

Forum: Security Council

Issue: Addressing the crisis in Yemen

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Introduction



Figure 1: Houthi soldiers march during a funeral procession for Houthi fighters killed in recent fighting against government forces in Marib province, in Sanaa, Yemen, on February 17, 2021. (Khaled Abdullah, Reuters)

Since 2004, the Ansar Allah movement, better known as the Houthi movement, has been leading an insurgency against the military and government in Yemen. In 2014, the tension between the insurgency and the government reached a boiling point and escalated into outright civil war. Since then, Yemen has been plagued by a slew of political, social, and economic challenges that have created what is now one of the world's largest humanitarian catastrophes. An estimated 4.5 million people, or 14 percent of the population, are currently displaced, most have been displaced multiple times. The risk of widespread famine in the country has never been

more acute. Tens of thousands are already living in famine-like conditions, with six million more just barely surviving.

Since these first offensives launched by the Houthis in 2014, the country has been in a state of disarray; Former presidents rescinding resignations, complicated UN-supported de-escalation programs, Saudi Arabia-backed military coalitions getting involved in the civil war, the Houthi rebels have even declared war on Israel and have shot down a United States drone less than two weeks after the declaration. This complex web of interconnected alliances and rivalries have proven to make resolving the conflict near impossible, but if it isn't brought to an end soon, millions more will suffer.

Definition of Key Terms

Shia

Shia Muslims are a group of Muslims that believe that only blood relatives of the prophet Muhammad are worthy to be religious leaders. The Shiites are also the smaller of the two branches and constitute approximately 10% of the Islamic population. Shiite leaders, or Imams, are always direct descendants of Muhammad, it is what differentiates them from Sunni Muslims. Conflict has pushed most Shiite Muslims into Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan.

Sunni

Most adherents to the Islamic religious tradition belong to the Sunni branch, making up 90% of the world's Muslims. They can be found in more than 40 countries across the Middle East, Africa, and southern Asia, most notably in Saudi Arabia. Sunni leaders, called Caliphs, are elected through voting.

Imam

Shiite religious leader

Coalition

A temporary alliance for combined action, especially of political parties forming a government.

Exile

The state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons.

Civil War

A war between citizens of the same country.

Cease-fire

A temporary suspension of fighting or a truce.

Naval Blockade

Tactically positioning armed warships to dissuade any other ships from approaching or leaving an area, preventing a country or region from receiving or sending out food, supplies, weapons, or communications, and sometimes people, by military force.

Air Strikes

Precision aerial bombings conducted by military warplanes.

Cease-fire

A temporary suspension of fighting or a truce.

Background

Historical Background on Yemen

In 1918, Shia Imams declared the northern part of modern-day Yemen as a kingdom and broke away from the Ottoman Empire with the southern part under colonial British rule. Fast forward to 1967, the British left southern Yemen, leading to the formation of the People's Republic of Southern Yemen. A six-year civil war in northern Yemen, in which Saudi Arabia and Egypt backed opposing sides, overthrows the Shiite Kingdom, and establishes the Yemen Arab Republic. In the following years, South Yemen becomes the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (a state with close relations to the Soviet Union) before the end of the Cold war and constant civil uprisings in both the north and south lead to the unification of both states in 1990. Ali Abdullah Saleh, leader of North Yemen, was elected president, while the South Yemen leader Ali Salim al-Bid became vice president. Soon after this unification the President Ali Abdullah Saleh provoked a crisis with Yemen's Gulf neighbors and the United States by refusing to condemn Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait, foreshadowing further disagreements in the future. Though Yemen seemed relatively stable around this time, recurring internal conflicts proved that the foundations of the state were fragile at best. In 1994, a civil war broke out after South Yemen declared its independence, but with North Yemen emerging victorious from the civil war, Yemen continued to exist as one state.

Terrorism in Yemen

In October of 2000, 17 U.S. sailors are killed aboard the USS Cole, a U.S. navy ship anchored at the port city of Aden, in a bombing. This act of terrorism quickly brought international attention toward a growing terrorist threat in Yemen. At this time, an offshoot of Al Qaeda known as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed responsibility for the attack. As the United States and other parties continue to urge President Saleh to

concentrate on fighting AQAP, Saleh launches a series of brutal campaigns, backed by Saudi Arabia, against northern Yemen Zaydi Shia fighters known as Houthis, whom he accuses of separatism and of trying to impose their religious orthodoxy on the state. The Houthis, in turn, complain of discrimination and disenfranchisement under Saleh's autocratic rule. (Yemen's population is 40-45% Zaidi Shia, with Sunni Muslims making up most of the remainder. Though Zayidi Shi'ism is distinct from Iran's Shi'ism, this still led to an alliance between supporters of these two religions down the line.) In September of 2008, a terrorist attack against the U.S. The Embassy in the capital city of Yemen, Sana'a, killed 18 Yemeni citizens, this led to the U.S. training Yemeni counter-terrorism forces and marked the beginning of the use of armed drones to target suspected terrorist leaders in Yemen. In August 2009, the Yemeni military launched Operation Scorched Earth to crush the Houthi rebellion in Saada. At this point, Houthi rebels had begun fighting with Saudi forces in cross-border clashes. Fighting continued until Saleh's government agreed to a ceasefire with Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the Houthi leader, and the rebels in February 2010. The Yemeni military simultaneously carried out Operation Blow to the Head, a crackdown on both the rebels and AQAP.

Fragmentation and the Beginning of the Crisis

2011 saw the emergence of the Arab Spring, protests for human rights and government reform swept across the middle east, with Yemen being no exception to these protests. Protests in Sana'a initially concentrated on corruption and economic hardships, but as demands for widespread government changes grew, fueled in part by casualties from the heavy-handed government response. Concerned about instability in their backyards, Yemen's Gulf neighbors drew on U.S. support and their own financial muscle to persuade President Saleh to resign in favor of his Vice President, Abderabbu Mansour al-Hadi, in a transitional arrangement known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative. The GCC initiative led to the abdication of the presidential office by President Saleh and Hadi was allowed to run unopposed for a two-year term in order to serve as a transitional government. The peace did not last, and Yemen's civil war officially began in 2014 when popular protests sparked by a reduction in fuel subsidies erupted against the government in September. The Houthis seized the opportunity and took siege of Sana'a, and demanded lower fuel prices and a new government, claiming that the government at the time was corrupt. After unsuccessful negotiations, the rebels seized the presidential palace in January of 2015, forcing then-President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the government under his administration to resign and to flee to Saudi Arabia. In February of 2015, after escaping from Sana'a, former president Hadi rescinded his resignation, complicating the UN-supported transitional council formed to govern from the southern port city of Aden. However, advancing Houthi attacks pressured Hadi to flee Aden and forced him to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia, where he ruled as president in exile.

The War from 2015-present

In 2023, more than 8 years after the start of this violent conflict, war persisted. New groups have emerged in the conflict, merging with some groups and warring with others. Since the start of the war, ceasefires have been few and far between, hundreds of thousands of casualties have been recorded, often including civilians. Needless to say, the violence has been never-ending. Saudi Arabia has continued to play a large role in the war, fighting the

SPC and Houthi rebels with weapons purchased from its European and American allies. Hundreds of war crimes have been reported from all sides of the conflict.

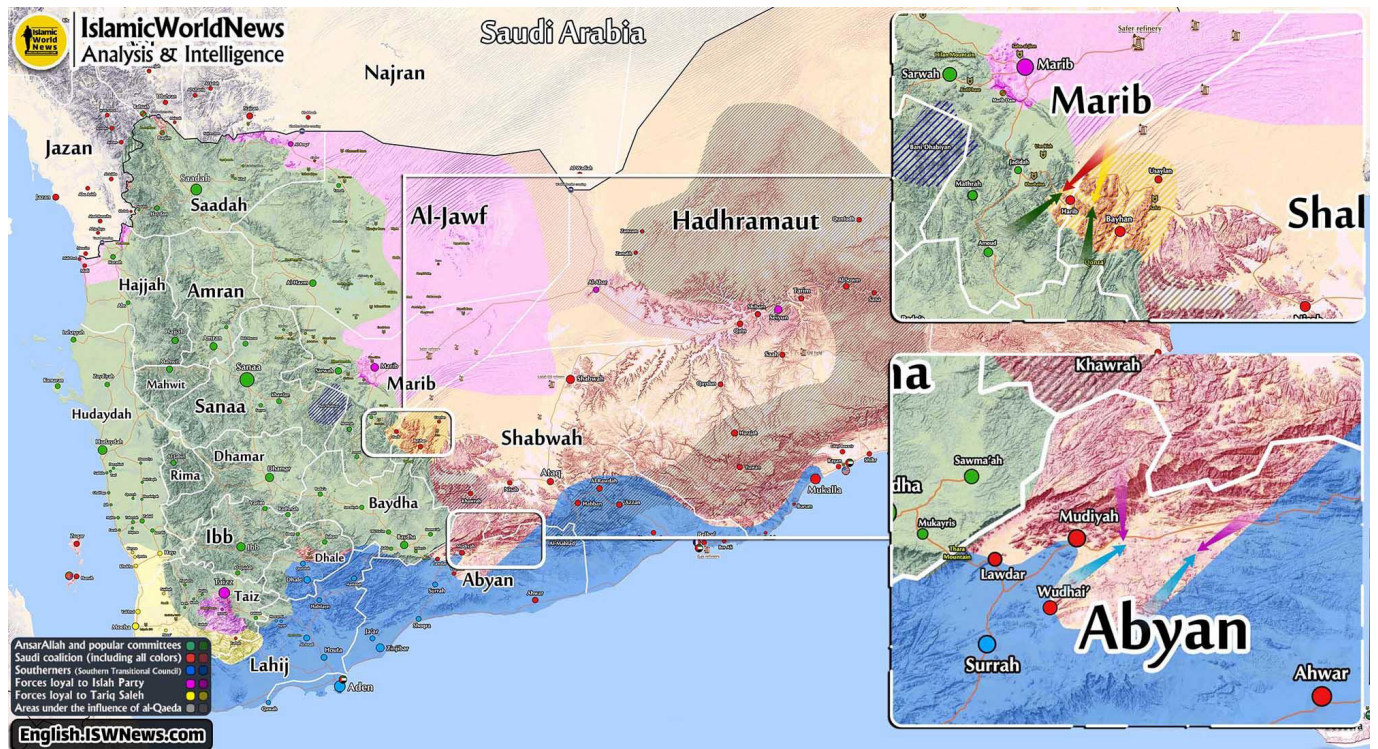


Figure 2: Map of controlled areas in Yemen 2023

Recent Developments

Though a six-month UN-brokered cease-fire officially lapsed in October 2022, both sides have since refrained from major escalatory actions and hostility levels remain low. Peace talks between Saudi and Houthi officials, mediated by Oman, resumed in April 2023, accompanying ongoing UN mediation efforts. However, concrete progress remains elusive, and the first official Houthi visit to the Saudi capital since the war began, on September 14, yielded nothing beyond optimistic statements. The discussions were reportedly centered around a complete reopening of Houthi-controlled ports and Sanaa airport, reconstruction efforts, and a timeline for foreign forces to withdraw from Yemen. Talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia in April 2023, mediated by China, have raised hopes of a political settlement to end the conflict in Yemen. The talks led to a breakthrough agreement to re-establish diplomatic relations and re-open both sides' embassies after years of tension and hostility. Iran's UN mission said that the agreement could accelerate efforts to renew the lapsed cease-fire. While hostility between the two warring sides remains low, AQAP's political violence surged in May and June of this year, reaching the highest monthly level since November 2022. The recent use of drones by AQAP in Yemen's south is likely an attempt to reassert its influence in the area despite its waning influence, and some speculate that this sudden and sustained use of drones signals external support.

The Humanitarian Crisis

The risk of a large-scale famine, violence, collapsing services and protracted displacement are the biggest challenges in Yemen. Natural disasters and climate-induced events, such as drought and flooding, are also key drivers of displacement and have heightened existing needs. Nine years of protracted conflict have pushed the country to the brink of economic collapse, shrinking the economy by more than half since the beginning of the conflict. 21.6 million people in Yemen are now in need of humanitarian assistance and protection services. The war in Ukraine has increased global food and fuel prices, disrupting supply chains of staple foods and basic goods. Yemen, which is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of hunger, is being impacted by the war as prices for wheat and grain soar. Despite ongoing humanitarian assistance, 17.3 million Yemenis suffer from high levels of acute food insecurity, including six million people who are on the brink of famine. The COVID-19 pandemic also made things worse – with people’s immune systems already severely weakened after years of war and deprivation. Yemenis continue to grapple with the effects of the virus and outbreaks of other preventable diseases – such as cholera, diphtheria, measles, and dengue fever – that were long-ago eradicated elsewhere in the world.

Major Parties Involved

Hadi Government, Saudi Arabia, and the coalition of Gulf States

The Hadi Government is the legitimate government of Yemen. The coalition of Gulf States consists of the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain, Sudan, and Kuwait, all led by Saudi Arabia. This group of countries work alongside the United States of America who provides military support to fight AQAP and the SPC. Countries like Germany, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and Egypt have all supported or are supporting the Hadi Government.

United States of America

The U.S. has been the victim of terrorist attacks in Yemen and works toward the goal of eliminating terrorist organizations like AQAP not just in Yemen but also in other parts of the Middle East. They work with the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to support the legitimate Hadi government. This campaign against terrorism started with President George Bush after the infamous September 11th attacks. The United States has carried out nearly four hundred strikes in Yemen. While Houthi rebels do not pose a direct threat to the United States, their attacks on Saudi Arabian infrastructure and territory threaten an important U.S. partner. Breaking from previous U.S. policy, President Joe Biden announced an end to U.S. support for Saudi-led offensive operations in Yemen in February 2021 and revoked its designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. However, the United States continues to sell weapons in the region.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

Al-Qaeda is a militant extremist organization known for their attacks on America and its allies, such as the 1998 US embassy bombings or the September 11th attacks. They claim to lead a global Islamist revolution and aim to unite all Muslims under an Islamic State known as the Caliphate. They are designated as a terrorist group by

NATO, the United Nations Security Council, the European Union, etc. In this report, focus is placed on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, abbreviated as AQAP.

The Houthi Movement

The Houthi Movement, officially known as the “Ansar Allah” (meaning “Supporters of God”), are a Shia Islamist political and military organization opposed to the Yemeni Government. They openly accused the then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh of being corrupt and for being backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States. Their name originates from the Houthi Tribe, a Hamdanid Arab tribe living in the north part of Yemen, members of whom constitute part of the Houthi Movement. The Houthis began as a moderate theological movement that preached tolerance and held a broad-minded view of all the Yemeni peoples. Their first official organization, founded in 1992, was the “Believing Youth”. The BY set up school clubs and summer camps and provided religious materials. After the 2003 invasion of Iraq, many were radicalized and soon adopted anti-American and antisemitic rhetoric. Many believe that the formation of the Houthi organizations has been reactionary to foreign intervention. The Houthis believe in collecting Shiite support against the threat of Saudi-influenced ideologies and condemn the former Yemeni government’s relations and alliance with the United States, believing it to be detrimental to the wellbeing of the Yemeni people.

Southern Transitional Council (STC)

The STC are a separatist movement seeking a revival of the formerly independent South Yemen. They consist of the previously mentioned Southern movement (a political movement as well as a paramilitary group with the same goal as the STC), and a few small military and paramilitary units who aim to fight AQAP and the Houthis. The STC is also backed by the United Arab Emirates who have hired a U.S. private military company to aid the STC. Since the Southern Movement is aligned with the Hadi Government and the Saudi-led coalition this effectively means that the STC are also aligned with them but only in order to fight AQAP and the SPC.

Supreme Political Council (SPC)

The SPC consists of the Pro-Houthi Yemeni Armed forces, Houthi rebels, and Pro-Saleh armed forces. They are supported by Iran, Qatar, North Korea, and Syria. They fight the Hadi Government and its allies as well as AQAP and ISIL.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

In April 2015, the Security Council introduced, through resolution 2216, an arms embargo against the rebels and sanctions against their leading representatives.

In September 2018, Yemeni government representatives and the Houthi rebels were to meet in Geneva for peace talks arranged by the UN. This would have been the first time in several years that the UN managed to organize such peace talks, but it failed when the rebel representatives did not attend. New negotiations were quickly organized and in December 2018, delegations from both parties met up in Stockholm, Sweden in the hopes of reaching a peaceful solution. On the 13th of December, the parties signed the ‘Stockholm Agreement’, agreeing

to withdraw their troops from Hodeidah and accepted UN support to manage and monitor the port, allowing vital provisions to be imported to the country. The agreement also included a prisoner exchange and steps towards a ceasefire in the city of Taiz. Another important agreement is that between the STC and the government, known as the 'Riyadh Agreement'. This agreement was signed in 2019 and will hopefully lead to the two sides working together again for a peaceful Yemen. A year after the 'Stockholm Agreement', the UN stated that there had been modest success in taking steps towards achieving sustainable peace in Yemen.

Possible Solutions

Further embargos. It would be difficult to implement embargos banning the trade of weapons to Saudi Arabia and other involved parties, but the war is only able to continue if weapons continue being supplied. Less weapons being supplied to the area would create an opening to continue peace talks.

Peace talks. Though there are ongoing peace talks, they are only between a few of the involved parties in the war. Encouraging peace talks between more and possibly all of the warring factions may prove to create a desirable outcome.

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