

THE FORGOTTEN WAR:

The Ongoing Disaster in Yemen

THE SOUFAN CENTER
JUNE 2018



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KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is now considered the worst in the world. Saudi Arabia and its coalition's war in the poor Arab nation has resulted in widespread famine, illness and death. According to the United Nations, 75% of Yemen's population, just over 22 million people, are in dire need of humanitarian assistance. More than 2 million Yemenis are internally displaced, almost 18 million are food insecure—about half of those are at risk of starvation—and approximately 16 million lack access to safe water, sanitation and adequate healthcare. Over a million cases of cholera have been reported inside the country—the worst epidemic in modern history.
- Yemen's geographic location contributes to its strategic importance. The country's location on the Red Sea gives it control over the shipping of almost a third of the world's oil. Any negotiated peace agreement needs to take into account how this geographic importance influences regional and global interest in Yemen.
- Saudi Arabia views neighboring Yemen as a critical security concern, historically exerting control over strategic areas and providing support to Yemen's various tribes. The United Arab Emirates has aggressively asserted its interest in Yemen, especially in the south, solidifying its power base in the strategic cities of Aden and Hadramawt; they are now seen by some—Yemenis and coalition partners—as an occupying force in the country.
- Iran has become a significant player in the Yemen conflict largely as a means of bleeding and humiliating Saudi Arabia in the context of its existential regional proxy war against the Saudis. Iran is supplying the Houthi movement with weapons, including short range ballistic missiles, that the Houthis have fired on targets inside Saudi Arabia.
- Military support to fight in Yemen, provided by the U.S. and the UK to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners, must be reviewed. Goals like degrading al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula need to be considered against the devastating effects of the war on the Yemeni people. The only monitoring body for war crimes in Yemen is the Saudi-controlled Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT). The JIAT should be replaced with a neutral international body to ensure proper oversight of crimes being committed against civilians, including of the secret prisons, allegedly run by the UAE, where acts of torture continue to take place.
- The humanitarian and security catastrophe in Yemen may result in a global security crisis, as the country further devolves into sectarianism and violent groups gain even stronger footholds. Both the security and humanitarian crises must be considered together, as the lack of attention to one will almost certainly aggravate and increase the other. The international community must provide the resources needed to end the crisis, recently estimated at 3 billion dollars.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three years after an extensive bombing campaign across the country began, in March 2018, the war in Yemen was designated by the Secretary General of the United Nations as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. This acknowledgment might finally bring this 'forgotten war,' and the devastating plight of the Yemeni people, into the forefront for the international community. Since the Arab Spring, the conflict plaguing the poor nation, which sits between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman, has steadily worsened. If nothing is done, Yemen's humanitarian disaster and internal security crisis are likely to create a security crisis for the region as well. Concerns range from the radicalization of the population to a potential flow of refugees out of Yemen to neighboring countries, on a scale similar to Syria.

Civilian casualties have resulted from direct conflict, the use of starvation as a tactic of war, and the spread of disease due to a lack of medical infrastructure. In response to the November 2017 missile the Houthis launched at Riyadh, the Saudis announced an increase in the stringency of their coalition's blockade. They dramatically increased their stronghold on ports, essentially starving a country in which 90 percent of food is imported, and 22 million citizens rely on humanitarian assistance for survival.¹ Saudi's blockade has effectively worsened the already catastrophic humanitarian crisis in Yemen.²

In order to better understand what policy options are both available and optimal in Yemen, this report presents an overview of the country's shifting alliances, strategic considerations, and most relevant historical facts. This paper argues that in order to achieve the best possible outcome—a comprehensive peace agreement with engagement by all parties to the conflict—the current humanitarian and security crises must be contextualized both within broader Yemeni history and

within regional and geopolitical dynamics. In the absence of that nuanced analysis, the worst possibility is likely: continued devolution into lawlessness as a failed state.

The key regional players in the war in Yemen, each bringing both grievances and goals to the fight, are Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Saudi coalition, which includes the UAE, wants to reestablish President Abdrabu Mansour Hadi—or another ally—as ruler. The coalition is engaged in a proxy battle against Iran and its agent, Hizbollah, both of which provide arms and advice to the Houthi rebel force that attempted to topple the regime of President Hadi in January 2015. Saudi Arabia views the war in Yemen as having potentially large consequences for the regional balance of power, with not only a Sunni-Shi'a conflict at play, but also against the backdrop of a burgeoning Sunni-Sunni power struggle among various Gulf nations. Also of concern is the potential for conflict spillover into neighboring countries in Africa.

A long-term aim of the global community is to degrade and destroy Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), whose most virulent and long-lasting franchise calls Yemen home. To that end, the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK) have provided ongoing support to the Saudi coalition. In the past, Gulf state forces have sought to work in tandem with local tribes against AQAP. In the last three years, however, the coalition has committed human rights abuses in the name of counter-terrorism, including by creating extra-judicial detention and interrogation centers—secret prisons where serious allegations of torture have been made against the UAE's military and their allied forces. Continued support of the Saudi coalition by the U.S., the UK and others needs to be carefully measured in the face of such crimes.

While the crisis in Yemen must end based strictly on humanitarian need, it is also important to consider the effects on global security of an unchecked humanitarian disaster. When famine and hopelessness truly set in, Yemen's humanitarian crisis will converge with its security crisis. At that point, even if outside influencers end their roles in the conflict, Yemen will have become a nexus of strife and deprivation, likely to devolve into a decades-long global threat.

Further compounding the problem, Yemen struggles with the formation of a concrete national identity. This plays a role in fomenting notorious levels of corruption, as individuals and groups tend toward decisions that benefit themselves and their kin rather than their country. In the last few years of Yemen's conflict-filled history, factions were established and feuds were begun against the backdrop of ancient Yemeni history and myth, with centuries of historical patterns repeating themselves.

The challenge of building and maintaining a coherent national identity helps explain why Yemen's Arab Spring served only to heighten sectarianism and internal divisions, while drawing

further attention to wealth and other disparities between itself and the rest of the Arab region. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC), the process that attempted to broker consensus on a political transition after the Arab Spring, failed to resolve Yemen's internal differences and closed in 2013 after 10 months of deliberations. The subsequent takeover of much of the country by an alliance of Houthi rebels and loyalists of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and international efforts to achieve resolution, only made the situation worse. In March 2015, the Saudi-led coalition began attempts to reverse the juggernaut of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Since then, the fighting has stalemated along traditional sectarian and political boundaries—roughly coterminous with the geographical dispersion of Zaydi Shi'a and Sunni populations in Yemen, which together make up the vast majority of the country.

Still, while Yemen had on its own long courted catastrophe, with rampant corruption, soaring birth rates and crumbling infrastructure contributing to its lack of economic growth, the current humanitarian crisis was largely avoidable. It has been brought about by the external influence of foreign entities in this proxy war: through the funding of sectarian groups by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE, and through the geopolitical maneuvering that prevented, post-Arab Spring, an orderly transition of power and a return to relative stability in Yemen. Rhetoric and actual battle over the last three years of war have thus polarized the country even further—especially along religious lines. This is new; most Yemenis grew up in a much more religiously pluralistic environment than now exists.³

Appreciating the framework through which Yemenis view the current state of conflict and crisis, including their history and geography, will help to demonstrate the ways in which new policies can more effectively bring about a resolution. Significant change must happen now. If not, a combination of the country's broken medical system and health crises, drastic food and water shortages, disappearing infrastructure and political vacuum—combined with an overburdened tribal support structure threatened by increased sectarianism—will lead to a tipping point from which Yemen may never recover.

HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

It is a moral imperative that Yemen's dire humanitarian situation be dealt with through international assistance and intervention. Considering Yemen's location, the potential for war-induced mass migration will only heighten the humanitarian crisis and security concerns in the region. The coalition blockade, which has increased the risk of famine and the destruction of infrastructure, needs to be brought to a complete end.

The conflict, and ensuing humanitarian suffering, is a result of sectarian fighting on the part of the country's overwhelming Muslim population, with Sunnis on the one side and Shi'as on the other. Sectarianism in Yemen is a relatively new phenomenon, fueled by bigger powers: Saudi Arabia and its coalition support Sunni extremists, while Iran supports the Shi'a Houthis. Yemen's more traditional tribal system—now sheltering a significant percentage of Yemen's many millions of internally displaced persons—will soon become overwhelmed. At that point, Yemen will no longer be able to contain its growing famine and health epidemics—or its radicalized fighters.

Violations have occurred on both sides, with reports of Houthi and Saudi forces preventing water and food aid from reaching intended destinations.⁴ However, attempts to investigate or assign responsibility for these and other law-of-war violations filter solely through the Joint Incidents Assessments Team (JIAT), which does not meet international standards for such investigations and suffers from a lack of transparency and clarity as to its mandate and source of authority.⁵ The JIAT is the only body monitoring violations, as the United States and the UK have used their influence to block other UN investigations.

Yemen has 27 million people and, at least until recently, one of the highest population growth rates in the world. The war and its associated abuses have stressed water, food, health care systems and infrastructure to such a point that Yemen now suffers from the worst cholera outbreak in history. A million people, including 600,000 children, contracted cholera in under 6 months (compared to the second-worst recorded outbreak, in Haiti, over the seven years between 2010 and 2017, with 815,000 cases). Yemen was at the edge of famine and water shortage before; what is happening now is a man-made disaster, driven by the last three years of war.⁶

While a significant portion of U.S. support to Saudi Arabia is aimed at curbing human rights abuses during armed conflict, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has surpassed the crisis in Syria as the direst in the world today. Those who were able to flee have done so, about-facing a migration tide that previously saw more than a million Ethiopian refugees and hundreds of thousands of people from countries such as Somalia and Djibouti flow into Yemen.⁷ Scores of others, including those who would normally be helping the country rebuild, fulfilling humanitarian roles, or reporting on the crisis—such as the young intellectuals who saw the Arab Spring as a means to a brighter future—have given up hope.⁸ Those who remain have been swept up in the ongoing violence, a trend that will compound the security situation as more join factional and sectarian groups as a means to keep themselves and their families alive.⁹

If little or nothing is done to ameliorate the humanitarian situation, conditions will deteriorate further, leading to a mass exodus of Yemenis who have been increasingly polarized by war and by proxy influences seeking to inflame sectarian tensions.

Yemen: The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis



Three years after an extensive bombing campaign across the country began, the war in **Yemen has been designated by the Secretary General of the United Nations as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.** This acknowledgment might finally bring this 'forgotten war,' and the devastating plight of the Yemeni people, into the forefront for the international community.

22 Million Need Aid & Protection

"More than 22 million people—or three-quarters of the population—need humanitarian aid and protection"



3 Million Displaced

"Some 3 million people have been displaced. Internally displaced people are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse."



"Data collected by World Health Organization from functioning health facilities indicates that reported deaths and injuries in Yemen's conflict, from 19 March 2015 to 30 April 2018, have reached 9,559 and 55,616 people, respectively. The actual numbers are likely to be much higher."

9,559 Killed



■ Men (84.73%) ■ Women (7%) ■ Children (8.27%)

55,616 Injured



■ Men (81.76%) ■ Women (4.10%) ■ Children (14.15%)

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Eleven Facts About The Yemen Crisis", Mar 29, 2018; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Yemen Humanitarian Update Covering 15-21 May 2018, Issue 16."



On the Brink of Famine

"In Yemen, nearly 18 million people - more than 60 percent of the population - need food assistance. In 2017, three years into conflict, 1.6 million additional people were pushed to severe hunger bringing the number of people who cannot survive without food assistance to 8.4 million."

World Food Programme, April, 2018

18 Million People OR **60% of the Population**



8.4 MILLION PEOPLE CANNOT SURVIVE WITHOUT FOOD ASSISTANCE

NEED FOOD ASSISTANCE

Health Care in Crisis

1 Million Cholera Cases

"In the last year, more than 1 million people suffered from cholera...Water and sanitation systems struggle to keep pace."



1/2 Health Facilities Lost

"Half of all health facilities are damaged or unable to function. Those that remain face severe shortages of staff and equipment."



56% Lack Health Access

"An estimated 56 per cent of the population does not have regular access to basic health care"



Source: OCHA

90% Import-Dependent

"Yemen relies on imports for about 90 per cent of its food, fuel and medicine. All ports...must remain open to humanitarian and commercial traffic."

\$2.96 Billion Needed

"To alleviate suffering on a massive scale, the Yemen humanitarian response plan calls for \$2.96 billion to assist 13 million people."

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "11 facts you need to know about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen", 2018; World Food Programme, "WFP scales up response in Yemen to prevent famine", 2 April, 2018



Yemen's Children in Conflict

"About one quarter of school-aged children are out of school, and 2,500 schools have been damaged or are not able to run."

Children are being forcibly recruited by the parties to the conflict. To help their families survive, girls are being married off early and children forced to work.

"An estimated 1.8 million children under the age of five...are acutely malnourished."



**2 Million
out of
school**

The number of children out of school is 2 million today, a 20% increase from before the war.

**2,500
schools
closed**

More than 2,500 schools are out of use -- many being used for other purposes.

**2,419
boys
recruited**

Reports say that around 2,419 boys have been recruited to fight since March 2015.

**3/4
girls
married**

Close to three quarters of girls married before the age of 18.

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Eleven Facts About The Yemen Crisis", March, 2018; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "11 facts you need to know about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen", 2018; UNICEF Yemen, "If Not In School: The paths children cross in Yemen", March, 2018.



GLOBAL IMPORTANCE: GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES AND TERRORISM

What happens in the poor country of Yemen has significant global impact. It straddles the Bab el-Mandeb passage from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, a location critical for freedom of maneuver and flow of trade, specifically petro-trade. Yemen has longstanding strategic international partnerships, all of which have been affected by the current war. The humanitarian catastrophe creates further political and religious discontent, and the country has the potential to metastasize into a breeding ground for radicalization with local, regional, and global implications.

Freedom of Maneuver

The Bab el-Mandeb forms a crucial waterway connecting East and West, with almost all of the trade between Europe and China, Japan, India, and the rest of Asia passing through it. Additionally, all of the oil and natural gas headed westward from the Persian Gulf, almost 30% of the world's total oil production, transits through the Bab el-Mandeb.¹⁰ Because of the importance of the trade in oil and other commodities, the influence and interest certain countries have in keeping the Bab el-Mandeb clear and free can be depicted



in concentric rings.¹¹ Yemen and Djibouti sit in the center ring. Eritrea, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are the next closest to the Bab el-Mandeb and other chokepoints on the Red Sea. These five centermost countries need not shut the strait down completely to make a political or economic statement. The threat posed by the positioning of missiles with enough precision and power to disable a ship can cause insurance rates to increase for shipping companies, sending ripples through the world economy, with predictable consequences at gas pumps and supermarkets.¹² The UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Iran, Israel, and any other countries directly dependent on shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb occupy the next ring, then Turkey and Pakistan, followed by the global hegemony who jockey for influence in the region: the European Union, the United States, and, to a lesser degree, China and Russia.¹³

Partnerships and Proxies

While regional partnerships and proxy conflicts further heighten the importance of Yemen, currently much of the tension on the ground now occurs between President Abdrabu Mansour Hadi's interim government and loyalists to now-deceased, former long-term President Ali Abdullah Saleh. President Hadi was Ali Abdullah Saleh's Vice President and became the interim President after Saleh stepped down as part of Yemen's Arab Spring. Hadi continues as Yemen's official President, although he has been in exile, mostly in Saudi Arabia, since 2015.

Late President Saleh's support of the Houthi coalition was at one time critical to their military and political success.¹⁴ Saleh subsequently became disenchanted with the Houthis, and in the early autumn of 2017, he advocated a reconciliation with the Saudis. His death at the hands of the Houthis severed the Houthi-Saleh connection. It also internally weakened Saleh-aligned tribes and drove a wedge through Saleh's family and inner circle.

The Saleh-dominated General People's Congress (GPC) was the largest and most influential party in Yemen. It was and still is strongly associated with former President Saleh and his family. All indications as of early 2018 suggest that the GPC party is no longer cooperating with Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ Regardless of whether "Saleh supporters" align with the Houthis or the Saudi coalition, this will only minimally affect the situation on the ground. Inasmuch as the factions in Yemen are closely aligned with Zaydi Shi'a-Sunni spheres of influence and North-South Yemen political boundaries, the weight of this history will overpower any temporary shift in the balance of power.

Thus, while Saleh's death is a critical milestone in Yemen's history and deeply important for Yemen's current political situation, a larger issue at play is external interference by the Saudi-led coalition. Emphasis has been placed on the Saudi position that the war they fight in Yemen is, at

heart, a proxy engagement meant to check Iran’s regional power and influence. While true, this narrative does not acknowledge the fact that President Hadi, who does not enjoy much popularity in Yemen, now resides comfortably in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Support for the Saudi goals of checking Iran and ensuring a friendly government by reinstalling Hadi put the United States in the position of backing an arrangement that does not reflect what most Yemenis want.¹⁶

The U.S.’ relationships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are characterized as alliances, yet these regimes have sometimes undertaken actions that undermine U.S. interests in important ways. In the current context, the U.S. is susceptible to criticism for its support for the Saudi-led coalition’s air campaign. Saudi Arabia’s bombing of targets in Yemen has caused thousands of civilian deaths,¹⁷ leading to the earmarking of 750 million USD in the massive 2017 U.S.-Saudi arms deal for training in civilian casualty avoidance, the law of armed conflict, human rights, and command and control. The expenditure is an acknowledgment of Saudi Arabia’s track record in these matters, and it is also an effort to mitigate the exposure the U.S. faces. Countries allied with Saudi Arabia—in particular the U.S. and UK—have repeatedly used their positions on the United Nations Human Rights Council to block international inquiries into Saudi and UAE war crimes.¹⁸ Unchecked support will likely affect U.S. standing in the region and in the world.

The use of secret prisons in Yemen, where horrific acts of torture have taken place, have been documented by journalists and human rights organizations. These prisons, located primarily in the southern part of the country, are run by the UAE or Yemeni forces they train. The U.S. has admitted to questioning people detained in those “black sites” but have denied engaging in or witnessing any human rights abuses, including torture, against detainees. Nevertheless, thousands of boys and men in Yemen have reportedly been swept up in “anti-terrorism” raids and



Source: Maggie, Michael, "In Yemen's secret prisons, UAE tortures and US interrogates", The Associated Press, June 22, 2017

deposited into these prisons. This will surely be one of the dark legacies of the war in Yemen—especially if there is no accountability for human rights abuses.¹⁹

Beyond U.S. and UK support to Saudi Arabia, and Iranian proxy support to the Houthis, other relationships and proxy battles have been playing out on Yemeni soil. China has economic interests in Yemen.²⁰ Russia has attempted to broker a deal to end the war.²¹ The United States supports the UAE in an important two-front fight in Yemen—against the Houthis, on one hand, and Al-Qaeda, on the other. U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis is fond of calling the UAE “Little Sparta” for its role in this conflict and in others, for example in Somalia and Libya. All such relationships complicate the dynamics of the region.

Al-Qaeda

The need to deny sanctuary to Al-Qaeda takes precedence in any discussion of Yemen. The Yemeni branch of Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has embedded itself as a force hard to distinguish from local power-wielding Sunni family groups.²² The decrease in government control over large swathes of southern and eastern Yemen has allowed Al-Qaeda’s presence, under the guise of Ansar Shariah and other Salafi groups, to weather several U.S.-supported Yemeni-military campaigns. AQAP has also withstood doctrinal challenges from the so-called Islamic State.

The two-pronged effort by the United States to combat AQAP and to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE in dislodging the Houthis are conflicting aims on the front lines of the battlefield. Increased sectarianism among armed Salafist groups, especially in Taiz, Aden, and along the northern front on the road between Marib and Sana’a, often renders such groups indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda supporters.²³

The main pillars of Yemen’s global importance—freedom of trade/maneuver; proxies and partnerships; and the defeat of AQAP—are

“The security situation has created significant obstacles to the delivery and distribution of humanitarian assistance, attributable to widespread violations of international humanitarian law and systematic and serious breaches of civil and political rights. The situation has cumulatively compounded and reinforced a diminished space for humanitarian action. The Panel has noted that civilians are disproportionately affected by the conduct of hostilities owing to the widespread and systematic use of tactics that practicably, and in certain cases directly, constitute the prohibited use of starvation as a method of warfare.”

— UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, January 2016 Report

inexorably linked. Progress in any area can help support and improve conditions in the others, but so too can a lack of progress or a setback in one area cause further destabilization elsewhere.

REGIONAL IMPORTANCE AND SECTARIANISM: SAUDI ARABIA, THE UAE, AND IRAN

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia views its lengthy half-mountainous, half-desert border with Yemen as a critical security concern.²⁴ This has been a constant throughout the region’s history, predating the Kingdom itself, stretching back in time to the first expansion of the Islamic polity under the Prophet Muhammad,²⁵ then to Ibn Saud’s first military conquests in the Saudi-Yemeni War of 1934,²⁶ and then to the 1960s and the North Yemen Civil War, which pitted more than 70,000 Egyptian soldiers (supported by the Soviet Union) against Saudi Arabia and its allies.²⁷ In all these conflicts, Saudi Arabia has dealt with Yemen as an immediate priority, recognizing the need to exert control over the country’s highly populated and relatively fertile uplands, often with direct financial support to various tribes.²⁸

The current Saudi stance is an adversarial position toward Zaydi Shi’ism in Yemen—a direct contradiction of its position five decades ago.²⁹ The Yemen border is, for Saudi Arabia, much like the border the U.S. shares with Mexico: one that creates security risks but also represents a source of critical cultural and economic exchange. Expanding this comparison further, the proximity with Yemen also presents Saudi Arabia with a Vietnam-like military problem: Yemen has been a place where Saudi Arabia tends to engage in protracted combat

Twelver Shi’a believe the twelfth imam, whom they consider infallible, disappeared in AD 874 and will one day return to usher in an age of justice as the Mahdi, or promised one.

Zaydis, also known as “Fivers,” believe that Zayd, the great-grandson of Ali, was the rightful fifth imam. The Zaydis do not recognize the later Twelver imams, and instead believe anyone related to Ali is eligible to lead the Muslim community. They also reject the Twelver doctrine that the imam is infallible.

without clear plans for victory. It is truly Saudi Arabia's underbelly.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a massive internal transition, with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) going to considerable lengths to consolidate power. Yemen plays a significant part in MbS's plans. In March 2015, as the newly appointed Minister of Defense, MbS launched Saudi Arabia into Operation Decisive Storm—the first phase of military involvement in Yemen.³⁰

Victory in Yemen is a centerpiece of MbS's modernizing strategy, which involves positioning Saudi Arabia as a military power.³¹ In his implementation of this strategy, however, MbS runs the risk of turning the Houthis into exactly the proxy group for Iran that the Saudis fear, as well as turning Yemen into the Achilles' heel that Ibn Saud, the founder of the country, warned of on his deathbed. Further complicating his goals, Saudi Arabia has not achieved a quick victory or quick exit from Yemen. This failure suggests a weakness that the Crown Prince must overcome at all costs or risk losing face and influence inside Saudi Arabia. MbS must therefore continue the narrative of a proxy fight with Iran in Yemen in order to keep Western support behind him, legitimizing his actions in Yemen and thereby preserving his reputation at home and abroad.

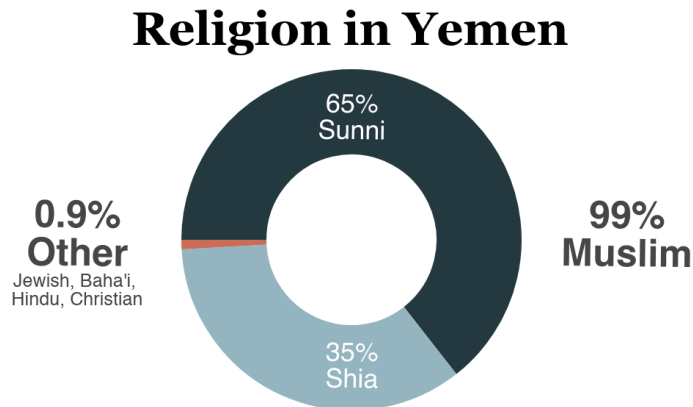
The UAE, by increasingly deploying ground forces around the country, particularly in the south, has asserted its interest in Yemen and demonstrated that it considers itself a rising force in the region. Most recently and controversially, the UAE sent troops into Socotra Island, a UNESCO world heritage site strategically located in the Red Sea off the coast of Somalia, with access to major shipping routes. Protests against Emirati presence on the island grew to the point that President Hadi called for UAE troop removal—even though the Emiratis claimed they were on the island to protect forces loyal to Hadi's government. The situation was resolved after Saudi Arabia signed an agreement with the UAE confirming Yemeni forces to once again be in control of Socotra's air and seaports.³²

Saudi and Yemeni resentment of the sudden projection of UAE power is best summarized by President Hadi's accusation that the UAE is "acting like an occupation power in Yemen."³³ The UAE has strongholds in both Aden and Hadramawt, and is using bases throughout the Horn of Africa on the other side of the Red Sea—including in Eritrea and Somalia—to project its influence in Yemen.³⁴ Further, it has been a driving force behind Russia's efforts at a cessation to the conflict, offering the promise of basing rights for Russian naval forces in Aden in exchange for diplomatic, political, and financial support from the Russians.³⁵ U.S. officials note that U.S. and UAE special operations forces have cooperated extensively, and in many cases successfully, against AQAP in southeast Yemen, perhaps to the point of foiling some international terrorist plots—

though the use of secret prisons and torture facilities by the UAE have made these victories far from value-neutral.

Heightened Regional Sunni-Shi'a Tension

In the current context, Saudi Arabia's longstanding concerns in Yemen are amplified by Iran. The Saudis view Tehran's involvement in Yemen as part of an expanding Iranian effort to extend its influence throughout the mostly Sunni Arab world and to encircle Saudi Arabia with pro-Iranian regimes and factions. The Houthis have received arms, training, and support from both Hizbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). That support is growing.³⁶



Direct Iranian support was at first offered conditionally and tentatively. Ties to Iran tended to be exaggerated by Sunni Gulf sources and fed back into the narrative of their worldview, which portrays Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against Shi'a influence from Iran. At the beginning of the war, for instance, it was former President Saleh rather than Iran who served as the driving force behind the Houthis. The Houthis were politically aligned with Iran, but because of Saleh's support, and because he still controlled much of the well-stocked U.S. and legacy Soviet-supplied Yemeni arsenal, the Houthis had little need for direct Iranian arms.³⁷ What they could get, they gladly accepted, but their march southward to take Sana'a and most of Yemen was not instigated by nor predicated upon Iranian money, arms, or muscle. However, Iran's engagement in Yemen deepened to counter the Saudi-led escalation there, as Iran saw the conflict as an opportunity to "bleed" Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces and to turn world opinion against the coalition for the humanitarian consequences of its military operations.

Iranian and Hizbollah advisors now operate on the ground in Yemen;³⁸ in March 2017, Iran's Qods Force Commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, along with other Iranian officials,

met in Tehran to organize further assistance to the Houthis, promising them the kinds of resources that they provide to Hizbollah in Syria.³⁹ In fact, Iran fires advanced weapons from Yemen into Saudi Arabia⁴⁰ and toward U.S. and coalition ships in the Red Sea,⁴¹ even though Iranian arms meant for Yemen are prohibited by U.N. Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2231.⁴²

Still, in comparison to U.S. and UK support to the Saudi coalition, both in terms of direct military assistance and political backing, the Houthis receive an order of magnitude less from Iran.⁴³ Soleimani is not known to have visited Yemen to advise the Houthis, in contrast to his nearly constant presence advising Iran-backed Syrian and Iraqi forces in those two countries.

The greatest disruption to religious coexistence in Yemen, as elsewhere in the Middle East, is the emergence of a polarizing jihad-oriented Salafist ideology, supported and funded by Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴ As a case in point, the current Houthi expansion and overthrow of the Yemeni government began with the expulsion of a Salafi school, the Dammaj Institute, that graduated many al-Qaeda operatives. The school was funded by Saudi Arabia and installed near the Houthi power center of Saadah in the northern part of Yemen in order to counterbalance the Houthi presence there.⁴⁵

Sunni-Sunni Power Struggle

The Sunni-Sunni power struggle across the Gulf bears directly on Yemen. Saudi Arabia presumes preeminence among the world's Sunni nations, although other countries, notably the UAE, have begun to assert themselves more. Qatar's alleged support of the Muslim Brotherhood drives a wedge between that country and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain imposed travel and diplomatic sanctions on Qatar, Yemen's government initially supported the Qatari government, but quickly buckled under pressure from Saudi Arabia and reversed that support, severing diplomatic ties with Doha.⁴⁶ Before the schism, Doha sent a military contingent to Yemen in support of the Saudi coalition.⁴⁷ The intra-GCC crisis ultimately caused Qatari forces to leave Yemen.⁴⁸

“The religious divide has historically been of limited importance. Internal conflicts have certainly been endemic to Yemen, but they have typically been driven by political, economic, tribal, or regional disparities. While these conflicts sometimes coincided with religious differences, they were rarely a primary driver. Instead, religious coexistence and intermingling was taken for granted by most Yemenis and seen as a normal feature of everyday life.”

— *Yemeni Peace Project,*
“*Sectarianism Is Poisoning Yemen*”

As much as the fight in Yemen is portrayed by Saudi Arabia as being a proxy conflict with Iran, it is also a proxy conflict between Gulf nations, each of which brings different tribal groups and

religious sects under its sway. The Sunni front is a piecemeal affair, giving the Houthis an advantage in terms of unity of effort.

Spillover into Africa

Recent involvement in Yemen by neighboring African countries, and the encouragement of that involvement by various Gulf states, can be seen in the three important ways. First, the current flow of cash into Yemen from Africa is significant. Second, there has been a deliberate realignment of diplomatic relations with Yemen by some of its African neighbors. Third, certain African countries have provided the use of their bases and other facilities to support the war. These three elements could spark a regional conflagration, especially given the risk of famine and water-rights disputes among the nations that have been compelled to contribute resources to the conflict in Yemen. Saudi and coalition arrangements with African countries in furtherance of war efforts include: paying the Sudanese more than 2.2 billion dollars for diplomatic and military support for the war; use of Eritrean and Djiboutian bases and ports; use of Somalian mercenaries and overflight and basing agreements in that country; and the increase of tensions with Ethiopia, which resents the warming of relations between Yemen and its geopolitical rival, Eritrea.⁴⁹

Disparity in Wealth

Yemen has been known throughout history as “Arabia Felix,” the lucky part of Arabia, because of its mountainous, relatively verdant and fertile land. Elsewhere in Arabia, settled cities are few and far between, and agricultural productivity is limited by a lack of water. With the discovery of oil in Yemen, things changed. Yemen has enough oil—oil of surprisingly high quality—to support itself, if the political and security situation were such that extraction and exploitation could be accomplished with acceptable levels of risk, and with a more equitable distribution of wealth among internal constituencies.⁵⁰ But for a host of complex socioeconomic and geopolitical reasons, oil has made Yemen the poor stepchild of the region. In fact, for decades, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis worked in other Middle East and Gulf countries rather than develop their own country. After the first Persian Gulf War, many Yemenis who were working in Iraq were expelled as punishment for then-President Saleh’s support of Saddam Hussein. The return home to joblessness and economic frustration caused some Yemeni men to join terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda. Similarly, the sudden 2013 expulsion from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states of almost all Yemeni workers, owing to domestic tensions in the demand countries, exacerbated the political crisis within Yemen and created a climate of resentment toward its neighbors.⁵¹

YEMENI IDENTITY, HISTORY AND WORLDVIEW

Yemen's national consciousness can be said to have begun to germinate around Islam, mountain life, and, increasingly, around a culture based upon near-universal qat use. While under ideal conditions these factors could cement an identity, within the last thirty years,⁵² Yemenis have continued to value tribal over national affiliation. In spite of the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen, the civil war four years later produced pronounced regional loyalties—superseding, at times, even the primacy of tribal identity.⁵³ Religious gulfs are also widening, with Yemeni society now reorganizing itself along heated sectarian lines.⁵⁴

Qat is a mildly narcotic leaf, chewed fresh the same day because the active ingredient decays quickly. A significant percentage of Yemenis, both male and female, chew qat, and its use appears to be on the increase. Soldiers and militiamen sell weapons and ammunition to those on the opposing side for qat, so it is part of the lucrative war time economy. However, the cultivation of qat comes at the detriment of the growth of other crops, including food staples.

Factions are incentivized to perpetuate divisions for economic reasons as well. Corruption, a perennial issue in Yemen, has not only increased since the start of the war, but has provided an alternate stream of economic activity for a new cadre of armed groups and economic players.⁵⁵ The willingness to profit from war—to the degree of selling armaments to the opposition—testifies to Yemen's lack of a cohesive national identity. As such, the issues plaguing the country can only be effectively analyzed and addressed at a more granular level.

The Houthis

After the first few Houthi victories in Yemen, there was surprise in diplomatic circles that leaders of the insurgent group ignored pressure from the UN to reach a negotiated settlement. The Houthis would have been in a position of strength at the bargaining table and would have stood a reasonable chance of having many of their demands fulfilled. Nevertheless, the Houthis continued to march southward into Sana'a.

Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, the original leader of the movement, whose death in 2004 resulted in the elevation of Abdulmalik al-Houthi, is quoted as having said that in an unjust world, Zaydis “must not sit in their houses.”⁵⁶ One of the main tenets of Zaydism, in addition to the standard Shi'a belief that leaders of the Islamic community need to be Sayyids (descended from the Prophet Muhammad) is that rulers are not infallible; in fact, they believe it is necessary to fight against corrupt rulers.⁵⁷ This belief goes a long way toward explaining why, time and again, the Zaydis rise up and fight so fiercely against would-be invaders and foreign influencers in Yemen. Historically, the Houthis have not had close ties to the regime in Iran, only embracing the connection after the Saudi-led coalition began to put extensive military pressure on the Houthi coalition.

Civil Wars and Saleh

If any single person can be blamed for Yemen's current crisis, it is former longtime President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh came to power in 1978 after rising through the military ranks on the Republican (Nasserite) side of the North Yemen War. When North and South Yemen unified in 1990, he became president of both countries, with Ali Salim al-Beidh, a southerner, his vice president.

Internal conflicts in Yemen—which have continued almost unabated for decades—along with steadily increasing sectarianism directly connect the early years of Saleh's rule to the present conflict. Saleh himself described his technique of governing Yemen as “dancing on the heads of snakes”: he maintained control (and the ability to continue his system of patronage) by pitting one faction against another, alternately supporting and then denying support to these factions, and positioning himself at the center of this chaos so that only he, and his close advisors, could exert control.⁵⁸

Saleh's track record as president was deeply problematic. He supported Saddam Hussein and was reviled by other Gulf Nations as a result.⁵⁹ He pillaged South Yemen and set up a system of patronage that resulted in his family and close associates siphoning away tens of billions of

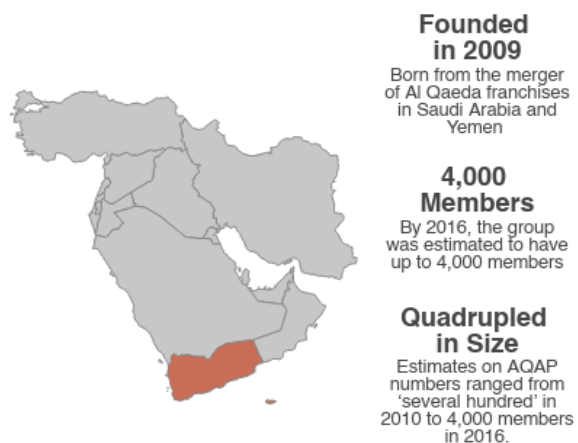
dollars, making Yemen one of the poorest nations in the world.⁶⁰ Yet he also, at least nominally, increased cooperation with the West, especially in combatting Al-Qaeda after the bombing of the *USS Cole* in 2000.⁶¹ His death at the hands of the Houthis was the ultimate consequence of his mercurial approach to leadership, as he switched from supporting the Houthis to creating an alliance with Saudi Arabia. This decision cost Saleh his life. It remains to be seen whether it will cost the Saleh family their prominence in future Yemeni politics.

The list of civil wars and disturbances during Saleh’s presidency is long, and understanding Yemen’s continual, low-grade conflict and the repercussions of them is critical to appreciating Yemen’s situation today. A few factors are especially important to note. First, at the end of the North-South war, unification came with its own winners and losers, permanently embedding a North-South polarization in the Yemeni consciousness and imposing Islamization and rule of Sharia law on the experimentally communist South, causing many southerners to feel marginalized. Large grants of land and other favors made by Saleh to both his northern allies and the leaders of the Zumra factions who supported him helped to create resentment among southerners.⁶² Second, the National Dialogue Conference, which convened after the Arab Spring, did little to quell the South’s grievances.⁶³ These grievances became the motivation for a southern separatist movement called al-Hirak, a significant though disjointed force in the current conflict.⁶⁴

Al-Qaeda in Yemen

AQAP, Yemen’s Al-Qaeda franchise, pervades the country and projects power outward.⁶⁵ It has morphed over time, experimenting with controlling regions of Yemen left with power vacuums owing to the dysfunction in Sana’a. Yemenis, particularly Sunnis in Shabwa, Abyan, Hadramawt, Marib, the fringes of Aden, and Taiz, regularly change political allegiance depending on prevailing circumstances, including whether or not the country is in a state of war.⁶⁶ AQAP has been the big winner in Yemen’s recent political and military struggles and appears to be deeply embedded in militia elements supporting the interim government of President Hadi.⁶⁷ AQAP members may consider themselves in a range of ways: as tribesmen who are also affiliated with al-Qaeda or even as Islamic State adherents—though the IS affiliate in Yemen has been slow to

AQAP: AL-QAEDA'S EXPANSION IN YEMEN



Source: U.S. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism, 2016

take hold, too brutal and quick to apply Sharia law, and mostly overshadowed by a more successful and flexible AQAP.⁶⁸

Although AQAP was and is the primary security concern in Yemen for the United States, it has been a secondary or even tertiary concern for most Yemenis. For the Yemeni government, it alternates between being tolerated or actively opposed, depending on pressure from the United States. AQAP is also used by elites for financial and political advantage; in the lead-up to the current civil war, it was viewed as less threatening to state stability than southern separatism, Houthi encroachment, or other infighting.⁶⁹ However, complicating the situation, AQAP is currently embedded with Sunni-Yemeni fighting units and tribal elements. Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the leader of many of those fighting units, is on the side of Hadi's deposed government and has political ties to the Islah party — the party with strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen — as well as documented ties recruiting, funding, and providing logistics support to AQAP.⁷⁰

Arab Spring and Current Civil War

Yemen's current war flows directly from the Arab Spring, with conflict having been on “pause” in 2012 and 2013 while the NDC attempted to construct a new order and national identity for the country. The particular way the Arab Spring was manifested in Yemen reflects its unique worldview: it led to a Zaydi movement with goals of resisting corruption and foreign influence, and heightened sectarianism, North-South divisions, and wealth and manpower disparities between the rest of the region and Yemen.

The Arab Spring in Yemen, as in many other Middle East countries, was instigated by a group of frustrated students and young professionals⁷¹—urban elites stymied by the system and responding to calls for democratization

The complicated geopolitics of the region is leading to a number of sub-conflicts hitting at the very heart of Yemeni society. 25 Yemeni Imams, most of whom were part of the Islah party, have been murdered since January 2016 forcing many non-Salafi religious leaders and scholars to flee to nearby countries or stop preaching within Yemen. The scars of targeting alternative voices can last for years; it weakens community resilience and allows terrorist ideology to flourish. (Source: Associated Press, 2018)

they believed the United States had signaled it would support.⁷² This group held the promise of better days for Yemen but was quickly subsumed by tribal and sectarian forces. As a result, a cohort of young, educated Yemenis—some Zaydi, others not—joined the Houthi movement as a means to show displeasure with the outcomes of the NDC.⁷³

Rather than collapsing into all-out war (as in Syria) or a destabilizing series of regime changes (as in Egypt), and rather than the regime making concessions to salvage its authority (as happened in Oman), Yemen carried out an orderly transfer of power after the Arab Spring that looked like it

Timeline of the Arab Spring and Yemen Revolution



might produce a diplomatic and political success.⁷⁴ The NDC process was instituted to resolve differences between factions and bring about the accession of a democratic government. Instead, the NDC dragged on for months longer than intended as each side consolidated power and grabbed resources.⁷⁵

As the NDC process crumbled, the UN-mandated interim government of President Hadi tried to exert more control. It was prevented from doing so by the fact that Hadi did not have a clear mandate nor an organic base of support because of his status as a member of the Zumra, Saleh was present and constantly meddling, and Houthi and southern factions continued to exert their influence. Backed by Saudi Arabia, and continuing former President Saleh's policies to allow the United States to use elite Yemeni units to fight AQAP, Hadi's government used its interim powers to push through resolutions that effectively eliminated access to Red Sea ports for the Houthis, and, through a six-region solution, gerrymandered Zaydi and southern lands in such a way that the arrangement was entirely unacceptable both to the Houthis and to southern/Hiraki concerns.⁷⁶ President Saleh seized the moment and threw his considerable weight behind the Houthis, which effectively opened Sana'a to Houthi occupation in a bloodless "white-glove" takeover. Saleh's reasons for doing this seemed murky at the time. It appears now that he may have been motivated by a desire to snub Saudi Arabia and Ali Muhsin's Islah Party and orchestrate a return to power.⁷⁷

With Saleh's support in hand, the Houthis moved to enter Sana'a and overthrow President Hadi's interim government. A few months later, the Saudis launched their coalition effort to resist Saleh-Houthi power and restore Hadi. Of less consequence than the actual sequence of events is the eventual, significant hardening of front lines along what roughly parallels the historic North-South border in Yemen.⁷⁸

THE CURRENT CONFLICT

Each of Yemen's main regions have been affected differently by the conflict.

Sana'a

Sana'a was seized by the Houthi-Saleh coalition in 2014, a takeover that stabilized in 2015 as President Hadi was first placed under house arrest and then fled the country. Operation Decisive Storm proved ineffective for Saudi Arabia's goals: regaining territory and restoring Hadi to leadership. Saleh's death almost two years later at the hands of the Houthis has left Houthi control of Sana'a intact.

Although the Houthi-Saleh alliance has dissolved, the Houthis do not seem to be losing much ground in or around Sana'a. The Saudi-led coalition's attempts to reinstate Hadi unwittingly create a common enemy that unite many groups opposed to the reinstatement of the status quo.⁷⁹ The endurance of the Houthi grip on Sana'a supports the idea of stabilization more broadly. The longer the Houthis remain in control of key government positions, the more their followers will be embedded in ministries and their systems of patronage will proliferate throughout Yemen's administration.⁸⁰

Sana'a experiences aerial bombings from coalition aircraft. Haphazard and indiscriminate, these attacks combine with Houthi use of force to contribute to civilian casualties, heightening the need for a nonpartisan investigative body to replace the JIAT.

Hodeida

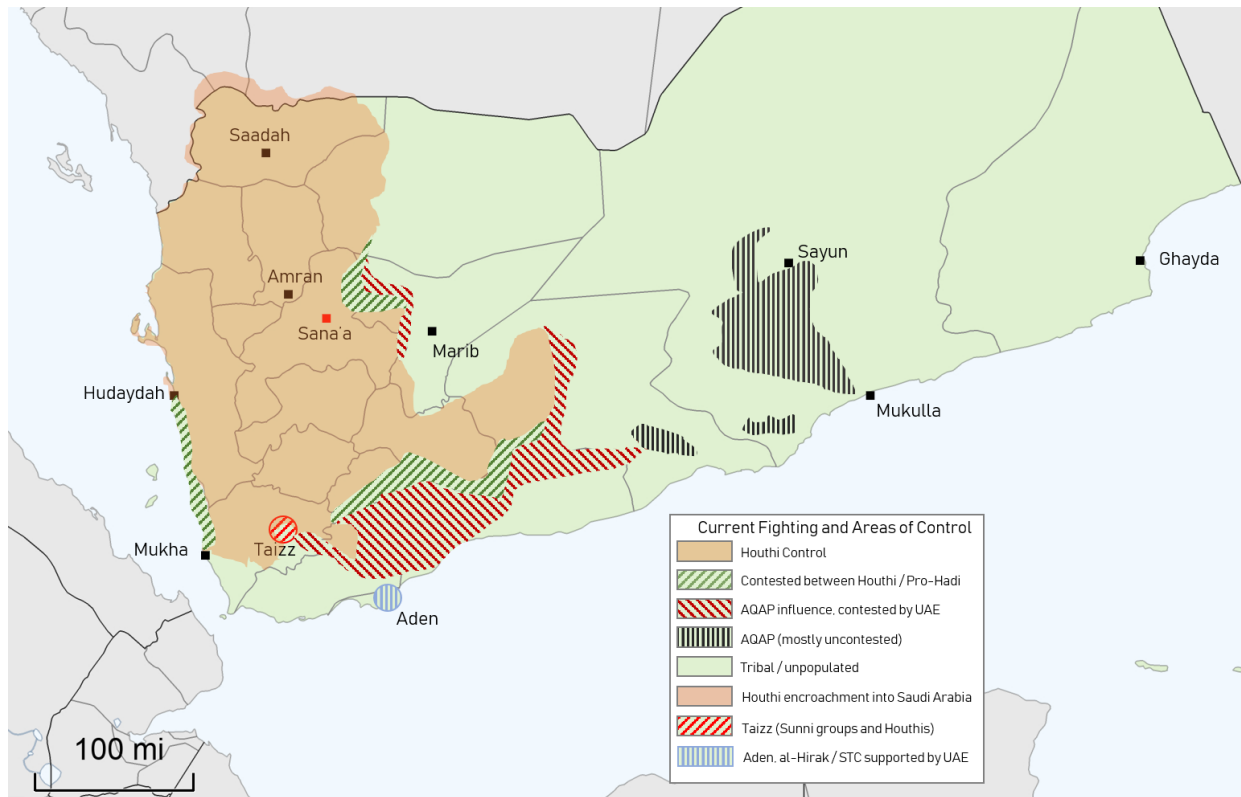
Rumors of a coalition effort to wrest control of Yemen's only significant Red Sea port have circulated since the start of Operation Decisive Storm. Even in late 2017, President Hadi reportedly ordered his forces to launch this long-delayed offensive.⁸¹ After bowing to international pressure not to attack the city of Hodeida—with the United Nations claiming that an attack on the country's largest port would have a catastrophic impact—there has been a renewed push to wrest the area from Houthi control. The thousands of forces that are gearing up to fight against the Houthis in Hodeida include Sudanese forces and others backed by the UAE, and will have to move through densely populated Houthi-dominated areas to reach Hodeida.

The coalition contends that the port is used by the Houthis to smuggle in Iranian-made weapons, and the United Nations has increased its inspections of ships bringing humanitarian aid into the country, including through Hodeida. Because of the critical importance of Hodeida in allowing commercial goods and humanitarian aid into Yemen, an attack or a reinstatement of the blockade in the port city would be detrimental to efforts to ameliorate the humanitarian crisis.⁸²

Aden

Aden is ideologically, politically, and geographically outside the sphere of Zaydi influence. Nevertheless, before being forced out by the Saudi coalition's initial military thrust, the Houthis managed to seize the city's airport and seaport, which is a major regional port.⁸³ Under British rule and up until the middle of the 20th century, it was the second busiest port in the world after New York.⁸⁴ Like Hodeida, it is a hub for trade and resupply, with routes that run north into the mountains and east into Abyan and Shabwa. As such, it is another major revenue generator for whichever force controls it.

Hadi has always considered Aden one of his power centers; he based Yemen's government there in 2015 when Sana'a fell into Houthi hands and later relocated the Central Bank of Yemen from Sana'a to Aden.⁸⁵ However, as the seat of al-Hirak, Aden is now being encouraged in its secessionist aims by the UAE. The UAE's position in this regard contradicts Hadi's goals and the goals of the larger coalition. Hadi does not want to see his power eroded through a portion of Yemen breaking away. This conflict has resulted in clashes between UAE-supported troops and Hadi troops over the UAE's formation of the Transitional Political Council (now the Southern Transitional Council), which controls most of Aden—meaning that Aden is de facto run by the UAE.⁸⁶



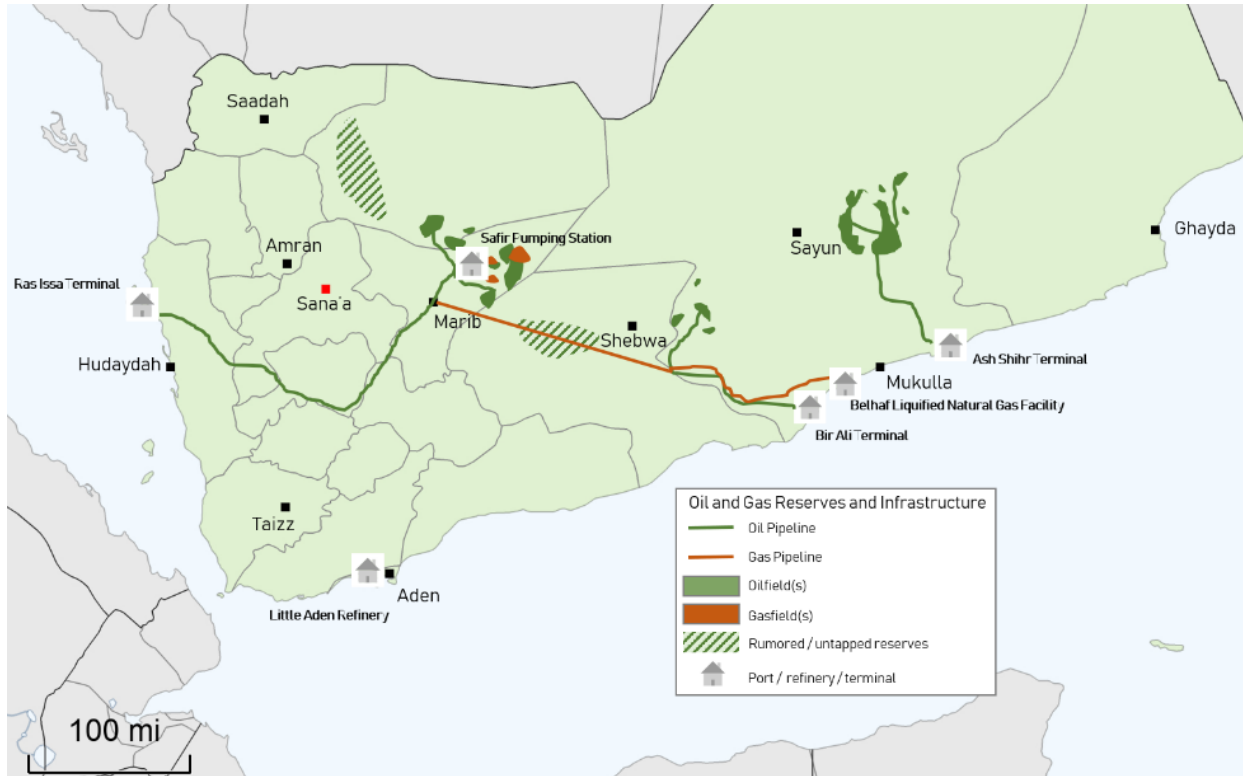
Source: Map based on the author's on-the-ground interviews, December 2017

Aden is a focal point for the waxing and waning fortunes of AQAP as well. Local cells remain operative, and the swath of land permeated by and vacillating in its allegiance to AQAP runs roughly along the front of fighting between the Houthi-Saleh forces and the coalition forces.⁸⁷ This area borders the area occupied by coalition forces and extends outward into the less-governable villages of Shabwa and Abyan, where Yemeni units, with U.S. and UAE Special Forces assistance, as well as Yemeni tribal support, have tried numerous times to dislodge and degrade AQAP and even IS.⁸⁸

Taiz

The situation in Taiz is the most convoluted, fragile, and shifting in all of Yemen. A recent post on Oxfam Yemen's Twitter page reported price increases of 20–30 percent for basic food staples and an unspecified number of resultant deaths from starvation.⁸⁹ In much the same way that the Saudi coalition has tightened a noose around Sana'a, the Houthis have surrounded predominantly Sunni Taiz and have kept the city under siege almost constantly for the last two years, with only a narrow corridor south to Aden periodically open.

The battle in Taiz is not simply between the Houthis and Hadi-supporting forces. It is complicated by Sunni-on-Sunni rivalries within the city, with numerous Sunni factions—



Source: Map by the author

including the Popular Resistance, al-Abbas Brigades, the Hasm Battalion, the Nasiriyeen Group, and al-Qaeda—all in agreement that they are fighting with Hadi against the Houthi forces besieging them. At the same time, each of these groups conducts raids and ambushes against one another.⁹⁰

Along with its neighbors Ibb, Dhale, and Qa'taba—all three of which have enduring histories of strife along the North-South border⁹¹—Taiz remains in dire straits. Armed factions operate out of most of the schools, with 250,000 of 800,000 children ejected from those facilities, and the Houthi blockade preventing health, nutrition, and aid services from reaching people in need.⁹²

Hadramawt

The UAE has created a new tribal-based force called al-Hizam, or the Security Belt services, sometimes also referred to as the Hadrami Elite Forces.⁹³ This group is said to represent tribes along a swath in the Hadramawt and further west into Abyan, Shabwa, and up to the front lines between Marib and Taiz. Its forces wear uniforms similar to those of the UAE military, follow orders from UAE advisors, and receive funding, training, and advice from UAE counterterrorism forces.⁹⁴ Since U.S. Special Forces advise UAE advisors, it can be assumed that there is at least an indirect relationship between U.S. elements and the al-Hizam groups.

Hadramawt itself has formulated its own separatist agenda, as well as openly flying the South Yemen flag since the Arab Spring.⁹⁵ Indeed, Hadramawt, with the port of Mukulla supporting an ancient power base centered around a huge, fertile wadi deep in the desert, is geographically distinct from the rest of Yemen and so tends to follow its own course, even when Yemen is more centrally governed. The Hadramawt is the home territory of the Bin Laden family. The Hadramawt also contains many of Yemen's proven oilfields and shares a border with Marib and Abyan where the other main source of Yemen's mineral wealth—more oil, as well as gas fields on the southern and western edges of the Rub al-Khali desert—are located. The Hadramawt has been more stable than other areas of Yemen, mostly because of its geographic isolation, though it harbors AQAP elements in two places: within the heart of Wadi Hadramawt itself, and also in an ebbing and flowing tide further south into Mukulla as counterterrorism pressure on those areas increases or decreases. AQAP's presence has required Yemeni government—and more recently UAE-led,—interventions. Some residents of Mukulla welcomed Al-Qaeda because they started to receive water and sanitation services more so than they had under either the government of Saleh or of Hadi.⁹⁶

There have been recent reports of the return of some Western oil workers and security managers to the oilfields in Hadramawt and even the border of Marib. While the battle lines remain in flux, this relative stability could demonstrate a willingness to restart oil production as a source of revenue.⁹⁷

Marib

Once known chiefly as the Islah headquarters of Yemen,⁹⁸ Marib sits athwart the road running from the interior desert north around Sana'a's Jebel Duqum to a hotly contested fork near the front lines at Nihm. This road branches southward toward Sana'a and northward through al-Jawf, and then through Baraqish and al-Hazm, to Saadah itself. The desert between the Saudi border and Marib has become a lifeline for support to coalition forces, giving them an interior route for land resupply. Because of this, Marib has become a comparatively prosperous place today. The population in Marib has swelled, going from 40,000 to an estimated almost 2 million people, a significant stress on its infrastructure.⁹⁹ The Houthis occasionally fire rockets toward Marib; one killed more than 45 Emirati soldiers in September of 2015.¹⁰⁰

The city benefits not only from war-profiteering but also from the “smuggling” of oil overland via truck, which results in an economic interest to continue fighting.¹⁰¹ Local tribes profit from the increased traffic along backroads through the mountains and into Sana'a, especially along the roads through Sirwah and al-Fardah. This war profiteering, which occurs on some scale in all the

regions examined here, has turned into a lucrative and stabilizing business for Marib tribes and for the troops themselves, as they sell weapons to their adversaries, harass transporters by taxing qat and other goods, and increase the need for more weapons and resupply of ammunition via low-grade skirmishing. This war economy, as everywhere, brings some measure of wealth to combatants, while most Yemenis simply suffer and become poorer.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. This proverb applies to nowhere in the world today as much as Yemen, caught in a sectarian power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia and made more complicated by the support of those countries' friends and allies. Continued failure and lawlessness in Yemen are untenable.

The only way forward is a diplomatic solution, led by the Yemenis and endorsed by all parties on the ground, as artificial solutions have twice been imposed from the international community and have failed. The first time was during the Arab Spring, when the UN intervened to attempt to prevent conflict, and now, with the tacit approval of the U.S. and the UK, Saudi Arabia's coalition has been propped up in its attempt to reinstate the externally mandated government of President Hadi. Without a strong local power base, Hadi is viewed as a puppet of Saudi Arabia. Yemenis mistrust the UN for its inaction to stop the conflict and believe that it merely endorses the Saudi coalition, and fault its Human Rights Commission for being under the sway of the coalition. The main international effort to broker a peace deal, reinforced by UN resolutions and innumerable statements of intent from Saudi Arabia's coalition, is thus concerning.¹⁰³

Unease about the prospect of a unity government without Hadi heading it are significant, however. It is possible that a new government would not be as friendly to the international community as would an installation of Hadi's old regime—an issue of concern to many, considering Yemen's strategic importance for moving so much of the material that supplies the world's energy. A new government might also fail to consolidate power throughout the more complicated regions of Yemen, such as Shabwa and Abyan, and therefore leave space for AQAP and other terrorist groups to flourish. Finally, without a strong coalition government, representative of the population at large, average Yemenis would likely remain exposed to

exploitation directed against them by those in power at the federal level, adding to the likelihood that external influences could once again gain traction inside Yemen. In that case, a peace agreement would likely fail.

Still, there are creative strategies that could be attempted in peace negotiations. The Houthis resist direct control by Tehran and are ideologically distinct from Iranian Shi'a orthodoxy.¹⁰⁴ This could allow space to broker a deal that pulls them away from Iran, as long as other sources of support are forthcoming. Practically, alternatives for Yemen's war time economy can be considered and other common sense changes can be enacted. For example, Yemen's fertile uplands, now more than 60% committed to the water-intensive cultivation of qat,¹⁰⁵ can be put to better use, which would help ameliorate the humanitarian crisis.

The stakes for ending the war in Yemen are exceptionally high. While it will not end the battle for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, a political solution in Yemen is a pre-requisite for easing regional tensions. Importantly, depriving Iran of its justification for intervening in Yemen would go much further toward reducing Tehran's regional influence than would U.S. or other efforts to confront Iran militarily in the region.

Ultimately, U.S. policymakers need to prioritize aims in Yemen. Does support to the coalition against the Iranian-backed Houthis supersede the fight to degrade and destroy AQAP? If supporting the coalition to check Iran's influence is the first priority, AQAP will end up stronger in Yemen as a result. If not, then the United States needs to question and tightly limit support to the coalition until such time as they definitively cease supporting Salafi-jihadi militias, religious leaders and others.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ben Buchholz

Author

Benjamin Buchholz is a contributor to The Soufan Center. Ben is a 20 year Army veteran who formerly served as a Strategic Planner for the Gulf Region at USCENTCOM, as Chief of Attache Affairs in the US Embassy in Yemen from 2013 through 2014, as a member of the military attache office US Embassy in Oman in 2010-2011, and as a Civil Affairs Officer in Iraq and Kuwait in 2005 and 2006. He has a master's degree in Near and Middle East Affairs from Princeton University. Ben is the author of multiple books and currently serves as Co-Founder and CEO of Nthos Solutions, a provider of information and influence capabilities.

Janet Byrne

Editor

Janet Byrne is a freelance editor, copyeditor, researcher, and writer specializing in material that concerns social justice and the politics of inequality.

Elizabeth Fernandez

Summer Researcher

Elizabeth Fernandez has supported The Soufan Center in grant writing, countering violent extremism and Yemen research.

Stephanie Foggett

Program Coordinator

Stephanie Foggett, Program Coordinator, focuses on international security, terrorism, and strategic communication at The Soufan Center.

Martin Reardon

Senior Vice President

Martin Reardon is the Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group (TSG). A 21-year veteran of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Mr. Reardon has extensive experience in the operational management and direction of complex counterterrorism and criminal investigations, both in the U.S. and internationally.

Mohamed H. El Shawesh

Multimedia Coordinator

Mohamed H. El Shawesh assists The Soufan Center with multimedia editing. El Shawesh has an MBA in Media Management from the Metropolitan College of New York through a Fulbright scholarship granted to him by the US State Department.

Patrick Skinner

Director of Special Projects

Patrick Skinner is the Director of Special Projects for The Soufan Group. He is a former CIA Case Officer, with extensive experience in source handling and source networks, specializing in counter-terrorism issues. In addition to his intelligence experience, he has law enforcement experience with the US Air Marshals and the US Capitol Police, as well as search and rescue experience in the US Coast Guard.

Meredith Stricker

Executive Director

Meredith Stricker is Executive Director of The Soufan Center. She has extensive experience in the human rights, peace and security, and development sectors.

ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER

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TSC’s dynamic team of research and policy analysts, with diverse professional, educational and cultural backgrounds—including experience in human rights; inter- national development; federal, state and local government; law enforcement; and military—leverage subject matter expertise against real-world experience to offer world-class investigative methodologies, innovative analytical tools, and contextualized, actionable solutions.

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