a Center has recorded 11 incidents of illicit arms smuggling along Hudaydah's coast, while activity has resumed at the ports of Hudaydah and Al-Salif, following their destruction by Israeli airstrikes. Along with arms, the Houthis continue to violate international sanctions, regularly importing **smuggled grain, printers, oil**, and other goods.

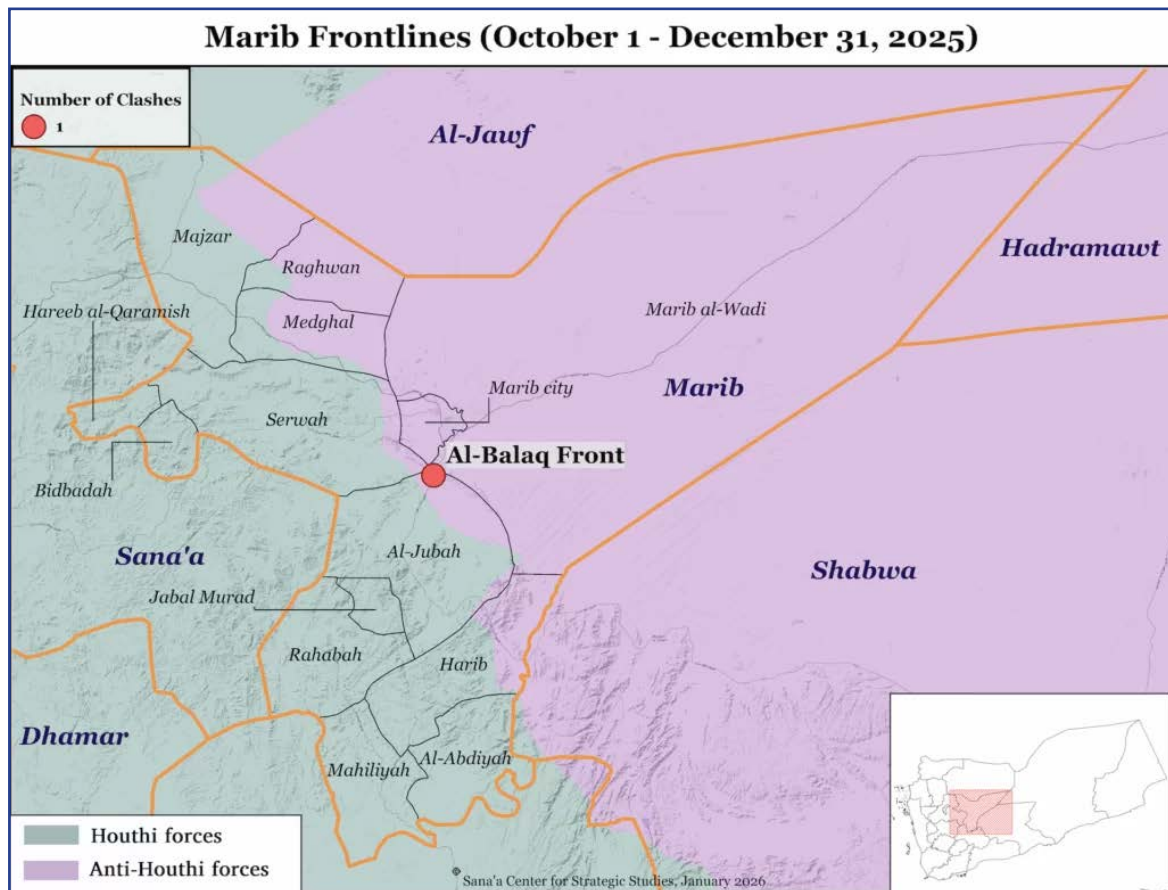
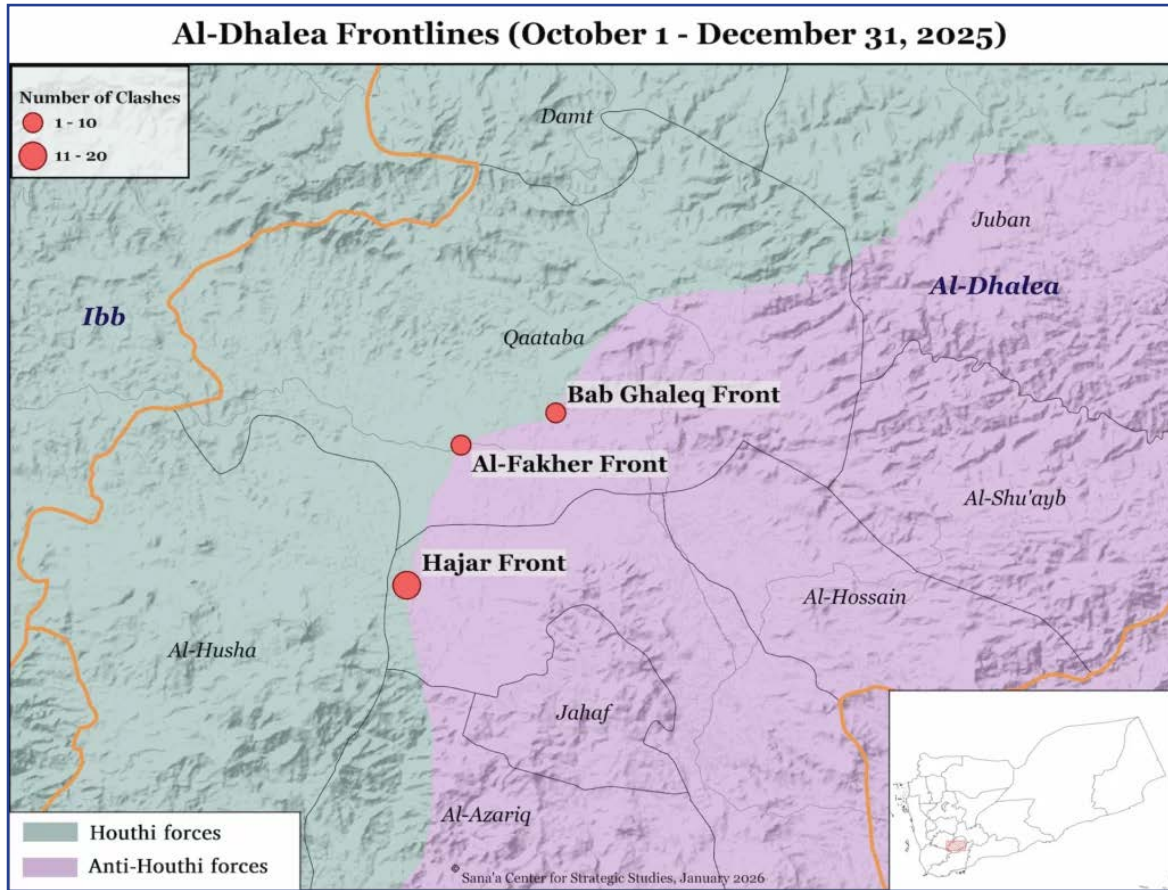
Frontline Stability Threatened by Coalition Reshuffle

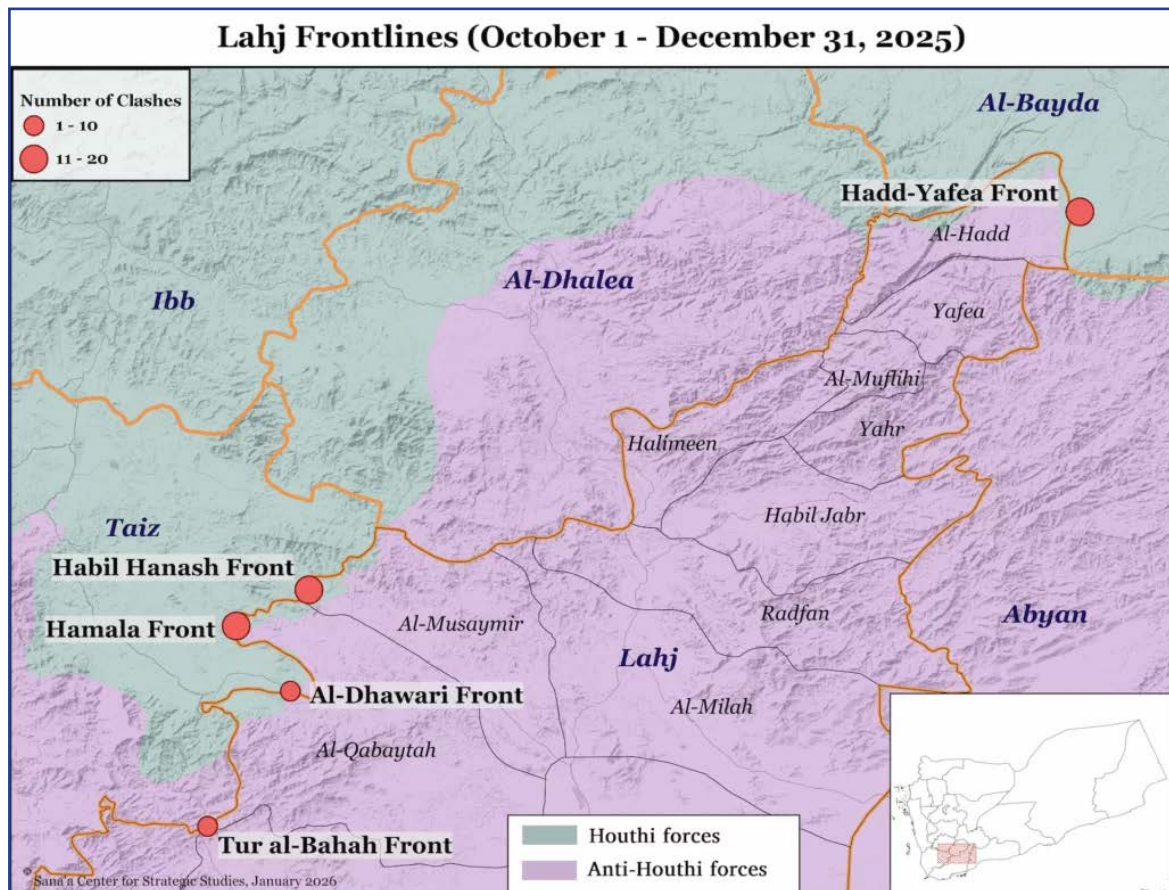
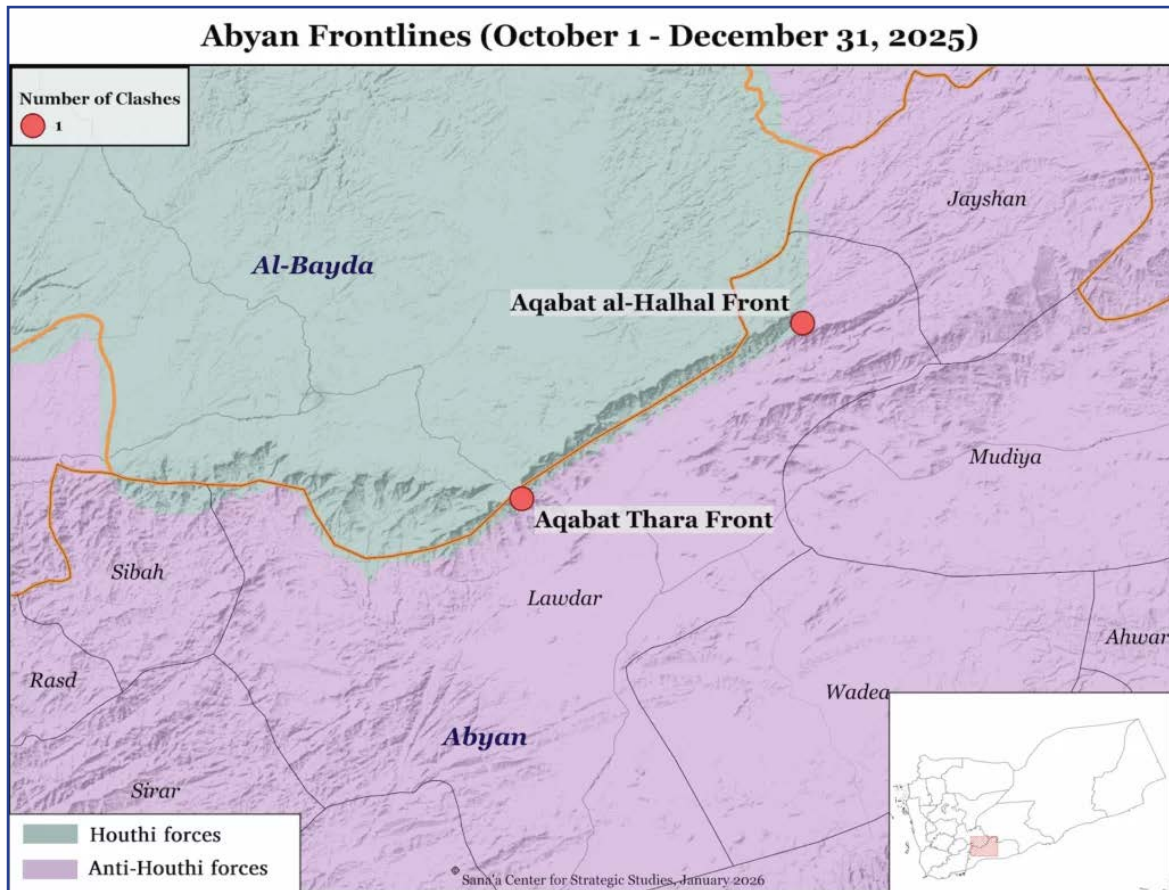
Infighting among the anti-Houthi coalition now threatens the fragile stability of Yemen's frontlines. Many of the most active frontlines, including those in Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Abyan, and Shabwa, were manned, in part, by STC-affiliated or UAE-backed units. Their transfer to Saudi administration, and the redeployment of Giants Brigade forces from frontlines in Hudaydah to Aden, could create weaknesses in the anti-Houthi defenses.

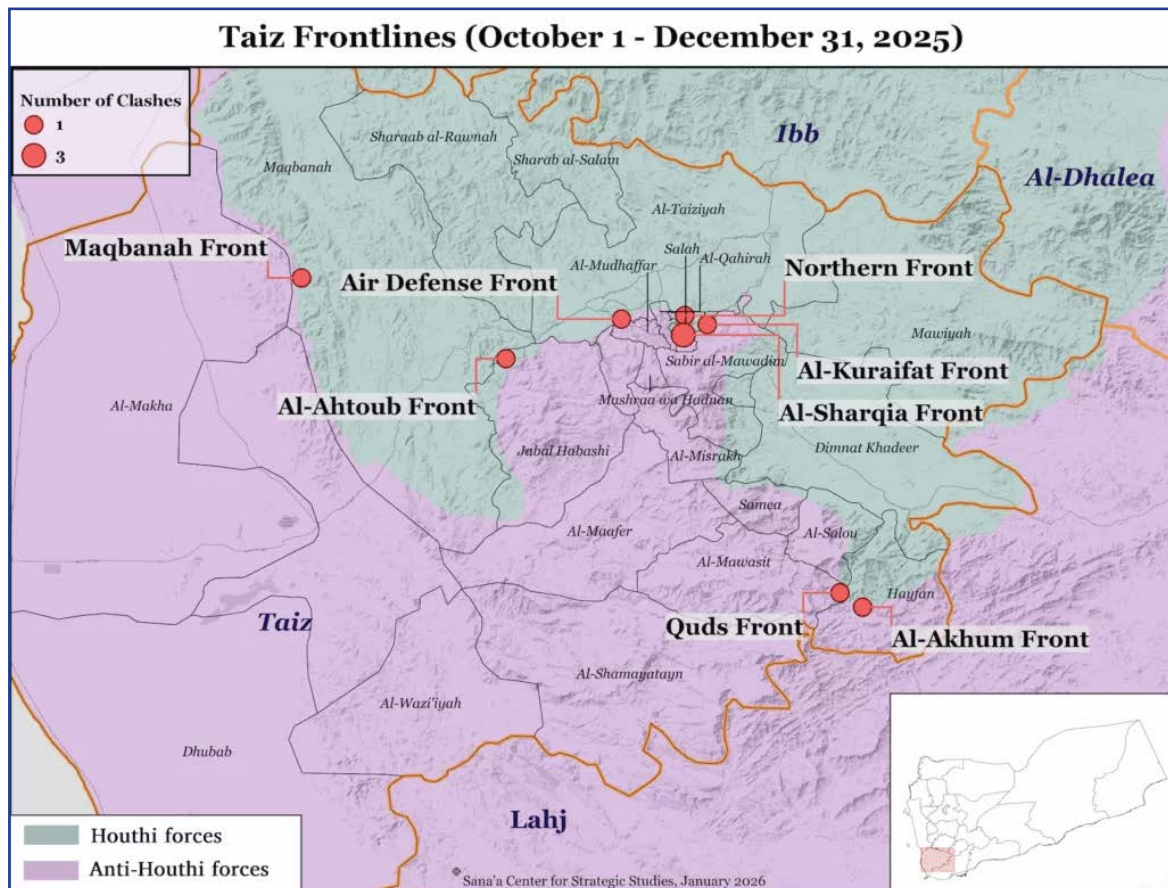
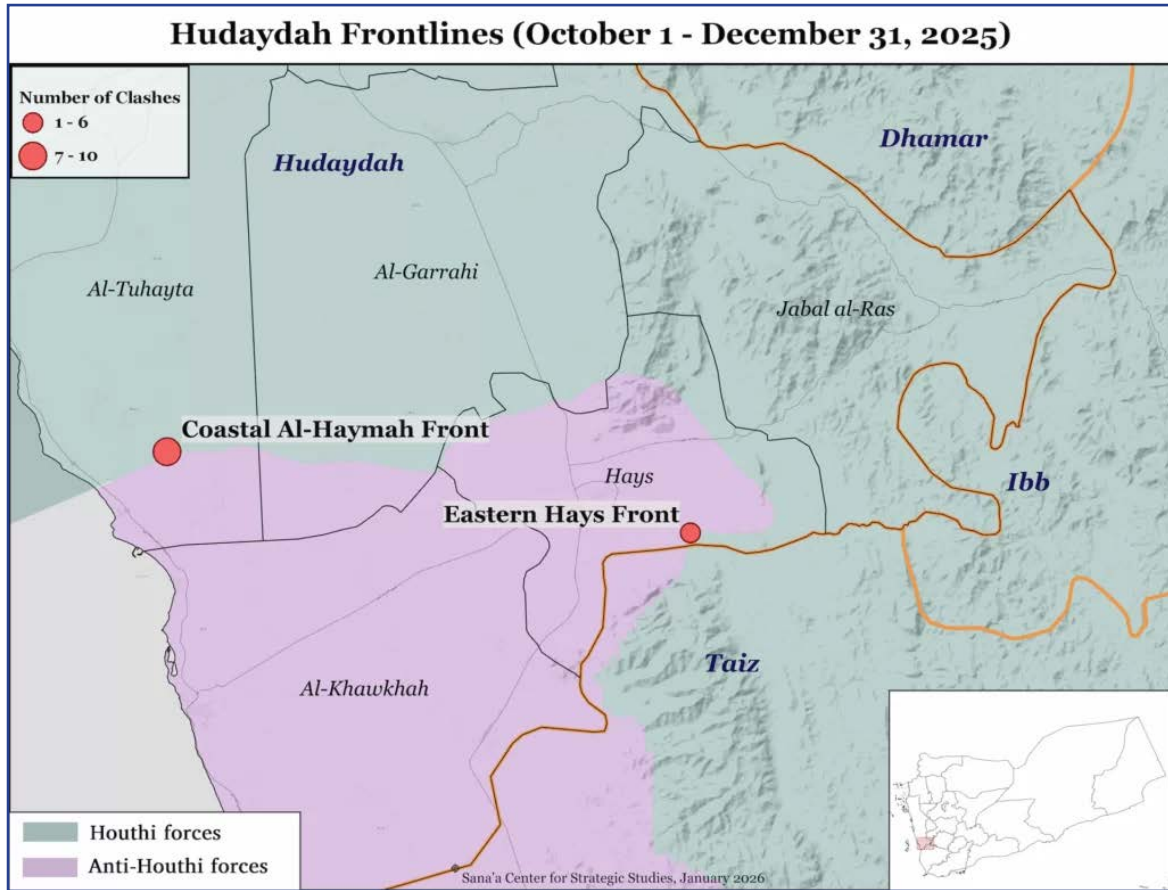
Despite these changes, the Houthis have made no major advances and appear to be watching to see what happens. Their continued mobilization of tribesmen, particularly in Marib and Hudaydah, suggests they're not sitting idle. The group is still reeling from losses to both its leadership and arsenal following US and Israeli air campaigns last year, which have caused internal discord and paranoia. Leadership in Sana'a is likely eyeing the possibility of a political *détente* with Riyadh, and any offensive now could jeopardize a future deal.

In other areas, frontlines remained fragile but stable throughout the autumn, with fighting taking place in Taiz, Lahj, Al-Dhalea, Shabwa, Abyan, and Hudaydah. In Al-Jawf, intermittent clashes were recorded between Houthi fighters and pro-government soldiers throughout November, but did not result in any major territorial changes or casualties. In late December, fighting also broke out for the first time in ten months along the Aqabat Halhal front in Abyan's Lawdar district, a development which may have been triggered by the redeployment of Nation's Shield forces.









Other Developments In Brief

October 16: The Houthis **announced** the death of their military chief of staff, Mohammed Abdelkarim al-Ghamari, from wounds sustained during “various raids launched by the criminal American-Zionist aggression.” It is unclear if Al-Ghamari was injured by a targeted Israeli airstrike in June or Israeli Operation Lucky Drop, which killed a dozen Houthi cabinet members and other officials in late August.

October 20: The Associated Press **reported** that a new airstrip has been built on Zuqar Island in the Red Sea off the coast of Hudaydah, which is controlled by forces loyal to Tareq Saleh.

November 13: The UN Security Council voted to **renew** its sanctions regime in Yemen for another year. Thirteen countries voted in favor, with Russia and China abstaining. The vote extends the asset freeze and travel ban on several Houthi officials, and the arms embargo measures that have been in place since 2014.

November 9: Tensions rose among government forces on the West Coast after UAE-backed Giants Brigade commander Hamdi Shukri **deployed** an additional battalion to coastal areas of Lahj, disgruntling Nation’s Shield forces stationed in the area. The move prompted PLC head Rashad al-Alimi to **withdraw** the Nation’s Shield forces.

November 24: Clashes **erupted** between villagers in Lahj and local security forces as Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan’s convoy passed through the area, sparking concerns of a possible assassination attempt. Although Shamsan’s presence appeared to have been coincidental, the incident underscored the deteriorating relationship between civilians and armed groups in Yemen.

November 29: A US drone strike **killed** senior Al-Qaeda leader Munir al-Ahdal, also known as Abu al-Haija al-Hadidi, and another individual as they were riding a motorcycle along a dirt road in the Al-Ramsa area of Marib al-Wadi district. Two suspected Al-Qaeda militants were also **killed** in a drone strike of unclear origin in Marib’s al-Wadi district on December 8.

December 25: Houthi authorities held **funerals** for five military leaders, some of whom were killed in US and Israeli airstrikes earlier this year. Among the dead was Zakaria Abdullah Hajar, who oversaw the Houthi drone unit and was considered a pioneer in the group’s drone capabilities. His brother, Ahmed Abdullah Hajar, was also killed and was responsible for logistics linked to missile and drone forces.

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A child at the Al-Munajj camp for internally displaced persons in Taiz's Al-Ma'afar district on December 1, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

The Economy

Wadhah al-Awlaqi

Yemen's Economic Deterioration Deepens Food Insecurity

Yemen's economy remains under severe strain, with its real GDP projected to **decline** by 1.5 percent in 2025. According to the **World Food Programme** (WFP), 61 percent of surveyed households in the country struggled to meet their minimum food needs in November. Of this group, 35 percent were facing severe food insecurity. Inadequate food consumption affected 63 percent of households in government-controlled areas and 61 percent in Houthi-controlled areas. Thirty-two percent of households in Houthi-controlled areas reported moderate to severe hunger, up 6 percent year on year, compared to 25 percent in government-controlled areas, down 8 percent. Higher levels were recorded in the Al-Bayda, Al-Dhalea, Raymah, Al-Jawf, and Hajjah governorates. To address food shortages, households adopted severe food-based coping strategies, with a higher prevalence in Houthi-controlled areas (66 percent) than in government-controlled areas (58 percent). These include shifting toward less nutritious foods or restricting adult food consumption in favor of children.

Broadly speaking, the cost of the minimum food basket (MFB) remained stable in government-controlled areas, rising only 1 percent month-on-month. However, this price is down 37 percent from the historic peak in July 2025 and 20 percent from November 2024. This was primarily attributed to the rial's recovery and a decrease in transportation costs. The rial appreciated by 27 percent year-on-year, driven by the government-enforced measures to manage the exchange rate and tighten oversight of imports and hard currency transactions. As a result, the prices of essential food items declined by 26 percent for sugar, 20 percent for wheat flour, 23 percent for red beans, and 14 percent for sunflower oil. Likewise, fuel prices in November were 11 percent and 9 percent lower than the same period in 2024. Key drivers include the market's gradual adjustment in line with currency recovery, partly underpinned by declining global crude oil prices. In addition, local crude oil production from Marib partly helps cover domestic fuel needs in government-controlled regions.

In Houthi-controlled areas, the exchange rate stability at YR534 per US\$1 has not alleviated economic pressures. The economy continues to face severe strain, mainly characterized by acute dollar shortages, cash withdrawal restrictions, limited civil servant salary payments, curtailed business activity, and banking system disruptions exacerbated by economic sanctions. The severe economic downturn in these areas has been compounded by the US and Israeli airstrikes on Red Sea ports and associated infrastructure over the summer. Reduced capacity continued to constrain trade through these ports, with fuel imports down by 28 percent from January to November compared to the same period in 2024. Food imports through Red Sea ports were 13 percent lower compared to the same period in 2024. While maritime insurance premiums along the Red Sea route have significantly declined following the Gaza ceasefire in October, traffic through the Bab al-Mandab Strait is still less than half the level recorded prior to the escalation of the Red Sea crisis, according to the [IMF](#).

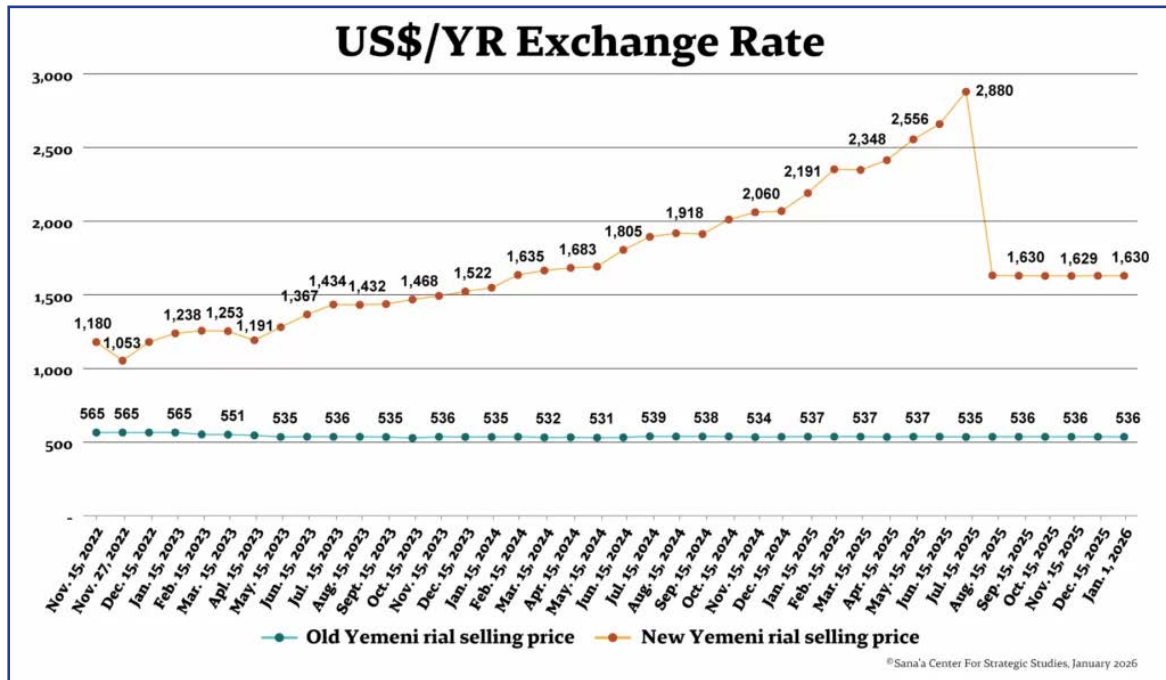
In contrast, food imports via the government-controlled ports of Aden and Al Mukalla increased by 28 percent over the first eleven months of 2025 compared to the same period in 2024. Conversely, fuel imports via these ports declined by 27 percent. This was primarily driven by economic hardships and the government's decision to terminate contracts with diesel-powered energy providers earlier this year.

The UN's Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan faced its largest funding gap in a decade, leaving millions without aid and exacerbating an already dire conflict. OCHA [reported](#) that the 2025 aid plan received only US\$687.9 million, equivalent to about 28 percent of the requested US\$2.48 billion by the end of the year, compared to 56 percent in 2024. In 2025, the WFP completed six cycles of food distribution in government-controlled areas, assisting 3.4 million people each cycle. Despite escalating needs, this severe funding shortfall had forced all clusters to scale back critical services. The WFP ceased all activities in Houthi-controlled areas and reduced coverage in government-held areas from 3.4 million to 1.6 million beneficiaries per cycle as of early 2026. In Houthi-controlled areas, the WFP completed two cycles during 2025, targeting around 2.8 million people each cycle. However, its activities in the North have been suspended since August due to a lack of operational space, a situation that continues to hinder the delivery of life-saving humanitarian aid.

The overall economic situation is precarious. Inflation and stagnant wages have eroded people's purchasing power and their ability to afford imported food staples and medicines. Fuel shortages, higher transport costs, import rerouting, and double taxation have raised prices. With Yemen's major foreign donors showing limited interest in funding the country's humanitarian response plan for the new year, severe underfunding is expected to continue. This will force aid agencies to further cut critical services, despite Yemen remaining one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with escalating hunger and disease.

Rial Remains Stable

The price of the new rial remained stable, trading around YR1,628 per US\$1. It experienced a slight depreciation to YR1,644 per US\$1 for a week in early December, triggered by the Southern Transitional Council's military escalation in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra, which created a complex monetary and economic landscape. The price of old rials circulating in Houthi-controlled areas also remained flat, at YR536 per US\$1.



A series of interconnected factors contributed to the stability of the rial in areas under government control. The lower-than-expected release of US\$90 million on November 20—out of a total Saudi pledged financial support package of 1.38 billion Saudi riyals (approximately US\$368 million)—offered short-term relief to support the rial. This long-awaited support came at a critical time for the government, which has been contending with a series of internal disputes, stalled economic reforms, and months-long delays in salary payments. The Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) subsequently commenced disbursements of delayed salaries, covering civil servants' August salaries and the salaries of army units for July. According to the CBY-Aden's [2024 annual report](#), the government required roughly YR1 trillion to cover public salaries for the year, approximately YR83.3 billion per month. Based on these figures, the recent Saudi support covered less than two months of salary payments. The government's fiscal deficit has expanded immensely since the Houthis attacked oil export terminals in late 2022. Declines in non-oil revenues and the depletion of the CBY-Aden's foreign currency reserves have further compounded the severe financial and monetary crisis.

However, a major source of the rial's stability can be attributed to the collective efforts of the National Committee for Regulating and Financing Imports and the CBY-Aden. These institutions continued to manage hard currency reserves, allocating them specifically to finance the importation of essential commodities. On December 30, the Committee held its fourteenth [meeting](#) to discuss import financing requests, stating that it had received 12,931 requests from banks and exchange companies over the last 100 days. During this period, it approved US\$2.5 billion from the 47 participating licensed banks and exchange companies to finance various types of goods and commodities, sufficient to ease downward pressure on the rial. The CBY-Aden also continued to implement punitive measures against outfits engaging in currency manipulation, withdrawing and revoking the licenses of dozens of exchange companies, shops, and branches.

On October 16, CBY-Aden Governor Ahmed Ghaleb al-Maabqi **stated** that the relocation of the banking system to Aden represents a pivotal step, enabling the bank to implement fundamental monetary and administrative reforms and achieve relative stability in the exchange rate. The remarks were made on the sidelines of the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Washington, DC. Other measures the CBY-Aden has recently adopted include prohibiting the use of foreign currencies for domestic purchases, increasing oversight of US dollar transactions, and imposing exchange rate caps on buying and selling the Saudi riyal.

The deteriorating political and security situation in areas under government control continues to threaten the currency's relative stability. Without a strategy to resume crude oil exports or mobilize other revenues, there is likely to be persistent downward pressure on the rial.

The Government's Economic Reform Battle

The government has been locked in a high-stakes struggle to end almost a decade of economic chaos. Faced with a fiscal crisis and pressure from international donors, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) attempted to roll out sweeping reforms in mid-2025. However, these efforts were met with fierce resistance from local power brokers, military factions, and the STC, pushing the state toward the brink of collapse.

In late October, the PLC issued **Presidential Decree No. 11 of 2025**, which outlines measures to restructure the state's financial system and end revenue leakage and the misappropriation of public funds. The primary reform seeks to enhance the central government's power to manage and control sovereign resources and to formalize its strained relationship with local authorities regarding local revenues. Various governorates have seized revenue-collection powers, operating outside any defined public budget, while the central government has struggled with ad hoc spending plans. The decree mandates that all governorates –with special emphasis on Taiz, Aden, Marib, Hadramawt, and Al-Mahra –must deposit all central revenues into the CBY-Aden.

The reform plan mandates that customs offices be directly under the government's central customs administration, with local authorities prohibited from granting reductions or exemptions. The decree also mandates the closure of illegal maritime ports, including Qana (Shabwa), Al-Shihr (Hadramawt), Nishtun (Al-Mahra), and Ras al-Arah¹ (Lahj). Additionally, it obligates major state-owned companies—PetroMasila, Safer, and the Aden Refinery—to deliver all refined products to the Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC), which is responsible for marketing and depositing revenues into the government's central bank account.

The reform plan also addresses illegal military and security checkpoints that impose tolls on trucks, burdening traders and diverting state resources. The Ministries of Defense and Interior are tasked with removing these illegal checkpoints, but groups operating under both ministries have been directly implicated in collecting the illegal tolls. The second and third pillars of the plan focus on long-term economic stability and expenditure discipline. A key measure is to liberalize the exchange rate for customs purposes, from YR700 to the current market rate of YR1,630 per US\$1. This measure aims to boost customs revenues and mitigate the budget deficit.

¹ The case of Ras al-Arah, located in the southwest of Lahj governorate along the Arabian Sea, highlights the degree to which funds are being diverted from the public treasury. This port, was controlled by the Lahj local authority and UAE-backed STC forces, saw hundreds of millions of Yemeni rials siphoned off by various officials. It is also a major site for the large-scale smuggling of contraband (including toxic pesticides, cigarettes, and medicines) and an entry point for African migrants.

The government's attempt to assert control, however, has seen resistance from local authorities and military actors in Taiz, Al-Mahra, Hadramawt, and Marib. Local authorities, accustomed to some eight years of autonomy, have largely ignored or actively sabotaged the central directives. In mid-November, a **memorandum** from the prime minister to the defense minister accused armed groups within the Islah-affiliated Taiz Military Axis of systematically looting public revenues, notably qat taxes.^[2]

In November, local media **reported** that a military checkpoint between Shuqrah and Qarn al-Kalasad in Abyan detained dozens of trucks loaded with building material after drivers refused to pay an illegal levy of YR200,000 per truck. On November 12, Security Belt forces in the Hassan area of Khanfar district **seized** several tankers loaded with crude oil intended for operating Aden's power stations, in protest against delayed salary payments.

In Al-Mahra, the local authority directly defied the government's orders, issuing directives to deposit local sales taxes, revenues from the Disabled Persons Fund, 70 percent of customs duties, and commercial profits taxes into the governorate's local accounts. On November 9, the Al-Shahin Customs Office **reported** that the local authority in Al-Mahra issued directives to transfer revenues from the land border with Oman to the local authority's account, threatening employees at the border crossing with dismissal if they didn't comply. In response, Prime Minister Salem bin Breik submitted a **memorandum** to the PLC, rejecting the actions taken by Al-Mahra Governor Mohammed Ali Yasser and asserting that he had exceeded his legal authority. The Al-Mahra local authority also **rejected** the PLC's decision to close the port of Nishtun on the Arabian Sea, arguing it was established legally. While the local authority in Hadramawt **said** it would commit to depositing all central revenues with the CBY-Aden, it has called on the government to recognize the port of Al-Shihr as an official customs point. The local authority also noted that its cooperation would be contingent on the government meeting the governorate's monthly obligations, including salary payments in the education and health sectors, additional operational budgets for service provision, and development expenditures.

The oil-rich governorate of Marib has not complied with the PLC's economic reform decree either. The local branch of the CBY has historically operated semi-independently from the headquarters in Aden, and the local authority, led by PLC member Sultan al-Aradah, has ignored past central government directives, such as a 2022 decree to liberalize the price of locally produced fuel. A twenty-liter tank of gasoline is still being sold at YR8,000 in Marib, one-third of its liberalized price in Aden and Taiz, depriving the government of revenue and encouraging fuel smuggling. The local authority has managed revenues from its locally produced oil and gas independently, allocating them to cover public expenditures without central government oversight.

The government's inability to capture revenue has compounded a severe liquidity crisis. By November, civil servants and military personnel were owed up to four months of back pay. In response, the Prime Minister Bin Breik **announced** drastic austerity measures, including restricting foreign travel for ministers and senior government officials to "extreme necessity only. PLC head Rashad al-Alimi has also directed the government to conduct a comprehensive inventory of state-owned land, property, and leased assets and to develop a plan to convert them into effective revenue streams. However, these supplementary fiscal measures have proven insufficient.

² The statement called on the Taiz Military Axis to cease interfering with state resources and collecting illegal tolls on roads under its control, and for the formation of an investigative committee that would refer units found to be involved in embezzlement to the relevant legal authorities. A July **memorandum** from the Ministry of Local Administration estimated that forces affiliated with the Taiz Military Axis had seized YR2.23 billion in qat taxes over a one-year period from May 2024 to May 2025.

The diversion of public revenues by military units in Taiz and their refusal to deposit them into the state treasury have been longstanding issues. Former Defense Minister Mohsen al-Daeri explicitly called on the Taiz Military Axis to cease all violations in September 2024 and again at the end of June 2025. The Taiz Military Axis has justified its revenue extraction by noting that it receives no support from the central government except for intermittent food supplies and irregular fuel deliveries. The Axis has also claimed that its soldiers are paid less than units based in other governorates.

The situation took a dramatic turn in early December when the STC took military control of Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. This move led to an exodus of top government officials to Riyadh and to a temporary halt in oil production at the Al-Masila fields. Heightened political instability and insecurity could jeopardize the rial's recent stability. Ongoing disputes over revenue collection reflect the fragility of the central government's authority, as local authorities have grown in influence and autonomy during the conflict. The issue has become a critical test of the government's ability to implement economic reforms pushed by international partners to restore confidence in the financial system and prevent the further collapse of state institutions. Progress requires a minimum level of harmony among government actors in policymaking. Absent this unified mandate, the government will face serious obstacles in managing state resources and maintaining essential services.

Blackouts in Aden and Hadramawt

The interim capital of Aden and the oil-rich governorate of Hadramawt have both grappled with severe power outages. Interconnected factors, including fuel shortages, infrastructure sabotage, insufficient funding, and persistent political-military instability, forced a shutdown of major power stations, leading to long blackouts.

In October, Aden was plunged into total darkness following a complete shutdown of its major power stations. The crisis peaked on October 19, when all power stations were **shut down** entirely due to a fuel shortage. The failure extended even to renewable energy - the solar power plant in Aden was forced to shut down as its operation relies on primary generation from Aden's Al-Raeis or Al-Mansoura stations to control the grid frequency and distribute loads. Fuel supply lines have also remained an instrument for political leverage. In one instance, soldiers in Abyan detained crude oil tankers destined for Aden to demand unpaid salaries. While local mediation eventually **released** the trucks, the Al-Raeis station continued to operate on a deficit, receiving only four of the seven tankers required daily for stable operation.

In December, fighting in Hadramawt halted oil production for several days, as armed groups vied for control over the critical Al-Masila oil fields and their infrastructure, while the suspension of fuel shipments triggered a near-total blackout across the region. The disruption in gas fuel supplies **reportedly** caused massive power failures, cutting off over 85 percent of the electricity grid's generating capacity across most of the Hadramawt Valley region. But there were already problems. The Public Electricity Corporation in Hadramawt Valley **reported** that diesel supplies declined gradually after October 11, from 210,000 to 160,000 liters per day. By November 17, they had reached a record low of 120,000 liters per day. While the corporation said it had been making efforts to secure fuel, the supply had not improved by year's end.

The military clashes also severely impacted Aden, which relies on fuel from Hadramawt. Residents received only two hours of electricity every 13 hours. While most diesel- and mazut-powered power plants were forced to shut down completely, Aden's Al-Raies power plant (operated by PetroMasila) remained operational at a reduced capacity of 65 megawatts. The PetroMasila station is emblematic of government incompetence and mismanagement. While it has a nominal capacity of 270 megawatts (MW), it has historically operated at 60 MW. A recent, partial improvement **occurred** with the integration of a second generator, boosting production to approximately 148 MW. However, the rest of its capacity remains offline due to technical problems that the government has been unable to resolve.

Many cities under the government's control continue to suffer from longstanding electricity shortages. This has disrupted the provision of essential services like water, healthcare, and sewage systems. Ad hoc solutions have provided temporary respite, but fail to address the root causes of the crisis. Without permanent solutions to improve energy infrastructure and secure supply lines from local military interference, the government remains vulnerable to persistent energy shortages.

Aden Hit by Gas Shortages

A widespread and severe gas shortage impacted Aden and other cities under government control from late November through December, and political instability and infighting prevented progress on a solution. The disruption resulted in long queues of cars and buses at the few stations that remained open. Citing depleted supplies, dozens of government-run filling stations across Aden suddenly closed, triggering a rise in black-market activity. The price of a 20-liter gas cylinder ranged between YR13,000 and YR15,000 in the second half of December, an increase of more than 52 percent above the official price of YR8,500.

The shortages are caused by a combination of interlinked factors: recurring tribal clashes and blockades disrupting supply routes, poor distribution arrangements, and the deliberate creation of artificial scarcity to maximize black market profits. Initially, media outlets attributed the disruption to recurring tribal clashes in Marib and roadblocks in Abyan. A tribal blockade launched on November 29 prevented shipments from leaving Block 18 in Marib, operated by the Safer Company. Abyan security forces later removed the blockade and reopened the international road, allowing tankers to proceed to Aden. But the shortages persisted. There have been widespread accusations of extortion and monopolistic practices. Dozens of gas tankers were seen waiting for hours at the Al-Alam checkpoint at the entrance of Aden, where illegal tolls were collected. Some of the trucks were reportedly then directed away from distribution stations and toward private traders' yards to create scarcity, inflate prices, and generate illicit profits. The regular operation and lack of congestion at fuel stations in neighboring Abyan would appear to be further evidence of local market manipulation.

The government's response to the crisis was slow and limited. On December 8, then-Aden Governor Ahmed Bin Lamlas held a meeting with representatives from the Aden Refinery and Gas Company, at which they agreed to release gas stored at the refinery to provide relief. Lamlas also ordered a ban on any gas leaving Aden for other cities, and media outlets reported that Aden would soon receive six tankers. In mid-December, the Yemeni Gas Company stated that it had pumped sufficient gas to address the shortage and restore market stability. This included dispatching a fleet of 461 gas tankers, the equivalent of approximately 1,852,000 gas cylinders, to meet demand in Aden and other governorates. The persistence of the crisis suggests that it was not caused solely by a delay in supplies, but rather by deficiencies in supply management and distribution regulation.

The crisis has forced the adoption of costly coping strategies, including paying extra to transport gas from distant areas or purchasing overpriced restaurant meals because cooking gas is unavailable at home. The institutional fragmentation triggered by the STC's military escalation also hindered efforts to resolve the crisis.

Gov't Signs Deal to Revitalize Al-Makha Port

The internationally recognized government announced a major infrastructure project for the port of Al-Makha in western Taiz. The Ministry of Transport, represented by the Red Sea Ports Corporation, **signed** a memorandum of understanding with Prima Investment Company Limited to rehabilitate, develop, and operate the port. At a cost of US\$138.9 million, the project was said to include the construction of a new 280-meter-long marine berth with a draft of up to 12 meters, an additional 50-meter-long berth for mooring tugboats and small vessels, and container yards, warehouses, silos, and service and administrative buildings.

Transport Minister Abdelsalam Humaid said that “developing the port is a crucial step to improve its operational efficiency and restore its commercial role after many years of inactivity.” Located on the Red Sea Coast, the port has the potential to play a greater role in regional trade. The port’s director general, Abdelmalik al-Sharabi, said that the project would increase capacity, allowing the port to receive 195 ships and handle up to 2.27 million tons of cargo per year, with the potential for future expansion. Humaid said the agreement is based on legislation governing public-private partnerships, but it is unclear whether the government followed the legal procedures to select Prima Investment Company Limited. Yemen’s Tenders and Auctions Law requires that public tenders adhere to certain transparency standards, with a view to opening the door to competition. The government has not clarified the nature of the deal or its legal and financial terms, prompting criticism and speculation about who might benefit.

Media outlets have **reported** that Prima is affiliated with AD Ports Group, an Emirati company specializing in port development and management and logistics services, and a subsidiary of Abu Dhabi Holding Company, which is owned by the government of Abu Dhabi. However, the future status of the project is unclear following the Emiratis’ recent withdrawal from Yemen.

Iraq’s Rafidain Bank Closes Sana’a Branch

Iraq’s state-owned Rafidain Bank, one of the oldest Arab banks operating in Yemen since 1982, shut down its operations in Sana’a following international pressure to sever funding sources for the Houthis after their FTO designation by the US Treasury Department and the imposition of associated sanctions.

Rafidain reportedly came under immense pressure from the Treasury Department following the designation and was accused of processing financial payments for the group. The allegations surfaced following a high-level **meeting** in Washington in late April between then-US Deputy Treasury Secretary Michael Faulkender and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein. Faulkender reportedly **warned** Hussein that the bank needed to stop doing business with the Houthis and relocate to territory under the internationally recognized government.

Hussein **responded** that Iraq only recognizes and “deals with the internationally recognized Yemeni government,” which maintains an embassy in Baghdad. He denied the existence of transactions with the Houthis in Sana’a, and pledged to “personally verify this.” The Iraqi embassy in Washington also denied the allegations and stated that Rafidain’s Sana’a branch had been “non-operational since 2017.” In August, Rafidain signed a “professional partnership agreement” with US-based financial consulting firm K2 Integrity as part of its anti-money laundering and combating the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) compliance efforts. However, the allegations resurfaced in August, when US Congressman Joe Wilson **urged** the Treasury to sanction Rafidain for processing payments for the Houthis. Wilson has previously called for sanctions against the bank, citing claims that Rafidain is facilitating large-scale transfers to Iran.

As of August 2025, the US had **sanctioned** more than 35 of Iraq's 72 banks or imposed restrictions on their dollar transactions. Rafidain had been under scrutiny due to its perceived opacity, and media outlets have reported that the Iraqi federal government has utilized the bank to process and distribute salaries to members of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). This raised questions over whether the PMF was able to exploit loopholes in the Iraqi financial system to channel funds to other Iranian-backed forces, including the Houthis.

The Qatar National Bank Yemen has also begun the final liquidation procedures for its Sana'a branch. During a webinar organized by the Sana'a Center in mid-June, the governor of the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden) **said** that the two institutions had decided to liquidate after a near-total halt in their operations. Arab Bank, headquartered in Jordan, made a similar decision and began closing its branches in Sana'a, Taiz, and Ibb last year.

The collective closure of foreign banks' operations in Yemen could trigger an exodus of foreign capital, deepening existing economic and financial challenges. The stifling financial environment imposed by Houthi authorities through the freezing of public debt assets, the imposition of illegal taxes, and direct interference in banking activities, combined with the fragmentation of the central bank, has created a complex financial and regulatory landscape. The designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization has compounded existing challenges and elevated the risks associated with investing in Yemen.

Houthis Initiate Public Auction For Seized Al-Tadhamon Bank Land

On October 28, the Houthi-aligned Specialized Criminal Court in Sana'a **announced** an auction for the sale of a 123,978-square-meter plot of land owned by Al-Tadhamon Bank, one of the largest private Yemeni banks in terms of deposits and asset size, in the Al-Sitteen neighborhood of Sana'a city. The Houthi announcement listed an exorbitant price of YR3.099 billion (approximately US\$5.8 million) for the auction, scheduled for November 16.

This auction, the second of its kind, is part of the Houthis' broader strategy to seize and confiscate the properties of opponents who challenge their authority, often under various pretexts, including alleged treason. Since 2017, the group has implemented sweeping campaigns to loot the homes and real estate properties of hundreds of individuals opposed to them. The Houthis have instrumentalized state institutions such as the judiciary and the Central Bank of Yemen in Sana'a (CBY-Sana'a) to provide legal cover for their asset seizures. To justify the confiscation of Al-Tadhamon's assets, the Houthis claimed the land was linked to former President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi. In response, the government-run CBY-Aden **issued** a statement warning of imminent local and international sanctions against any individuals or entities involved in the Houthis' illegal actions targeting the real estate and assets of banks and financial institutions. The CBY-Aden emphasized that "any agreements, sales contracts, transfers of ownership, mortgages, or other transactions resulting from such actions are invalid and illegal, issued by entities designated as terrorist organizations, and expose their owners to the loss of their financial rights and full legal accountability."

Houthi Smuggling of Currency Printers Thwarted

On October 2, the Counter-Terrorism Service in Aden **announced** it had thwarted a Houthi attempt to smuggle a shipment of modern currency printers. The operation, carried out in coordination with the Customs Authority, arrived from Germany via the container port in Aden. The Counter-Terrorism Service referred the incident to the CBY-Aden, which issued an official request to the Public Prosecutor to hold the printers for expert examination.

An investigation conducted by the Sana'a Center's Economic Unit found that the printers were imported by a company known as Printers Aid Company Ltd., an authorized dealer and contract partner of Germany's **Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG. Printers Aid**, based in Sana'a and owned by the Al-Mahdi Company, which is part of a wider business network aligned with the Houthis. The confiscated printers are Heidelberg SM 74-10P series models and are equipped for commercial printing of packaging, labels, and high-volume publishing materials. They can print paper banknotes, but lack the security markings that authenticate legitimate currency. It remains unclear whether they are capable of printing Yemeni rial banknotes.

Imported Cement Hits the Market

The Israeli bombing of cement factories in Houthi-controlled Hudaydah and Amran in May compelled a rapid shift to using external suppliers to meet domestic demand. Media outlets **reported** that markets in Houthi-controlled Sana'a have suddenly begun selling bags of cement deceptively branded as being locally manufactured by the Amran National Cement Factory. The General Cement Corporation later admitted that the cement had been imported before relabeling, as this was necessary to bridge the supply gap following the shutdown of its factories due to Israeli airstrikes.

However, the Yemeni Consumer Protection Association in Sana'a announced its intent to file a complaint with the Attorney General. The association said the relabeling was a serious violation of several laws, including Consumer Protection Law No. 46 of 2008, and called on the relevant authorities to take action.

UN Panel of Experts Documents Houthi Revenue Extraction

The latest UN Panel of Experts (PoE) on Yemen **report** documented how the Houthis have continued to generate revenue through extractive taxes, illegal seizures and levies, extortion, and smuggling, despite financial sanctions targeting the group.

The Houthis have adopted an aggressive system of taxation and asset seizure to sustain and finance their operations. Main sources of revenue include levies imposed on individuals and companies, a sales tax on goods such as fuel and cigarettes, and a general tax on all imports. The Houthis have also collected a significant share of surplus profits from all sectors, with a particular focus on the financial and banking sectors.

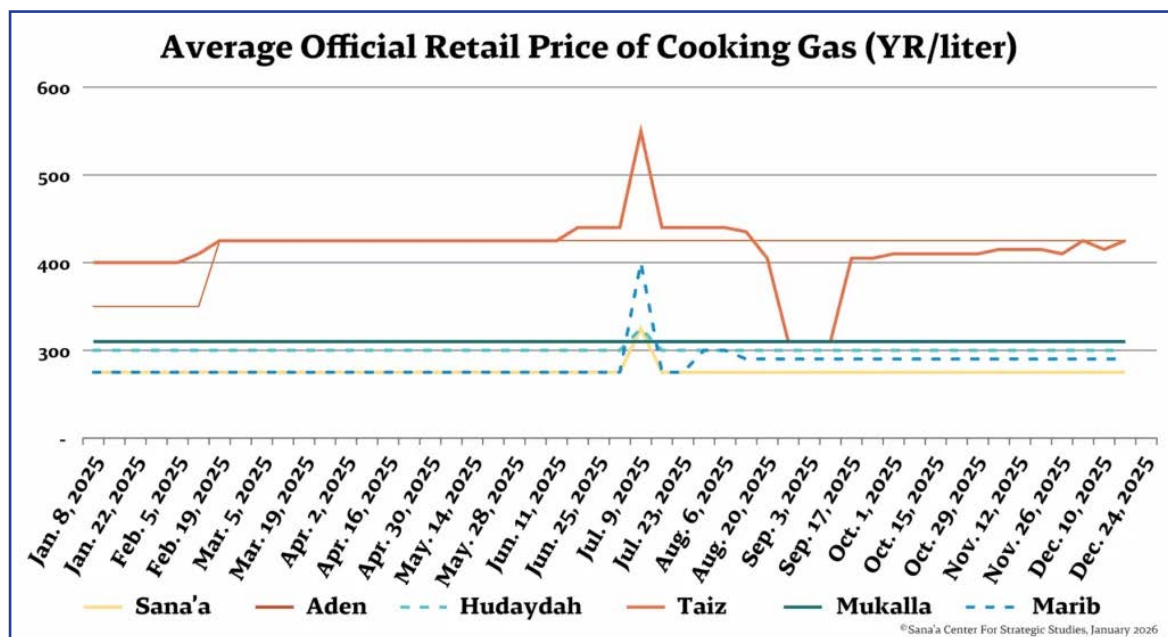
Another lucrative sector is telecommunications, which provides the group access to sizeable revenues. Although several telecommunications companies have relocated to Aden, much of their infrastructure remains in Houthi-controlled Sana'a. The Ministry of Communications and the Public Telecommunications Corporation are led by Houthi loyalists, ensuring the group's operational and financial control. These state bodies, in turn, control private operators. The Houthis collect an estimated US\$20 million in monthly revenue from roaming and international

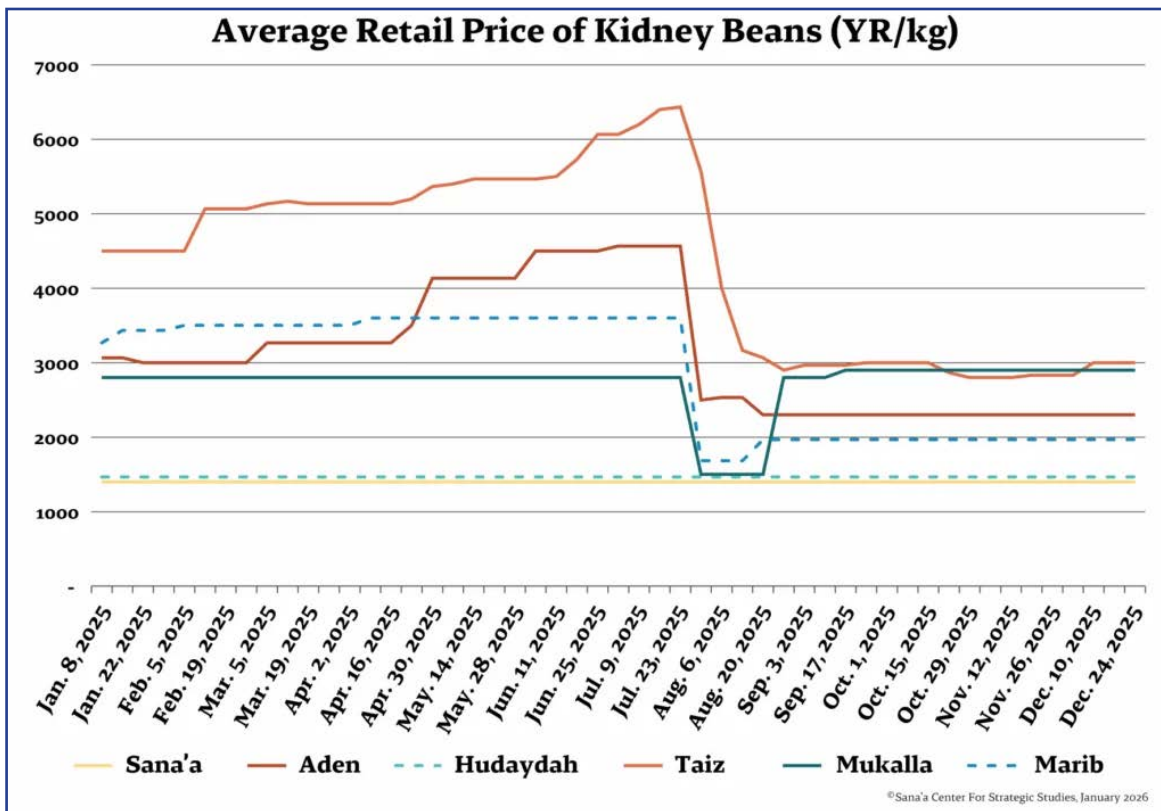
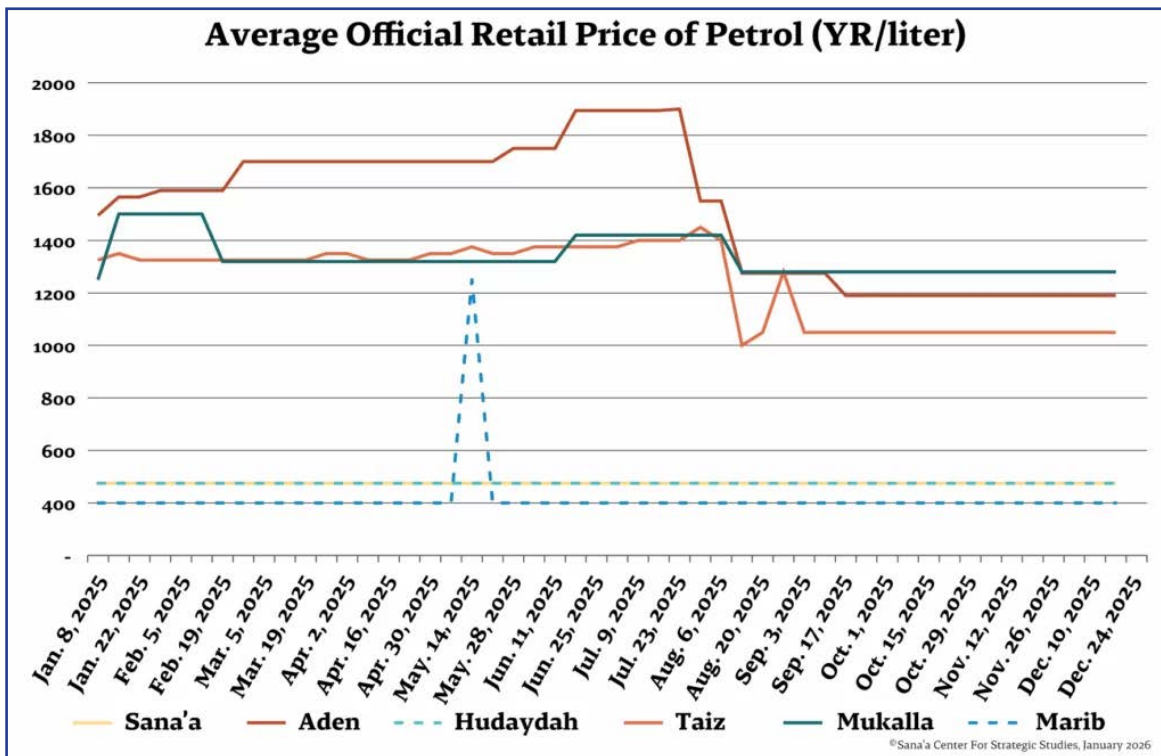
calls, including from usage by subscribers in government-controlled areas. The Yemen Mobile company indicated in its 2024 annual report that it paid YR26 billion (approximately US\$16 million) in zakat and income taxes to the group. Overall, it is estimated that the Houthis collect approximately YR150 billion rials annually (equivalent to US\$92 million) from the telecom sector (public and private).

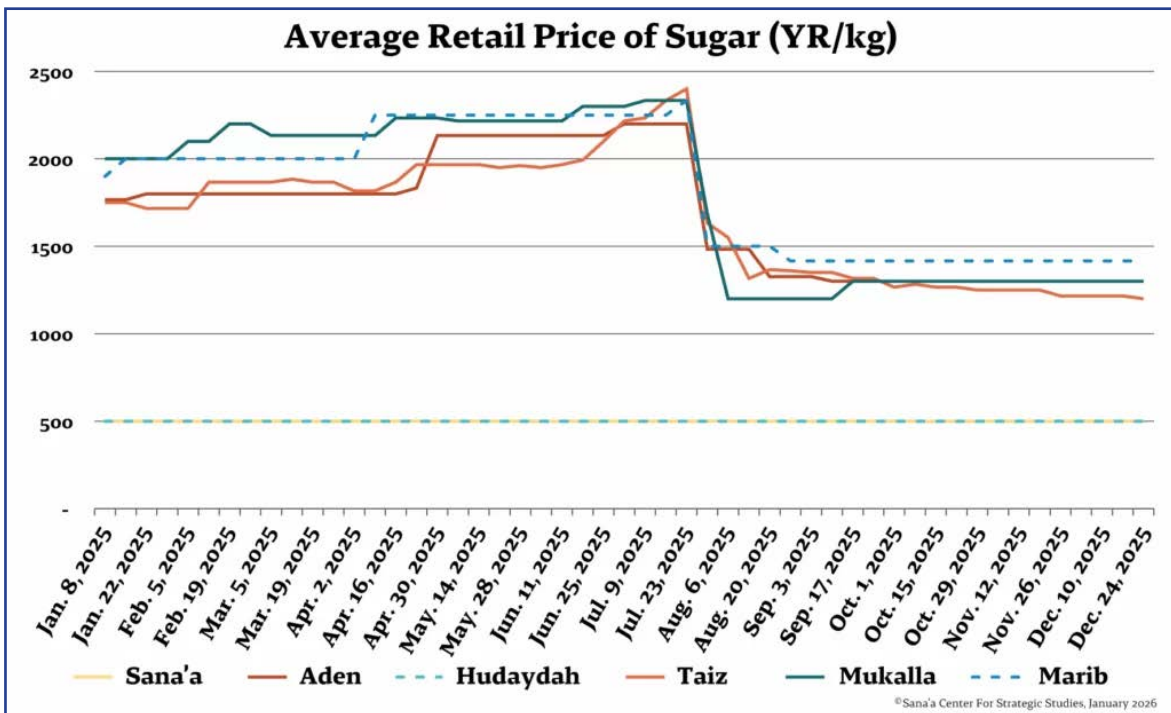
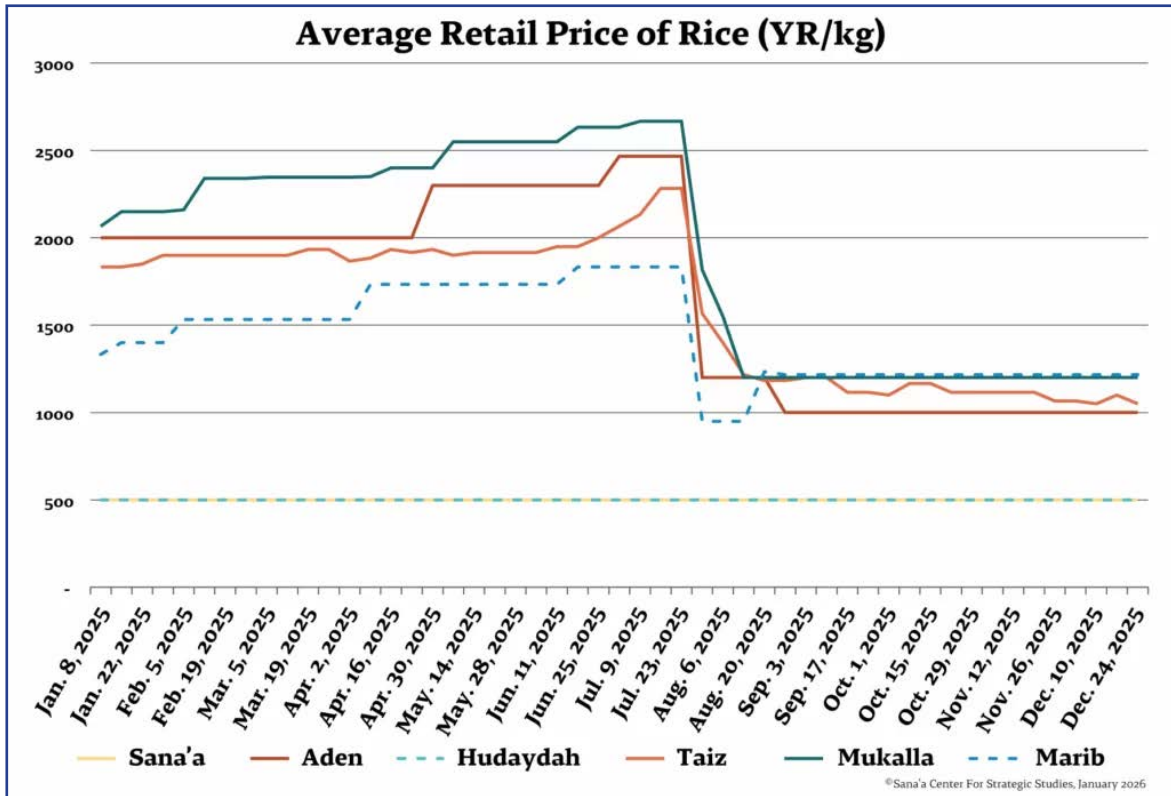
The Houthis also collected revenues from the civil aviation sector, but these revenue streams have been suspended since April 2025 following the US redesignation of the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Other revenue streams had included landing and take-off fees at Sana'a International Airport, passenger excess baggage fees, and freight charges before the airport was rendered inoperable following Israeli airstrikes. In August 2024, the group froze US\$120 million belonging to Yemenia Airways.

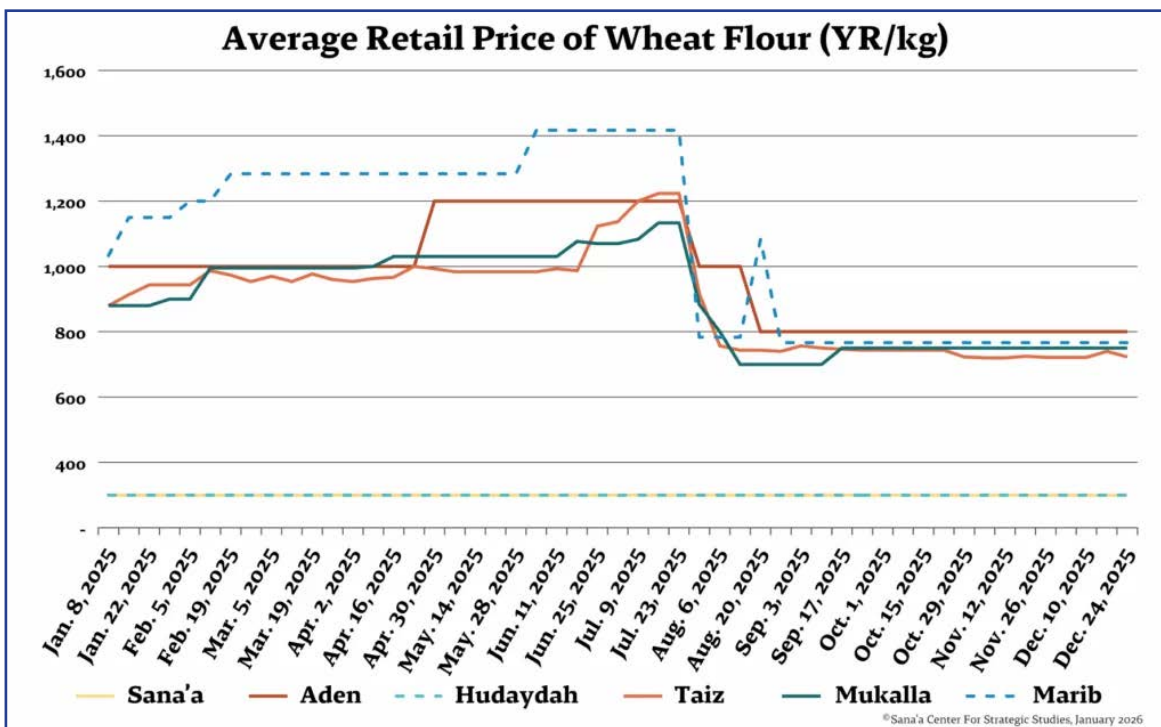
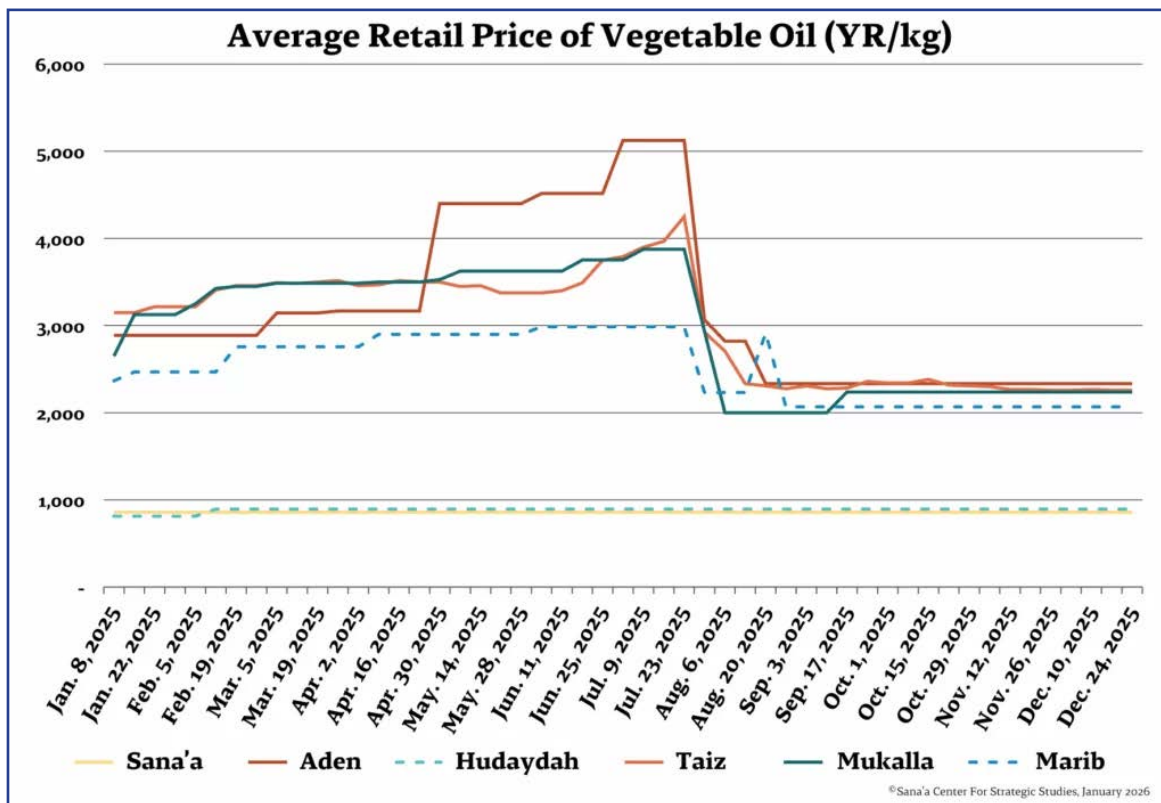
The group has also continued seizures of commercial enterprises and financial institutions. In July, the Houthis seized the Yemen Gulf Bank and appointed senior official Raed al-Shaer as the bank's judicial custodian. A Houthi loyalist was also recently appointed to the Board of Directors of Kamaran Company for Industry and Investment.

The report also detailed how the Houthis have placed restrictions on humanitarian access and delivery in areas under their control and have diverted aid, including medical supplies, for economic benefit. According to the report, "many workers have fled, and businesses have relocated to the Yemeni government-controlled areas to avoid threats, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, or property confiscation." Humanitarian entities have been pressured to hire individuals selected by the Houthis, who ensure that beneficiary lists and aid disbursements align with the group's interests. The group often demands a share of project funds, exploiting humanitarian aid to mobilize further income and fund their war efforts. Aid is stolen and sold, food baskets have been diverted to Houthi combatants, and tribal leaders have been pressured to provide new military recruits, including children, in exchange for aid. Over 70 UN staff also remain in Houthi detention, along with many more employees from international organizations and members of civil society.









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STC supporters rally at the Khormaksar Parade Grounds in Aden in support of the declaration of an independent southern state on December 21, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo

Commentary

A Chance to Break the Cycle of Conflict

Abdulghani Al-Iryani

The drastic decision to dissolve the Southern Transitional Council (STC) raised fears that Yemen would fall into a familiar cycle: defeat and marginalization of an important constituent of the political body, producing long-lasting, deeply held grievances.

One such cycle started immediately after Southern independence. The defeat and banishment of the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY) in 1967 continued to disrupt South Yemen's stability and frustrate its development throughout the seventies. This culminated in the fateful civil war of January 13, 1986, which resulted in the defeat and marginalization of a political bloc dominated by the Abyan-Shabwa elites, who fled to North Yemen along with nearly one hundred thousand of their followers and were incorporated into the northern armed forces.

A mere three years later, elites from the Al-Dhalea-Lahj-Yafea Triangle, then in control of a much weakened southern state, received another major setback with the collapse of their Soviet backers. They acceded to a long-held ambition for the reunification of Yemen and agreed to merge into a single centralized state, heedless of the risk that the north might dominate the much smaller population of the south. On May 2, 1990, North Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of the unified state, and Ali Salem al-Beidh, the Secretary General of the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), which ruled South Yemen, became vice president.

But the bright prospects of unified Yemen were savagely dimmed by another cycle of conflict, defeat, and marginalization. The spring of 1991 saw a campaign of assassinations and terror against top YSP leaders of the Socialist Party, dealing a mortal blow to the project of unification. By 1994, the party had organized not just to defend itself, but also to renegotiate the terms of the merger. The stage was set for war.

The 1994 war was brief – two months and three days. At first, the southern army held the line. However, eyewitnesses and participants noted that many units lost the will to fight when Al-Beidh declared secession. Southern jet fighters dropped their ordnance in the mountains at a safe distance from the forces of the central government. The southern street was still pro-unity, and so were the armed forces.

The defeat of the southern army was not, in itself, catastrophic; the catastrophe was what followed. The losing faction of 1986, organized into part of the northern army named the “Unity Brigades” and led by General Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, spearheaded the march on Aden and defeated its opponents from 1986. The looting, banishment, and marginalization that the losing side suffered left deep scars, and the cycle of grievance was repeated.

After a short while, cooler heads called for national reconciliation, and a national consensus formed around the need to reintegrate the losing side and address southern grievances, as far back as the peasant uprisings and broad nationalizations of the early seventies. However, Saleh had other plans. The war had been good for his regime. Before it began, Al-Beidh had been wildly popular in the north, much more so than in the south, as a leader with proven patriotism and integrity, having agreed to become a vice-president for the sake of unity. He was winning the popularity contest over Saleh. But the declaration of secession reversed that. Saleh emerged as the sole defender of unity and saw that “defending unity” could be used as a rhetorical weapon to silence the opposition and stay in power. So despite paying lip service to reconciliation, Saleh ensured that it would never happen. He chose General Hadi, the sworn enemy of the YSP, as his vice president and put him in charge of the integration of officers from the southern army. Hadi’s faction worked to become the sole representative of the south.

This monopoly of southern representation by one faction led to the founding of the Southern Hirak in the late 1990s, the peaceful protests that started in 2007, and the formation of the STC in 2017. The cycle closed with STC’s claim to be the sole representative of the south and its ill-conceived attempt to control the eastern governorates, followed by its dissolution in January 2026.

The ongoing restructuring of the leadership and the cabinet of the internationally recognized government will tell us whether another cycle of conflict will be triggered. Thankfully, Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) chief Rashad al-Alimi’s recent appointments of former Defense Minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi to the PLC and Shaya al-Zindani as the new prime minister are promising signs that the lesson of history has been learned. Al-Subaihi is a suitable substitute for the ousted President of the STC, Aiderous al-Zubaidi. Hailing from Al-Sabbayha district of Lahj and enjoying broad popular respect as a war hero and a national leader, he is trusted by the southern and northern streets alike. Similarly, charging Al-Zindani to form the next cabinet was an astute choice. As the first-ever prime minister from Al-Dhalea, his appointment assures that the governorate will not be marginalized after Al-Zubaidi’s departure.

The breaking of this cycle of conflict and the integration of the losing faction are the best pieces of news I have heard in a long time. Such wisdom is needed for the country to exit the dark tunnel of war and division that has taxed the Yemeni people for over ten years.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani is a senior researcher at the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies where he focuses on the peace process, conflict analysis and transformations of the Yemeni state. Al-Iryani has more than three decades of experience as a political and development consultant.

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A convoy of STC-affiliated forces headed to Hadramawt on December 15, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo

Commentary

From Competition to Rivalry: Yemen Reshapes the Saudi-Emirati Relationship

Hussam Radman

Since 2016, bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have experienced periods of acute tension in Yemen. Previously, these tensions never went past managed competition. Both states preserved areas of joint cooperation, avoided crossing one another's red lines, and kept open lines of dialogue following every round of escalation or attempt to assert influence in Yemen.

However, the events of the past two months in southern Yemen represent an unprecedented turning point in the relationship, with a shift toward an overt rivalry that has brought an official end to the Saudi-Emirati coalition in Yemen and catalyzed a new cycle of regional conflict.

Over the last decade, relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE were shaped by three factors: shared threats, a recognition of regional standing, and ambitious economic, social, and technological development models. The third factor rendered the relationship between the two states permanently competitive, while the first and second factors determined whether such competition would be cooperative or confrontational.

In 2011, Riyadh **redefined** its national security threats to confront the geopolitical vacuum resulting from the collapse of Arab regimes, curb the expansion of political Islam led by Turkey and Qatar, and deter the network of political Shia proxies led by Iran. This aligned perfectly with Abu Dhabi's perception of its own threats.

In 2015, a new leadership emerged in Saudi Arabia, bringing the Kingdom **closer** to Abu Dhabi through shared priorities of economic and social modernization and new national governance models. This strengthened the bilateral relationship along a new axis: the UAE expressed a willingness to engage further in Saudi Arabia's aggressive regional approach, both in the Yemen war and later in the decision to boycott Qatar. In return, Abu Dhabi sought Saudi recognition of its status as an equal partner in regional affairs. Yemen served as the first test of this approach through the joint command of the Arab Coalition's forces.

However, the strategic partnership was never fully realized. To the extent that it did operate, it was punctuated by numerous disagreements, particularly in Yemen. As the Saudi modernization project under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accelerated, competition with the UAE intensified.

The period from 2020 to 2024 witnessed the undermining of many of the Saudi-Emirati coalition's foundations. The two states' perceptions of their respective threats were no longer aligned, and it became clear that Abu Dhabi's expectations of an equal partnership would not be met. Saudi Arabia began acting unilaterally on several fronts, expecting the UAE to fall in line and follow suit on matters such as the Yemen roadmap, reconciliation with Iran and Qatar, and efforts to raise oil prices via OPEC.

Nevertheless, the coalition persisted in a minimal and formal capacity for two reasons. First, both parties needed to deter Iran, particularly in Yemen; and second, the partnership became increasingly important to the UAE as a cover for its own regional activities and for expanding its geopolitical influence. The coalition's cover gave Abu Dhabi a powerful excuse for plausible deniability of its local allies' actions.

By 2025, however, the gap between the two countries had widened significantly. The weakening of the Iranian regime meant deterring Tehran was no longer at the forefront of Saudi priorities. Instead, Riyadh invested diplomatically to ensure the success of **nuclear negotiations** and **forestall military strikes** against the regime. Moreover, Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, Pakistan, and Turkey, increasingly saw Israel as a growing strategic challenge and began working to curb its hegemony. This, in turn, has inevitably undermined the trajectory of the Abraham Accords, which the UAE had bet on as a central pillar in the construction of a new regional security architecture in which it sought to play a leading role. Finally, Saudi Arabia and Egypt became concerned about Emirati involvement in Sudan, and the two began working to curb Emirati influence as much as possible. This was made evident during Bin Salman's **visit to Washington**, where he urged Trump to exert pressure to end the war in Sudan.

In other words, Saudi Arabia and the UAE no longer disagreed merely over the identification of mutual threats. They had come to view the other's expanding regional influence as a strategic obstacle and threat. This partially explains the motives behind the UAE's adoption of a high-risk regional policy, which first manifested in Sudan and then reached its peak in southern Yemen.

Abu Dhabi's Yemen Gambit

In December 2025, the UAE began a game of geopolitical roulette. This meant either proactively expanding its influence in order to assert itself as a major regional player or losing its geopolitical assets and facing political isolation. Simply put, Abu Dhabi would either emerge as a winner or accelerate losses that it feared would occur sooner or later.

But the high-risk Emirati approach backfired, catalyzing a coordinated regional response from Riyadh, Muscat, and Cairo to undermine Emirati influence in Yemen. At the same time, it has triggered a more [aggressive Saudi policy](#) in the Horn of Africa and Libya.

Abu Dhabi has lost its role as a major player in Yemen, but it is still an influential power. Three regional factors will determine Abu Dhabi's new approach to Yemen, and whether it leans toward adaptation or shifts toward a war of attrition.

First, there is the regional balance of power. If internal and external pressures on the Iranian regime increase and its regional influence erodes, Abu Dhabi will likely become more committed to playing a major role in the region within a new axis based on the Abraham Accords. The reverse here is also true. If Washington and Tehran return to the diplomatic track, and the likelihood of regime collapse in Iran or its exposure to a decisive strike recedes, the UAE would be more inclined to abandon its ambitions for a regional order anchored in the Abraham Accords.

A second factor regards the scope of Saudi efforts in Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Depending on the extent of Saudi Arabia's ability to threaten Emirati geopolitical assets, Abu Dhabi may feel forced to confront any Saudi policy. The UAE might attempt to leverage its influence in Yemen as a counterbalance to Saudi pressure in Africa.

A final factor concerns international or regional mediation. External actors could intervene to reduce hostilities between the two sides and facilitate a resumption of dialogue. Cairo and Washington remain the most suitable candidates to play such a role.

Until then, Saudi Arabia will treat any escalation in Yemen's south as an Emirati escalation. Riyadh believes that stripping the UAE of its veil of plausible deniability is the only way to restrain it from investing in a campaign of attrition against the Saudi-backed government.

Hussam Radman is a researcher fellow with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. His research focuses on Yemen's Southern Movement and militant Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic State group, and armed Salafist factions. He is also a correspondent for Dubai TV and has previously worked for the newspapers Al-Sharea in Yemen and Egypt's Al-Ahram.

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A collection of silver jewelry from Seyoun and Sana'a // Photo Credit: Helen Lackner

Q&A

Until They Go Home: Helen Lackner's Collection of Yemeni Artifacts

Lara Uhlenhaut and Helen Lackner

"Eventually, it should all go back to Yemen."

Yemen has been at the heart of Helen Lackner's life for more than half a century. A distinguished and prolific author and non-resident fellow at the Sana'a Center, Lackner has covered topics as diverse as climate change, economic collapse, women's role in society, and the historical roots of the ongoing conflict. The depth and breadth of her work have made her a respected and authoritative voice on Yemen for many years.

Lackner first visited Yemen in 1973, and in 1977, went to teach in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), or South Yemen. She later moved to the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), or North Yemen, and, over the following five decades, spent about 15 years working in Yemen, witnessing its many political transformations. During this time, Lackner worked in teaching and research and carried out development work with rural communities, focused on agriculture and fisheries. While living in Yemen, Lackner also built an impressive collection of Yemeni artifacts, including miniature models of Yemeni buildings, unbaked mud pottery, dresses, jewelry, basketry, and woodwork, bought from across the country. In June 2025, [Mabrouklyn](#) hosted an exhibition featuring around 60 pieces from Lackner's vast collection of around 500 artifacts at the [Kunstraum Gallery](#) in London, offering the public a rare glimpse of Yemen beyond the backdrop of war.

For this edition of the Yemen Review, Lackner spoke with Sana'a Center editor Lara Uhlenhaut about why she treasures this important collection and why she wants to preserve it until it returns to its original home.

Lara Uhlenhaut: Helen, what first brought you to Yemen?

Helen Lackner: I first visited Yemen in 1973 and later sought to spend time in the region to learn Arabic. I got a job teaching in South Yemen through the PDRY embassy. I didn't particularly want to teach, but I ended up teaching English and French at secondary schools and universities in Aden and Abyan. I was one of the few foreigners working for the PDRY government on a government salary, earning less than I could have received here in England on social security benefits. Most recognized voices on Yemen, such as Sheila Carapico, went to the YAR, and many did so because they could not complete their PhD fieldwork in Lebanon, which was in the midst of a civil war. This was back in the 70s. In the PDRY, there were very few expats, mostly Sudanese and Egyptian communists. At the time, the only international NGO allowed to operate in the PDRY on a residential basis was the Swedish Save the Children.

LU: Standard question to anyone who lived in Yemen. Did you chew qat?

HL: Under the PDRY regime, chewing qat was only allowed on weekends and holidays. I had decided that if I was going to properly live in Yemen, I just had to learn how to chew. As you probably know, the stuff tastes absolutely foul, so I spent months training myself to tolerate it. I practiced and occasionally chewed with some Yemeni families. Then I moved to the YAR in 1982 and discovered everyone was chewing qat practically every single day! I decided then that my only solution to that problem and its side effects, such as lack of sleep, was to chew only on Thursdays. I am neither militantly anti-qat nor am I pro. I recognize it as a major element of the Yemeni economy, particularly for smallholders and those working in its value chain.

LU: You are often interviewed about Yemen's political and social issues, but today we will discuss something more personal: your extensive collection of Yemeni artifacts. How did this collection come about?

HL: When I was living in Seyoun, the entertainment facilities were a little limited, and I am not a night person anyway, so on Fridays, when there was nothing much else to do, I would go to the handicraft souq. There was a woman named Sultana who was selling beautiful Hadrami dresses. So I kept buying them. I got about 20-30 of them. These highly decorated dresses, especially the Hadrami ones, were worn by Yemeni women even whilst working in the field. Others, such as the loose-fitting Tihami black or white ones, are impossible to find. Four from my collection have been accepted by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. I also have many cloths from Bait al-Faqih, a town in Tihama renowned for its weaving. Of course, over the years, the style and colours used have **changed** a lot. But I always used to buy what was in fashion that year. The mawaz, for example, (a traditional garment worn by men) went through many different trends. One year, they had tanks and guns woven into the pattern.

LU: You also have a rare collection of unbaked mud pottery from Hadramawt.

I first bought these pieces of pottery when I traveled to Hadramawt in 1977. The style has changed a lot since then, so you can't find these anymore. Much of it comes from Tarim in Hadramawt, and was produced by a specific family there. They had created unique styles and paint patterns that evolved over the years. Unfortunately, after the senior woman of the family died, they stopped making them, and they are now a unique heritage collection. They also made beautiful unbaked incense holders and little toy sets, like tea and coffee sets, for children. A colleague in France wrote her master's thesis on the pottery from this family in Tarim.



Unbaked mud coffee set toy from Tarim // Photo Credit: Helen Lackner



Silver pouch worn on belts by Yemeni men // Photo Credit: Helen Lackner

LU: I have noticed that whenever I see you speak about Yemen, you are always wearing this incredible Yemeni jewelry.

HL: I would say ninety-five percent of my jewelry is Yemeni, all of it made of silver. I make it a point of principle to wear Yemeni jewelry whenever I am talking about Yemen. And I never take off my Yemeni bracelets. Over time, I accumulated a large quantity; friends used to ask me to buy Yemeni jewelry for them whenever I was visiting Yemen, and I somehow ended up with sacks full of it. In Seyoun, I had my preferred jeweler, from whom I bought most of my pieces. The Seyoun silver souq was as good as the one in Sana'a, if not better.

As far as I know, these are the only two cities in Yemen with good and sizeable silver souqs. Over the decades, I noticed that many jewelers in Sana'a switched to gold. When I first visited,

most of the souqs sold silver, and there were only a few gold shops. Later, it was mostly tourists who were buying silver in the souq. Yemenis buy gold. But the quality is changing. I went to my "silver man" in Sana'a in 2013, and he was absolutely furious. "The Chinese are coming, buying our stuff, going home to make copies of it," he said, "then coming back to sell it as Yemeni silver."

LU: Many of the objects you collected reflect Yemen's rich regional diversity. How do they speak to a broader sense of Yemeni identity and unity?

HL: You can't drive in Yemen for more than two hours without a massive change of scenery. Yemen is so diverse – from the mountains to the terraces, to the desert, to the sea. A person from Al-Mahra is very different from someone from Sa'ada, from diet to culture to clothing to cultural expressions. Even though I accept the argument that, for example, Hadramis are very different from the rest of Yemen, there are also differences within Hadramawt itself, between the wadi and the coast. But those who know the country well can tell a Yemeni from someone from other parts of the peninsula.

Ultimately, there is something all Yemenis share, and even in these diverse artifacts, there is something distinctly Yemeni that you won't find, let's say, in Oman or Saudi Arabia. The difficulty is defining exactly what makes it Yemeni.



Model of the Kathiri Palace in Seyoun //Photo Credit: Helen Lackner

LU: Are there any pieces in the collection that hold special significance for you?

HL: It would have to be the model of the Seyoun Palace displayed at the exhibition in London. There was a brief period during which I had the keys to the Seyoun Palace. I was working there classifying documents that were found in its basement, just rolled up pieces of paper, mostly land tenure documents from the 19th and 20th centuries. I worked at the time with Jaafaar al-Saqqaf, a well-known cultural figure in Wadi Hadramawt. We cleared one room in one of the towers and put mats on the floor. We would go every morning with our flasks of tea and sit on our mats (I have a black-and-white picture somewhere). I couldn't read the writing, so he would read to me. When we needed a break, I would wander around the palace. I learned my way around, as it is quite complicated with many apartments and divisions. No one was using it at the time, and it was between the PDRY regime's plan to turn it into a hotel and the much better idea to turn it into a museum, but the work had not started yet. I even figured out which part of the palace I would have wanted to live in – my own private quarters. I would have to show you on the model.



Helen Lackner and Jaafaar al-Saqqaf at Seyoun Palace, December 1981 //Photo from Helen Lackner's archive.

LU: Yemen has experienced an assault on its cultural heritage during the past decade of war, a crisis that has not received significant attention in the media. Are you concerned about the future of Yemen's cultural heritage?

HL: I spend more time worrying about the future of these artifacts, to be honest, as this is something that I personally need to deal with. But this is certainly a major concern that Yemenis should address with greater urgency. What has changed about Yemeni culture isn't so much due to the war. If anything, these changes would be accelerating if it were not for the war. Of course, people are not thinking about these shifts because they are focused on more urgent matters, such as survival and coping with all the economic and humanitarian challenges. External influences, particularly the spread of globalized, mass market media and the use of artificial intelligence, pose a greater risk to the integrity of Yemeni culture than any conflict could. An example that comes to mind is how Yemeni music, for instance, is increasingly being Gulf-ized. The authenticity of local culture risks being eroded by this wave of artificial multimedia, which, while attractive to younger generations in particular, threatens to displace traditional forms of expression. This isn't unique to Yemen — it's a global trend. Many are not interested in preserving traditional culture. Understandably, they want to be modern and be part of the global system. This shift touches everything, from customs to clothing and artifacts.

LU: So, what message do you have for the younger generation of Yemenis who are trying to sustain and engage with these traditional practices and crafts?

HL: In 1980, I was walking around the Al-Qa'a souq in Sana'a. A couple of kids somehow found out that I was living in Aden. They all got very excited. "Aden must be wonderful," they said. And I was thinking to myself, why would they be so excited about socialist Aden? And then they said, "All those modern buildings!" It turns out Aden's block of flats, many of which were built by the Brits in the early 60s, had an allure. "We should destroy all of this lot here," they added, gesturing widely at the old souq. The attractions of the "modern world" were as pronounced then as they are now. Today, many contemporary artists blend the old with the new. It's creative, but it's different from preserving heritage. This is about creating something new. And whyever not! Why should painters, for example, limit themselves to reproducing 18th-century styles when they can offer modern interpretations? The problem lies when you stop being proud of your own traditions. And from my experience, Yemen was a place where people had pride in their own culture and traditions. Yes, Taizis and Adenis were the first to start wearing suits, but many Yemeni men still proudly walked around in their mawaz. It is true of any culture: preserving and keeping heritage alive doesn't mean walking around in loincloths. It is about valuing tradition, not being overly zealous about innovating or modernizing practices at the expense of traditions honed over centuries. I might be wrong, but I suspect there are significant numbers of younger generations who have perhaps lost that pride, and I am not sure it is because of the war. Some people want to emulate Elon Musk and have a Tesla. Others don't.

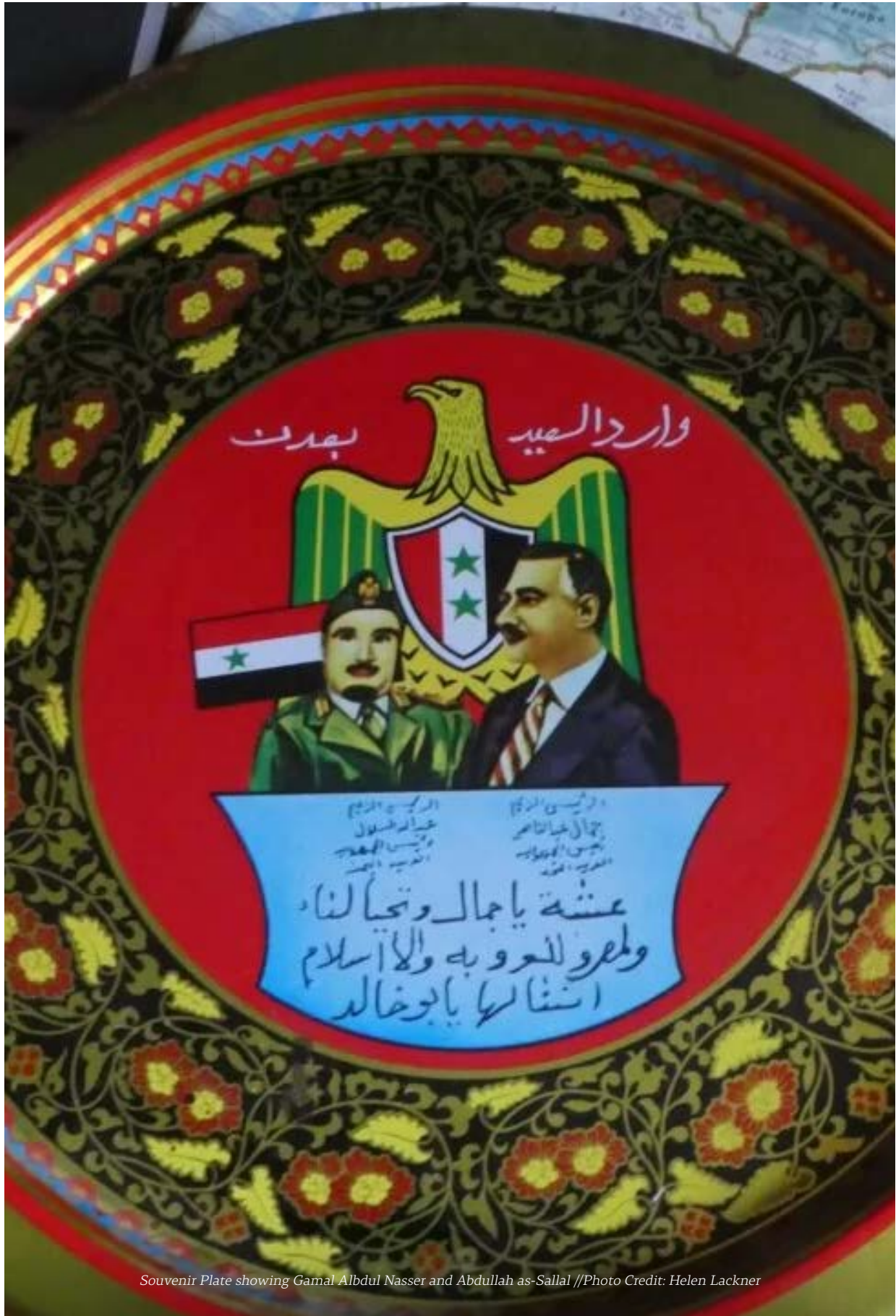
LU: What is next for your collection?

HL: For me, what matters most is finding a solution for the future of these artifacts. Arwa Othman had a small museum in Sana'a, filled with a far bigger and better collection of the kind of artifacts I have, including folk memorabilia. The Houthis came in and destroyed the whole lot. Returning my collection to Yemen in the current situation is not feasible. My focus is to catalogue and prepare these pieces so that, when the time is right, they can be returned to Yemen. It is important to hold on to these treasures. If you ever visit me in my house, where I have it all displayed, you will see I don't go for high art, but for folk art. There is not enough of it to open an entire museum, but there is a lot there, including political memorabilia such as socialist-era badges, historical items like memorial trays, and even bits and pieces from the national dialogue. All this is part of history, and it should be in Yemen and available to Yemenis. It's sitting in my house, which is all very nice, but I am not having the public enjoy these artifacts there. By doing this interview, I also look forward to good suggestions. I will keep the collection and find ways to store it until it goes to Yemen. Eventually, it should all go back to Yemen.

Lara Uhlenhaut is an editor with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. She has lived and worked extensively in the Arab region including as Gender and Development Consultant with the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Yemen and as Editor with the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Beirut. Lara holds an MA in Anthropology of Development from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London and a BA in English Literature from the University of Kent.

Helen Lackner is a non-resident fellow with the Sana'a Center. She lived in Yemen for more than 15 years in the past half century, working in all three of the states which existed in that period. She worked mostly in rural development, but also taught and carried out local socio-economic studies and training Yemen's environmental issues, particularly water and the impact of climate change are among her many interests. Her most recent books are 'Yemen in Crisis, Devastating Conflict, Fragile Hope' [Saqi 2023] and 'Yemen, Poverty and Conflict' [Routledge, 2023]. Her first book on Yemen was 'PDRY, Outpost of Socialist Development in Arabia' [Ithaca, 1985]

This article 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. Any views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



Souvenir Plate showing Gamal Abdul Nasser and Abdullah as-Sallal //Photo Credit: Helen Lackner



An art exhibition entitled, "We Are All Gaza," by artist Shahrazad al-Atharbi in Sana'a city on October 15, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo

Analysis

The War's Impact on Yemen's Intangible Cultural Heritage

Rafiq Al-Akouri

Yemen is uniquely positioned at the crossroads of Asia and Africa. Historically, this strategic location has made the country an important meeting point for multiple civilizations, resulting in a unique and dynamic landscape of intangible cultural heritage, expressed through rich oral traditions, intricate social practices, and diverse artistic expressions. To this day, rituals, festivals, customs, traditions, and tribal and communal norms continue to shape the daily lives of Yemenis, forming a living cultural heritage that is passed down through generations. The wide range of Arabic dialects spoken in Yemen, alongside indigenous languages such as Mehri and Soqotri, which are still in use today, has given rise to a rich oral and written tradition that preserves century-old customs through poetry, proverbs, and folktales.

Dance, singing, and music, too, are deeply embedded in Yemen's cultural fabric, with each region having its own distinctive musical and vocal traditions. The legacy of Sana'ani music and Hadrami *dan*, for instance, have been inscribed on UNESCO's Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Yemenis' artistic expressions are also evident in their handicrafts and the quality

of their craftsmanship. These skills are often passed down through generations, often within families that specialize in specific crafts, such as the making of *jambiyyas*, the traditional daggers worn by Yemeni men. A high level of artistry is also evident in the construction of Yemen's iconic mud-brick architecture, particularly in Hadramawt and the historic buildings of Old Sana'a. Yemenis' traditional knowledge, rooted in observations of natural processes and the environment, continues to guide rural communities, particularly in fields such as traditional medicine, sustainable agriculture, and agricultural astronomy.

Today, this vast wealth of intangible cultural heritage is being undermined, and threats to its survival are being overlooked. Armed groups are increasingly attempting to erase the cultural heritage of Yemeni communities. The displacement of thousands of Yemenis from their ancestral lands threatens to weaken the continuity of century-old legacies and practices, and the country's fragile and fragmented institutional capacity hinders efforts to both value and protect this precious heritage.

A War on Culture

Over the past decade, ongoing conflict and unrest have taken a heavy toll on the country's cultural traditions. This includes the systematic plundering of institutions dedicated to preserving this heritage, such as the looting of the Yemeni Music Heritage Center in Sana'a, which housed some of Yemen's oldest recordings. Radio stations across the country have also been **targeted**, many of which held valuable archives of Yemeni music. These stations have faced attacks from various warring parties, including the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) in Sana'a and Al-Qaeda in Mukalla. Cultural spaces, such as the Cairo Citadel, which once housed a traditional crafts center, were repurposed as military barracks. **Museums** across the country have been destroyed as collateral damage in bombing campaigns, and important initiatives like the House of Folklore, established by Arwa al-Othman in Sana'a, have been attacked.

The profound impact of war on living cultural heritage is rarely addressed. Since the onset of conflict, each warring faction has sought to assert its legitimacy by imposing a uniform culture on all segments of society. This has been done by eliminating practices that underpin cultural, religious, and ethnic identities. In Houthi-controlled areas, such attempts at distortion are rife. Examples include **criminalizing** singing and music, harassing artists, and issuing laws and directives related to the culture and identity of other groups, such as imposing specific **dress codes**, imposing regulations on **wedding** celebrations, and banning certain religious practices like the **Tarawih** prayers. These were banned on the grounds that they were a manifestation of Wahhabi influence in Yemen.

While Houthi authorities seek to eradicate certain practices, they also work to reinforce others, primarily by imposing distinct cultural, religious, and ethnic practices that reinforce their own identity. For instance, the Houthis have revived elements of intangible cultural heritage that were nearly extinct and reintroduced them in a distorted form to strengthen their rule. A striking example is the popular celebration of the Prophet's Birthday as an organized, large-scale official event. In the past, the event had a spiritual character, marked by gatherings of remembrance (*dhikr*) held in mosques or privately in homes. However, the Houthis have turned it into a major official event, staging mass public festivals focused on mobilization. The group has also transformed traditional **Zamil** folk poetry into mobilizing anthems.

Intangible Heritage in Exile

Further threatening the disruption of Yemen's social fabric is the **extensive displacement** taking place. The large-scale migration of Yemeni communities due to war has significantly disrupted their connection to their heritage, severing ties with the ancestral lands that are integral to their cultural identity. This displacement has changed Yemen's demographic landscape, often leading to cultural tensions between local populations and those who have been displaced. There are growing fears on both sides of losing their identities or having an unfamiliar culture imposed upon them. The displacement of women, who have traditionally played a key role in preserving domestic and community practices in Yemen, has considerably weakened the continuity of this heritage. The war has also led to emigration, primarily among youth, who will likely face a future disconnection from their heritage and the loss of cultural transmission. This is in addition to the emigration of bearers of cultural heritage, including folk artists, visual artists, skilled craftsmen, and tribal elders. Many researchers and specialists in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage have also emigrated.

There have been attempts and projects to create a cultural **community** in the diaspora. Yemenis abroad have opened traditional restaurants and shops selling traditional clothing, handmade goods, and local items such as incense, Taiz cheese, and traditional ghee. However, these ventures are often dominated by commercial interests, which affects the authenticity of the cultural elements. Influenced by supply and demand, one finds traditional clothing with a modern twist, or popular dishes served in the style of international cuisine. Furthermore, traditional industries and crafts lose much of their authenticity due to the unavailability of natural materials sourced from Yemen. Even customs and traditions are ultimately influenced by the host society's culture.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage

In 2006, Yemen ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The ratification was formalized through the issuance of Law No. (9) of 2006, and the Convention was signed on behalf of Yemen by the Ministry of Culture's Undersecretary for Works and Intellectual Property. In implementing the Convention's provisions, a decision was issued in 2014 to appoint an Undersecretary for the Intangible Cultural Heritage Sector within the Ministry of Culture; however, the sector's activities have not been effectively implemented.

Article 16 of the Convention stipulates that, in order to ensure greater visibility of intangible cultural heritage, raise awareness of its significance, and encourage dialogue that respects cultural diversity, the Intergovernmental Committee shall establish, maintain, and publish a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, based on proposals submitted by States Parties. The Convention further clarifies that, for an element to be inscribed on the Representative List, it must be present within the territory of the submitting state, practiced by communities over generations, transmitted across time, and fulfill a recognized social function within the community.

Because of the war, Yemen has lost the opportunity to register several elements that constitute a core part of its cultural heritage. These elements have instead been ascribed to neighboring countries, either as national or joint files, without Yemen's participation.

Examples include:

- Knowledge and practices related to cultivating Khawlani coffee beans: Inscribed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the Representative List in 2022. Although Saudi Arabia initially proposed submitting a joint file with Yemen, this did not materialize.
- Harees, a traditional dish consisting of crushed wheat cooked with meat: Inscribed in 2023 as a joint file between the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, despite the dish's widespread presence in multiple regions of Yemen, including Hadramawt and Tiham.
- Semsemiah, instrument crafting and playing: Inscribed in 2024 as a joint file between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, notwithstanding academic studies confirming that the Semsemiah was transmitted to Africa through Yemen.
- Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity: Inscribed in 2024 as a joint file involving the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Jordan (notably excluding Yemen), the historical country of origin of coffee.
- Zaffa traditions (wedding processions): Inscribed as a joint file involving the United Arab Emirates, Djibouti, the Comoros, Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, and Somalia. Although the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) requested Yemen's participation, the relevant Yemeni authorities were unable to fulfill the procedural requirements.

While they have been excluded from a number of initiatives, Yemeni elements of intangible cultural heritage are inscribed on the Representative [List](#) of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

- Sana'ani singing/songs (2008).
- Date palms: knowledge, skills, traditions, and practices (joint file) (2019).
- Arabic calligraphy: knowledge, skills, and practices (joint file) (2021).
- Arts, skills, and practices associated with engraving on precious metals (joint file) (2023).
- Henna: rituals, aesthetics, and social practices (joint file) (2024).

In December, Hadrami *dan* music, submitted by the Hadramawt Foundation, was [added](#) to Yemen's list of intangible cultural heritage.

Protecting Prized Heritage: Obstacles and Opportunities

In 2002, the Ministry of Culture established the Heritage and Cultural Development Fund. According to its founding [decree](#), the Fund's objectives include "supporting the establishment of local and international exhibitions, activities, and cultural events related to Yemen's cultural, civilizational, and historical heritage," and "contributing to the support of activities of popular organizations, associations, and centers involved in the collection, protection, and preservation of cultural and civilizational heritage."

By 2014, the Heritage Fund supported over 100 **associations** and civil society organizations. This support ceased completely with the start of the war, leading to the suspension of activities for most of these institutions due to a lack of funding. Some organizations that managed to survive and continue their work were then shut down in the later stages of the war due to widespread harassment, including **pressure** to align their work with the Houthis ideological orientations and diktats. Civil society organizations, working to safeguard cultural heritage, must obtain permits from security authorities, especially in Houthi-controlled areas, and face difficulties securing funding from donors. When funding is obtained, **security** approval is still required, and activities are monitored, often leading to their distortion to align with the **agendas** of political and cultural groups.

The Social Fund for Development (SFD), established in 1997 under the Prime Minister's Office, supported intangible heritage projects submitted by institutions and organizations through its **Heritage Unit**. It also conducted capacity-building courses and workshops for institutions, organizations, and individuals. The SFD also ran the Small and Micro Enterprise Development Program, which has supported institutions dedicated to traditional crafts. The Unit's activities ceased at the beginning of the war, but it later resumed some of its functions through UNESCO's "Cash for Work" program, which has financed a range of projects related to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Over the decades, numerous international laws and conventions have been enacted to protect cultural heritage from the impacts of conflict. Yet, many of these instruments have largely focused on tangible cultural heritage, such as the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, while giving little to no attention to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

In Yemen's case, the official institutions responsible for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage—foremost among them the Intangible Cultural Heritage Sector within the Ministry of Culture—should undertake concrete safeguarding measures, including developing national inventories covering the full range of Yemen's intangible cultural heritage. For those that have already been inscribed by other states, Yemen can submit requests to join those files so that they become joint inscriptions, while simultaneously preparing and submitting dedicated nomination files for Yemeni heritage elements to UNESCO's lists. Such steps are essential for preserving this heritage for future generations of Yemenis, wherever they are, and for ensuring that these unique cultural practices are not lost forever.

Editor's note: A previous version of this article referenced religious shrines that are not under the control of the Houthi group. The Sana'a Center regrets the error.

Rafiq al-Akouri is a researcher and national expert in Yemeni cultural heritage. He holds a postgraduate diploma from the Higher Institute of Folk Arts, specializing in folklore methodologies and preservation techniques, and serves as a focal point and supervisor for Yemen's cultural heritage files with UNESCO. Al-Akouri is the President of the Yemeni Organization for the Preservation of Yemeni Cultural Heritage and has participated in numerous national and international projects aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage. These include UNESCO projects focused on preserving Sana'ani singing and documenting children's traditional play songs in Yemen. He is also Yemen's representative to the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD).

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Caption: The Al-Wadea border crossing // Photo credit: Saudi Press Agency

Analysis

Al-Wadea Crossing: A Critical Corridor in Disarray

Daifallah Al-Soufi, Ahmed Abdelmonem and Mazen Fares

The Al-Wadea border crossing between Yemen and Saudi Arabia was established in September 2003, coinciding with efforts by both countries to **enhance coordination** and cooperation amid the security challenges posed by terrorism. Before the war, the crossing was used for the movement of Yemeni travelers to and from Saudi Arabia, but its activity remained limited due to the existence of other points of entry, such as the Al-Tuwal crossing in Hajjah and the Al-Buqa' and Alab crossings in Sa'ada. Al-Tuwal and Al-Buqa' were more convenient options for entry to and exit from Saudi Arabia because of their proximity to population centers, in contrast to Al-Wadea, which is located in the northeast of Yemen in Hadramawt.

Since 2015, however, the Al-Tuwal crossing has been closed following the transformation of the city into a military confrontation zone between government forces and the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*), who turned the area into a **military base** used to target cities in southern Saudi Arabia. The war has also forced the closure of other crossings as well, and for the past decade, Al-Wadea has served as the only remaining land connection between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The crossing's importance has therefore increased, evolving into a primary hub for commercial traffic, the entry of humanitarian aid into Yemen, and the movement of travelers and pilgrims, particularly between Yemen's eastern governorates and Saudi Arabia. The importance of the Al-Wadea crossing is further amplified by the **large Yemeni community** in Saudi Arabia, which remains the primary destination for Yemeni expatriation.

Today, the crossing has become a site plagued by chronic congestion, corruption, and inefficiency, driven by fragmented control, weak institutional capacity, and increased traffic. Frequent changes in authority, the absence of effective management systems, and unsuccessful reform attempts—such as the poorly implemented Obour application—have further strained operations, making the crossing a burden for Yemenis. To ease these challenges, comprehensive and accountable oversight has become imperative.

A Vital Passage Caught in Chaos

Data from Yemen's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Affairs indicate that approximately **1.5 million** Yemenis reside in Saudi Arabia. Despite its limited infrastructure and weak capacity, the Al-Wadea crossing receives thousands of Yemenis daily, including expatriates returning home, laborers seeking opportunities abroad, and patients who rely on it as a critical gateway for medical treatment. Al-Wadea accounts for approximately two-thirds of total passenger movement to and from the country. In 2024, **it received roughly 2.3 million passengers** out of the 3.3 million who crossed Yemen's land, sea, and air borders. The crossing is also a primary conduit for the flow of goods into Yemen.

In recent years, the surge in the number of travelers, combined with a lack of institutional development, has transformed Al-Wadea into a daily scene of severe congestion and protracted queues. Amid persistent administrative **challenges** and organizational chaos faced by Yemeni authorities, the crossing has become more than a mere transit point; it now serves as a mirror reflecting Yemen's fragmented reality and the government's inability to provide services commensurate with the crossing's strategic, economic, and humanitarian significance. Chronic structural and administrative shortcomings include the absence of a reliable electronic system for managing and documenting cross-border movement and the failure to separate commercial and humanitarian truck traffic from other vehicles, thereby exacerbating daily congestion.

Official data shows that revenues from the crossing exceeded **100 billion Yemeni rials** in 2024, making it one of the state's most significant sources of income. Despite, or perhaps because of the substantial revenues it generates, multiple testimonies and **reports** indicate the crossing has remained a theater for illegal levies and the exploitation of influence by various military and administrative leaders who have vied for control throughout the years of the war. These include both civilian and military actors, represented by the border administration and the forces tasked with securing the crossing. The primary military unit operating at the crossing is the 2nd Battalion, also known as the Border Crossing Protection Battalion, which falls under the 141st Infantry Brigade. The brigade is part of the government's 6th Military Region based in Marib, with operational theaters in Al-Jawf, Amran, and Sa'adah. Another force operating at the crossing consists of military units affiliated with the Saudi-backed Nation's Shield forces, under the command of Presidential Leadership Council head Rashad al-Alimi. Civilian actors have also been implicated in the imposition of illegal tolls and extortion, including the former director of the crossing, Mutlaq al-Sa'iri. Following widespread reports of corruption at the crossing, then-Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar formed an official committee in 2016 to investigate the matter. However, the findings of this investigation have never been publicly disclosed, and **Al-Sa'iri** remained in his position until 2024.

Ongoing structural imbalances have maintained a fertile ground for extortion and corruption, turning the crossing into a passage that is both psychologically and financially taxing for Yemenis. In response, the authorities marketed Obour, an electronic transit application, as an organizational solution, but it has quickly become part of the problem, exacerbating border issues.

The Obour App

In late January 2025, the Land Transport Authority announced the launch of the **Obour application**, a move described at the time as an attempt to organize traffic and entry through Al-Wadea and to reduce the lengthy wait times endured by Yemenis. The application offered several features, including advance booking, emergency case processing, and reservation verification.

However, a significant gap between its stated goals and its practical implementation quickly became apparent. According to testimonies from travelers and drivers,^[4] Obour suffered from persistent technical glitches, including frozen requests, delays in booking approvals, applications remaining “pending,” and problems in rebooking after a cancellation. Furthermore, the application was not supported on iPhones.^[2] Reviews on the Google Play Store reflected **deep frustration** with these failures, which placed many in precarious situations,^[3] particularly those whose visas were nearing expiration or whose travel dates were tied to employment contracts.

Testimonies suggest that conditions at the border and the app’s failure have given rise to a parallel system: paying for passage. Travelers reported paying between 500 and 800 Saudi riyals (roughly between 130 to just over 200 USD) to brokers and intermediaries at the crossing to allow their vehicles to bypass the long queues.^[4] Many travelers assert that this has become the only way to avoid waiting a week or more at the crossing.^[5] Sometimes payment is mandatory. One driver recounted being asked for 500 Saudi riyals to “cross into Saudi territory” after the system repeatedly rejected his booking.^[6] These accounts align with internal reports from the crossing confirming “clear brokerage” at the entry gates, especially during peak seasons such as the Hajj.^[7]

Consequently, rather than improving wait times and facilitating transit, the Obour app has created additional bottlenecks that entrench extortion and impose new financial burdens on travelers.

Power Struggles

Throughout the war, the crossing has been a major source of revenue, making its control a focal point of political and economic competition. In recent years, Al-Wadea has seen frequent changes in its protection and supervisory arrangements, reflecting intense competition among Yemeni factions over one of the country’s few remaining sources of revenue. Until mid-2024, the crossing was **under the supervision** of the 141st Brigade, affiliated with the government’s 6th Military Region. But in August of that year, control shifted to the Saudi-funded **Nation’s Shield forces**, which **assumed responsibility for passports, customs, and the central gate**. This transition followed popular and tribal demands in Hadramawt to hand over management to locals; the move to the Nation’s Shield forces achieved this, **as most of its personnel are from Hadramawt**. But despite the transfer of supervision, the crossing continues to face the same structural issues of corruption and a lack of oversight.

¹ Interview with driver transporting passengers to and from Saudi Arabia, November 29, 2025.

² Interview with a driver and a traveler, October 15, 2025.

³ Review by the author of comments on the Google Play Store, November 25, 2025.

⁴ Interview with an expatriate laborer, September 3, 2025.

⁵ Interview with an expatriate, September 3, 2025.

⁶ Interview with an expatriate, September 3, 2025.

⁷ Interview with an expatriate, September 3, 2025.

Although the crossing's management announced the abolition of passport fees (previously 10 Saudi riyals) in November 2024, the move failed to stop illicit financial practices. Fees soon reappeared **under new names and through different methods**, indicating that the problem lies not in the fees themselves but in the absence of institutional accountability. This prompted **government directives** in October 2025 that emphasized the need to halt revenue collection outside legal frameworks. The Ministry of Transport was legally responsible for enforcement, with a focus on collecting revenues through official channels and remitting them to the central bank.

An Urgent Need for Administrative Oversight

The experience with the Obour app and other reform attempts demonstrates that the core issue is not a lack of technical tools, but the absence of an administrative and regulatory system capable of managing such a sensitive facility. Every attempt at change is met by a corrupt system capable of circumventing new rules and reproducing itself in new forms.

Improving processes at Al-Wadea requires a genuine commitment from official authorities to reform the administrative system, decouple military influence from civilian management, and hold accountable those involved in financial extortion and exploitation.

Financial and administrative oversight must be strengthened to ensure that all revenues are deposited into the treasury in accordance with the law, and that illegal financial practices are abolished. Activating the roles of regulatory bodies, including the Ministry of Transport and relevant government agencies, is vital to ensuring compliance and penalizing those who exploit travelers. This oversight should be continuous and multi-layered, involving field inspections, regular audits of financial records, and technical reviews of the application process to ensure transparency at every stage of a traveler's journey.

Technically, the Obour application requires updating to provide effective booking mechanisms and technical support for travelers. These measures must be overseen by independent regulatory bodies to ensure the application is not used as a vehicle for further financial extortion.

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The Amiriyah School was built in the 16th century in the city of Rada'a, Al-Bayda Governorate. // Photo source: U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

Commentary

Al-Bayda and the Stigma of Terrorism

Mohammed Abdullah

“At around 8 pm, we heard the sound of aircraft circling overhead for a short period before the noise faded away. At approximately 1 in the morning, an airborne operation took place involving a helicopter (Apache), from which American soldiers were deployed. The helicopter descended to a low altitude near the home of Sheikh Abdelraouf Al-Dahab, and the soldiers stormed the house. We heard gunfire that continued until dawn, while Apache helicopters remained hovering overhead. Anyone who attempted to flee the house or neighboring homes was targeted by the aircraft. Even women and children who tried to escape were killed. ”

- Testament of a local resident who witnessed the US raid on Yakla, Al-Bayda, in 2017.

With its central location bordering eight other governorates, Al Bayda is considered one of Yemen's most important regions. It was on the frontline between North and South Yemen prior to unification in 1990. Its predominantly Shafi'i (Sunni) population had a history of conflict with Zaydi states from the north until the 1962 revolution against the Zaydi Imams, in which the people of Al-Bayda played a decisive role. Today, many of its residents view the Houthis as an extension of those Zaydi states. The Houthis, in turn, made the governorate one of their first targets for expansion after seizing control of Sana'a in September 2014, under the pretext of protecting civilians from Al-Qaeda. Areas of the governorate were subjected to siege, displacement, and

shelling. Conflict between the Houthis and the governorate's residents continues to the present, despite the disparity in arms. The Houthis hold an advantage in numbers, weaponry, and financial and logistical support over the local tribal forces they encounter, whom they routinely brand as terrorists. The stigma of association with Al-Qaeda provided the Houthis with a pretext for invasion, occupation, and repression, and the group's presence has drawn US airstrikes. Even though it no longer has a serious footprint in the governorate, Al-Bayda still pays a price for the association with Al-Qaeda.

The Al-Dahab Legacy: Family Feuds and Ties to Al-Qaeda

For the citizens of Al-Bayda, their initial encounters with Al-Qaeda were limited to an internal conflict in the **Al-Dahab family**. Three siblings, Tareq, Nabil, and Qaid, were considered to be affiliated with the organization and waged a struggle against their older brother, tribal sheikh and parliamentarian Ali al-Dahab. They claimed he had **usurped** their rights after their father's death. Ali expelled Tareq and his brothers, who relocated to Sana'a.

Tareq eventually joined Al-Qaeda. His brother-in-law was Yemeni-American Anwar al-Awlaqi, whom he had met in the Political Security Prison in Sana'a sometime between 2006 and 2007. In early 2012, the two led **Al-Qaeda** forces to seize the city of Rada'a in Al-Bayda. The forces **pledged** allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri as Al-Qaeda's international leader, and to Tareq as Emir of Rada'a.

Tareq gained social standing outside Al-Qaeda for his perceived even-handedness in resolving local conflicts. Tribes would come to him to arbitrate their disputes, as he was known for ruling in favor of the rightful party and for refusing bribes or fees for his services. Tareq himself **withdrew** from the city following tribal mediation and an eventual deal with the state. An agreement was reached for a withdrawal to Al-Manaseh—Tareq's village in the northwest Wald Rabi' district—in exchange for the **release** of Nabil al-Dahab, Tareq's brother, from a prison run by the Political Security Organization.

In 2012, Tareq withdrew to his village, but **was killed** by another brother, Hizam, just a few days later. Tareq's supporters in Al-Qaeda, in turn, killed Hizam, who was accused of acting on behalf of **the** state. The organization controlled the northwest Al-Manaseh area for months before **withdrawing** through another round of tribal mediation. But the stigma of being linked to Al-Qaeda was now attached to the whole Al-Dahab family, even those who were not members of the organization. Another brother, Abdelraouf al-Dahab, was appointed sheikh of the Wald Rabi' district and dealt with official authorities, even meeting with then-President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Abderaouf fought alongside the Yemeni government against the Houthis and worked with popular resistance groups coordinating with the government to form military brigades aimed at liberating Rada'a and Al-Bayda. As a result of increasing tribal pressure, elements of Al-Qaeda withdrew to the Yakla area, bordering Marib.

The instability and tension wrought by tribal-familial conflict and Al-Qaeda activity **paved the way for the Houthis** to take control of the governorate in October 2014. The group committed violations aimed at subjugating the tribes and humiliating their leaders. The Houthis **publicly executed four sheikhs from the Al-Omar tribe** in the southern Dhi Na'im district in 2016. Many people were arrested and killed, some **tortured to death** in Houthi custody.

Some fighters from Al-Qaeda supported the tribes in their battle against the Houthis after 2014, but the group no longer posed a serious threat as a coherent force. Instead, it became a dangerous liability. The threat now was the **American bombing** of Al-Qaeda elements located in residential areas. For years, Al-Bayda was a theater of US drone strikes and **air** operations. Citizens repeatedly sought tribal mediation to secure the withdrawal of Al-Qaeda elements from their areas, and the group typically complied.

Some have interpreted American operations against Al-Qaeda in the governorate **as providing a service to the Houthis**, as airstrikes on members of Al-Qaeda facilitated their rapid takeover of areas of the governorate. One **raid** involved 30 American personnel transported by Apache helicopters to the village of Yakla, in the northwest of Al-Bayda Governorate, on January 29, 2017. The **operation** resulted in the deaths of around 25 people, among them women and **children**. The exact number of Al-Qaeda members among them remains unknown. The operation reinforced the prevailing narrative portraying the area as a hub for terrorism. The Houthis continued to extend their reach, and by 2021, the group announced the elimination of Al-Qaeda elements and its complete control over the governorate.

An Unrelenting Houthi Campaign of Violence on Al-Bayda Residents

The relationship between the Houthis and the residents of Al-Bayda has been characterized by explicit or latent hostility and a lack of trust, with repeated bouts of severe oppression and violence against the local population. Fighting has been recurrent since the Houthis moved in in 2014, and has continued under their occupation, with many villages in multiple rounds of confrontation and violence. The Houthis routinely destroy the homes of their opponents in Al-Bayda as a form of collective punishment. Instances have been recorded in the **Al-Hufrah** neighborhood in Rada'a, the villages of **Hankat al-Masoud**, **Khubza**, **Hammat Sarar**, and **Al-Zaub** in Qaifah, and **Al-Humayqan** in Al-Zahir district. By 2020, the **Houthis had blown up** approximately 816 homes, 124 of which were in the Al-Bayda governorate. Notably, such actions have continued after the Houthis announced their elimination of Al-Qaeda in Al-Bayda and their **assumption of** full control over the governorate in September 2021. Though the Houthis initially justified their military expansion in Al-Bayda under the pretext of counterterrorism, their use of repressive violence continues in the absence of Al-Qaeda activity.

Between 2014 and 2017, 350 families were displaced from the northwest **village of Al-Zaub** due to a Houthi siege. The most severe fighting took place in June 2015, which led to the displacement of most of the village's residents, with further fighting in March 2016 and September 2020. Residents had tried to prevent **Houthi fighters from using** the road passing through their village during the group's advance into Al-Bayda. Indiscriminate bombardment damaged water tanks, wells, communication networks, and electricity lines. Civilians—particularly women and children—were prevented from evacuating to receive medical attention. Homes, shops, and vehicles were looted or blown up, and medical supplies were stolen from the area's only hospital. Fuel tankers were burned, and qat farms were destroyed. Twenty-nine civilians were killed, and 100 were **kidnapped or detained**. Tribal mediation led to an agreement under which the Houthis would withdraw in exchange for villagers halting their resistance activities. However, the Houthis violated the agreement **two years later**, shelling homes and storming the village with tanks.

The Houthis **blew up most of the** houses in Khubza in 2014 during their expansion into Al-Bayda. Around 200 families were displaced from the village, and an agreement was reached that the Houthis would not enter the village. However, in July 2022, the Houthis claimed that three of their fighters were killed at a security checkpoint near the **village** and imposed a siege preventing entry or exit. Seventeen civilians were killed, and several homes were burned. The Houthis also accused the village residents of harboring **foreign fighters**, though there is no evidence that any were present. In early 2025, Houthi forces requested permission **to pass through the village** to go to another area. Once inside, they imposed a comprehensive siege under the pretext of **“searching for fugitives.”**

Oppressive and arbitrary Houthi rule has bred further conflict. In 2023, a relative of a Houthi supervisor killed Saif al-Zaylai in the **Al-Hufrah neighborhood of Rada'a**, reportedly over a dispute over qat taxes. Al-Zaylai was a qat seller in the Souq Uraybe qat market, west of Rada'a, and had refused to pay. The family pursued the case, finding support from the neighborhood *aqil*, Ali Tawfiq Naqqous, and local residents. But after a year, there was still no progress toward justice. The victim's brother saw his killer passing in an armed Houthi vehicle, and opened fire, killing him. He then fled the neighborhood. The Houthis, after trying and failing to find him, **decided to blow up his house**. The explosion caused neighboring houses to collapse, killing 20 civilians. Amidst local and international outcry, the Houthi leadership claimed that what happened was an **isolated incident** and promised an investigation. Naqqous and local residents continue to pay a price for their stance, as the Houthis routinely provoke the neighborhood's residents, fabricate pretexts for confrontation, and engage them in violent clashes that have resulted in several casualties. At present, Naqqous and a group of neighborhood youths are detained in the Political Security prison in Al-Bayda.

In **Hanakat al-Masoud**, fighting erupted in January 2025 when the Houthis tightened their control over the village. Using tanks and drones, the Houthis cut off communications for days, looted private property, and demolished several homes via shelling. They **killed approximately 15** civilians and conducted a massive arrest campaign targeting nearly 400 people, more than 60 of whom remain detained in Sana'a. The Houthis claimed that the residents had prevented them from taking custody of fugitives, while sources in the village said they were demanding the implementation of a prosecution order to release the five men.

In the northwest village of Hammat Sarar, homes were demolished and artesian wells destroyed in initial fighting in 2015. In August 2024, Houthi gunmen killed two young men from the **village of Hammat Sarar**. The villagers pursued the killers in an attempt to retaliate, killing approximately four of the group's fighters. In turn, the Houthis brought in tanks and armored vehicles, tightening their siege around the village and demanding **the handover of those accused** of killing its members. The siege was not lifted until village elders were handed over as hostages through tribal mediation.

The Houthis have prevented relief organizations from reaching areas opposed to their rule, and have disempowered local officials. Public officials are treated with suspicion^[1] and paid lower salaries than their counterparts elsewhere.^[2] They have imposed additional taxes^[3] on agricultural crops such as qat, residents' most important source of income. They have also imposed disproportionate fees on government offices - the Health Office in Al Bayda pays monthly fees to the Ministry in Sana'a that are four times higher than those paid by Dhamar.^[4]

¹ Interview with a security official in the Al-Quraishyah district, June 2019.

² Interview with the director of a summer school in Rada'a, April 2025.

³ Interviews with a group of tribal leaders and tribesmen, May 2025.

⁴ Interview with an employee of the governorate Health Office, April 2025.

The Price of Stigma

Citizens see no explanation for these discriminatory practices other than collective punishment. Al-Bayda has one of the lowest recruitment rates into the Houthi ranks of the northern governorates, and continues to resist the administration of Houthi supervisors. Consequently, the Houthis have continued to try to link the citizens of Al-Bayda to terrorism whenever conflict erupts. This is perhaps an attempt to create political cover, though international organizations have condemned the violence against civilians, stating that it may amount to **war crimes**. Locally, this narrative has helped the Houthis neutralize tribes in Al-Bayda, preventing them from garnering support from villages, who fear being accused of supporting terrorism. It may also have facilitated the mobilization of tribal fighters to support the Houthis under the pretext of counterterrorism.

The relationship between the Houthis and the citizens of Al-Bayda remains characterized by mistrust and animosity. It is an equation the Houthis have sought to change through subjugation and violence, while citizens combat these efforts with their own arms. But the balance of power is in the Houthis' favor, and whatever loss of popularity the group incurs due to its use of excessive violence, its use of heavy weapons, sieges, and home demolitions has been decisive. Despite the national and international condemnation of Houthi practices in Al-Bayda, residents fear that the stigma of terrorism and the violence that accompanies it will stick with them.

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This publication was produced as part of the second phase of the Yemen Peace Forum (YPF), 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. The YPF is funded by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



An art exhibition entitled, "We Are All Gaza," by artist Shahrazad al-Atharbi in Sana'a city on October 15, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo

Analysis

The Saudi-Emirati Economic Rivalry and Its Fallout in Yemen

Khaled Monassar

Tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates predate the recent confrontation in Hadramawt, stemming from a deeper rift that was already apparent at the start of the coalition's campaign in Yemen. From the outset, the two powers pursued distinct goals, influenced by broader economic ambitions and long-standing strategic competition that extended well beyond Yemen's borders. The friction between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has undermined efforts to free Yemen from the grip of the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*), fueling divisions among local actors. Ultimately, it is Yemen and the Yemeni people who have paid—and continue to pay—a heavy price.

Saudi Arabia entered the war primarily to protect its southern border from the threat of a group linked to Iran. The UAE had its own reasons. The first was to keep Saudi Arabia occupied with another enemy. Although relations between the two countries appeared normal in 2015, unresolved issues have persisted since the UAE's founding. The second reason was the UAE's economic ambitions, which in Yemen extended to the strategic Bab al-Mandab strait, the port of Aden, and the island of Socotra. Abu Dhabi also attempted to extend its influence over the telecommunications sector in areas under government control through an [agreement](#) between the Emirati company NX Technologies and the government in August 2023, but the deal was later halted due to public pressure.

Economic competition has been a primary factor in the rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In May 2009, the UAE announced its **withdrawal** from the Gulf single-currency project after Saudi Arabia was chosen as the headquarters of the proposed central bank. The decision ultimately resulted in the failure to establish a unified currency. Although the UAE provided other justifications for its withdrawal, the prevailing view is that it sees itself as the financial center of the Gulf.

The rivalry intensified with Saudi Arabia's launch of its Vision 2030 program in April 2016, an initiative aimed at creating a prosperous economy, diversifying revenue sources, attracting foreign investment, and developing projects in tourism, real estate, transport, and logistics sectors. The UAE viewed this as a serious economic threat, given Saudi Arabia's geographical location, size, and vast financial resources.

Over the past five years, the UAE has sought to establish major tourism and logistics projects of its own to compete with Saudi Arabia, including the US\$35 billion Ras Al-Hekma project in Egypt, as well as a number of port management and logistics service projects. In Yemen, the UAE sought to gain control—through its allies—of the port of Aden, which had been managed by Dubai Ports World from 2008 until the government, under then-President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, canceled the agreement in August 2012. The UAE also sought to control the Bab al-Mandab, the southern gateway to the Red Sea, through its allies, who maintain a military presence on the coast and on the nearby Mayyun Island.

Riyadh has taken its own steps to secure economic supremacy. In February 2021, the Kingdom **announced** a policy prohibiting government entities from contracting with companies whose regional headquarters are not in Saudi Arabia. The policy was intended to help diversify the economy, create local job opportunities, and increase foreign investment. But it was also an effort at regional economic consolidation. The regional headquarters of many global companies were located in the UAE, which accordingly viewed the measure as targeting its own foreign investment. On January 26, the Saudi Minister of Investment stated that more than **700 global companies** have established their regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia.

Competition in artificial intelligence and data centers represents a new front in this conflict, as both countries seek to become the leading regional hub in these sectors. According to PwC **estimates**, the contribution of artificial intelligence to the UAE's GDP by 2030 will be US\$96 billion (13.6 percent), while in Saudi Arabia it will reach US\$135.2 billion (12.4 percent).

In its most audacious move to date, the UAE supported the Southern Transitional Council (STC) as it sought to extend its control over Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in December, a maneuver that could have advanced a secessionist project and undermined Saudi influence in Yemen. Hadramawt has been a longstanding red line for Saudi Arabia - the two share a long border and significant social and political ties. Riyadh has previously explored extending an oil pipeline through Hadramawt and securing a maritime outlet on the Arabian Sea.

Ultimately, by shifting economic competition into a military and political confrontation in eastern Yemen, the UAE raised the stakes too high. Saudi Arabia responded by expelling and dissolving the STC and reasserting its dominant position across southern Yemen. But Abu Dhabi is unlikely to relinquish what's left of its investment in the country. Despite the UAE's announcement of its withdrawal from Yemen, the political and economic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE will persist, and Yemen will not be immune to its machinations.

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A Yemeni flag on the rubble of the Sheikh Ibrahim Aqil school in Taiz's Al-Mudhaffar district, October 10, 2024 // Photo by Al-Baraa Mansour

Analysis

From Stagnation to Destabilization: How Yemen is Becoming the Region's Ticking Time Bomb

Salah Ali Salah

Recent developments in Yemen have broken years of stagnation, bringing the country into an explosive new era. The Southern Transitional Council's (STC) initial **expansion** into the eastern governorates, and its subsequent loss of territory and dissolution under Saudi pressure, have revealed the fragility of the Gulf powers' "containment" approach to Yemen. This strategy, which has traditionally relied on sharing influence by backing local politicians and armed factions, had managed to keep Yemen's fragile anti-Houthi coalition together for nearly a decade. Now, as regional priorities shift and the local landscape changes, that time is over.

The priorities of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in Yemen have long been diverging. In recent years, Saudi Arabia moved toward a political solution with the Houthi group (*Ansar Allah*) in Sana'a, while the UAE focused on consolidating influence along the country's southern coastlines and maritime corridors. This planted the seeds for competition between the two powers, which publicly erupted with the STC's surprise advance on Yemen's eastern governorates in December 2025. The move crossed Saudi red lines, bringing UAE-backed forces **near** the Saudi border and raising **Saudi fears** of a complete loss of influence in the country.

The drastic whiplash in political control between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has unfolded against the background of the ongoing conflict against the Houthis. Although both countries **entered** the war in 2015 to fight the group, that mission has been forced to share the table with other mounting priorities, which increasingly center on competition between the two powers. Simply put, neither state now appears to make combating the Houthis a central part of its political calculations.

On the other hand, the Houthis' silence during the southern escalation may indicate that they were pleased with the discord and fragmentation among their allied adversaries. Most public comments from Houthi leaders in December and early January focused on external events – an **insult** against the Quran in the United States, the **Israeli recognition** of Somaliland, the US military's **capture** of Venezuelan President Nicholas Maduro, US President Donald Trump's demand to control **Greenland**, and **protests** in Iran. Their focus on broader international issues enabled them to present themselves to their supporters as a legitimate regional power, while their rivals remained preoccupied with settling local scores and squabbling among themselves.

On the ground, the Houthis have **continued** to mobilize large swaths of their population and launch new **recruitment** campaigns in their areas, while keeping a close eye on weapons and armored vehicles recently transferred to the frontlines, which could represent a direct threat. The STC removed weapons and equipment from Hadramawt to Al-Dhalea, Aden, and other areas after seizing control of the governorate. During the recent operation to expel the STC, other forces within the anti-Houthi coalition sent additional weapons and ammunition to Marib and other areas. The Houthis could respond by moving to neutralize these assets.

Across the Gulf of Aden, Israel's recognition of the autonomous region of Somaliland has added another layer to the Yemeni equation. Israel remains firmly committed to its hostile stance toward the Houthis, believing they have not yet been sufficiently "**disciplined**," like other Iranian proxies, who suffered heavy blows in Syria and Lebanon. In recent years, Israel has adopted a strategy of fueling local **rivalries** and **destabilizing** governments. To this end, Israel appears to be **strengthening** security coordination with Somaliland, which could soon yield a Red Sea airbase. This would expand its regional influence and capabilities in the southern Red Sea, which would be helpful should Israel's military confrontation with the Houthis **resume**.

The Houthis have **cultivated** their own footprint in the Horn of Africa through **recruitment** networks, enabling them to build ties across the Red Sea and extend weapons-smuggling networks. After a period of relative silence, the Houthis have again raised the possibility of renewed Red Sea conflict, and appear to possess the tools and contacts to do so via their own long-range arsenal and **links to Al Shabaab**, the Somali Al-Qaeda affiliate. The Houthis have long **sought** to play a role on the opposite shore of the Red Sea, much as Hezbollah had in Yemen and Syria. According to a security source, Houthi intelligence agents are actively working with military units in Sana'a to prepare teams and military experts for special operations missions in Africa.

In effect, all worst-case scenarios remain open. Political—and potentially military—confrontations in southern Yemen are possible, fueled by ongoing mobilization around **demands** for the restoration of the southern state in Aden and continued Saudi-Emirati competition. Meanwhile, the Houthis retain multiple options for escalation, including attacks on frontlines and beyond. The group could exert pressure along the Saudi border, in the Horn of Africa, or against maritime traffic and Israel - especially if Iran is directly targeted in another round of military conflict.

The convergence of multiple trajectories in Yemen: prolonged political stagnation, competition among regional allies, and the rise of armed actors, risk creating a regional catastrophe. The danger of the current moment lies in the continued erosion of constraints that have so far prevented such an explosion. Containment strategies may keep the situation at bay for now, but they deepen the roots of underlying grievances and widen their repercussions. As the conflicts in Yemen, the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and Israel become increasingly interconnected, it will no longer be viable to treat Yemen as a singular file. As it has in the past, the cost of failure in Yemen will extend beyond its borders, to a region already in turmoil.

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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.

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



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