

Security Council

Topic 3: The Yemeni Civil War

Research Report by Vittoria Malusel

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1. Definition of Key Terms

Sunni: The Muslims of the branch of Islam that adheres to orthodox tradition and acknowledges the first four caliphs as rightful successors of Muhammad. The largest number of Muslim countries belong to this faction, Saudi Arabia included.

Shia: The Muslims of the branch of Islam comprising sects believing in Ali and the Imams as the only rightful successors of Muhammad and in the concealment and messianic return of the last recognized Imam. Iran is one of the few Shia Muslim countries, thus the conflict with Saudi Arabia is more and more exacerbated.

Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict: Also referred to as the “Middle Eastern Cold War”, is an ongoing dispute between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with the aim of gaining supremacy in the Middle East, mostly for political and economic reasons, worsened by opposite religious beliefs. The

counterparts usually participate in wars, including the Yemeni civil war, on opposite sides.

Militia: A private group of armed individuals that operates as a paramilitary force and is typically motivated by a political or religious ideology. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are considered so.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): An intergovernmental union comprising the States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, that is all Arab States in the Persian Gulf, apart from Iran. Most of these States form the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni conflict.

Southern Transitional Council (STC): It is a Yemeni secessionist organisation formed in 2017, consisting of 26 members, that takes active part in the fight.

2. Introduction

The Yemeni Civil War is a long-drawn-out, multi-sided conflict that began in late 2014 between two main opponents: a Shia rebel group, the Houthis, and the Yemeni government, led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Both counterparts, along with their allies, claim their right to rule over the State. Houthi forces are supposedly supported by Iran, whereas a coalition of more than ten countries led by Saudi Arabia backs Hadi's government. War broke out as the Houthis succeeded in taking control of the capital and largest city, Sana'a; following failed negotiations, the rebels seized the presidential palace in 2015, leading President Hadi and his government to cede. Hadi overruled his resignation and fighting has continued since, causing one of the world's most atrocious humanitarian crises, as well as a guerrilla that seems far from ending.

3. Timeline of Events

The Arab uprisings of **2011** brought Yemenis to protest against the ruling president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been in charge for more than twenty years. He was criticised for having caused widespread unemployment and corruption. The biggest protest was organised by the Shia Muslim movement called "The Houthis", which had been at war with the Saleh government for years. The President was eventually forced to leave his power to former Vice-President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.

The UN sponsored national dialogue to address the future of Yemen, but tensions rose again when the proposal of dividing the country into six federal regions was made. The Houthis disapproved of the plan, since it would undermine their own

interest and national visions. Hadi's government failed to maintain order, as AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and DAESH, Arabic acronym of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) took advantage of Yemen's political instability, invading the State. The Houthis made further territorial gains, although they turned to Saleh, who still possessed military power and saw this as an opportunity to regain his title.

In **September 2014** Houthi fighters seized control of Sana'a, the Yemeni capital, event which is considered as the start of the conflict. The Shia armed movement later forced Hadi to resign, after the President's refusal, the Houthis gained an unprecedented level of influence, confining Hadi to his residence in Sana'a.

One month later the arrival of Houthi militants made Hadi escape from the capital and travel to Aden, where he declared that the Houthi takeover was illegitimate. He also affirmed he would remain the constitutional president of Yemen. His predecessor as president, Saleh, publicly denounced Hadi and called on him to go into exile.

In **March 2015** the leader of the Houthis said his group's decision to prepare for war was imperative under current circumstances and that AQAP and its allies, among whom he counts Hadi, would be targeted, as opposed to Yemen and its citizens. Also, on the **same day** al-Qaeda militants captured the provincial capital of Lahij. Later **in March**, Hadi declared Aden the temporary Yemeni capital, as Houthi forces entered Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, and quickly assumed control of its key points.

The civil war went on **for months** with the same scheme: the Houthis, supposedly backed by Iran and the troops still loyal to Saleh, gained more and more territories, albeit Hadi's government resisted, because of the support received by Saudi Arabia and the military coalition consisted of nine other Sunni Muslim States, including Egypt, Morocco and UAE, alongside the logistical support of the United States. The coalition set up a sea and air blockade especially in Sana'a, a city that was repeatedly bombed until the **end of April**; such aerial campaigns were aimed at restoring the former government, even though they targeted mostly non-military zones. The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (with the exception of Oman) said they would intervene against the Houthis in Yemen at the request of Hadi's government.

A few weeks later Oman, the only Middle Eastern country not taking part in the coalition, presented a 7-point plan to both Houthis and Saudi Arabia. The proposition included the withdrawal of the Houthis from Yemeni cities, the restoration of President Hadi and his government, early elections and Yemen entering the GCC. The Houthis accepted the proposal, but Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government refused any negotiations.

In July of the same year Hadi's allies reconquered Aden with support from Saudi Arabia, an event which allowed supplies to finally reach the port city giving civilians

desperately-needed aid after months of suffering; a UN ship docked in Aden carrying relief supplies, the first UN vessel to reach the city in four months.

In **January 2016**, new conflict began in Aden, with ISIL and AQAP controlling different areas of the city. In particular, ISIL extremists carried out bombing attacks, as well as suicide bombings, in various parts of the country.

In **February** pro-Hadi forces managed to enter Sana'a Governorate by killing dozens of Houthi fighters. They continued their advance, capturing some cities and villages. War went on **for months** and no counterpart appeared to be on the lead, not even during several demonstrations held in **August** to support former President Saleh and the Houthis; the people's demands eventually revealed themselves as unsuccessful.

From January to March 2017 the US conducted plenty of airstrikes, aimed at attacking militants, but causing civil casualties, too. The guerrilla kept going in the **following months**, but not only did it involve the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition, but also ISIL, who shared various videos in which they threatened the counterparts. Later, on the **11th May 2017** the Southern Transitional Council was founded.

On the **2nd December** an unexpected turning point occurred as Saleh publicly offered to talk to the Saudi-led coalition, so as to put an end to the civil war, formally splitting with the Houthis, by whom he was killed two days later. From this day onwards, the Houthis could not count on military troops loyal to Saleh.

At the **end of 2017**, the Houthis managed to make several more territorial gains, causing a large number of combats held at the **start of 2018**, two of which are also related to the AQAP branch in Yemen, considered as the most dangerous by the US.

The STC were backing the Hadi government against the Houthis, but tensions erupted in **2018** with the separatists accusing the government of corruption. Conflicts led to the assassination of the President of STC, who was killed in one of the numerous airstrikes. At the **end of 2018** all antagonist parties agreed to have a ceasefire, which is a lifeline for the country.

Sporadic exchanges of fire and other ceasefire violations were reported between Houthi forces and coalition troops in **January 2019**. In **July 2019** the UAE, a key ally of Saudi Arabia in the war, facing international criticism of its conduct, announced a withdrawal of its forces from Yemen.

On the **12th August**, fighters aligned with the Southern Transitional Council took control of Aden from the Saudi-backed government. On the **8th September**, the Arab coalition exhorted separatists and President Hadi's government to cease all military actions in south Yemen. The two Gulf nations asked them to prepare for "constructive dialogue" to end the crisis between the two nominal allies.

In **September 2019**, Saudi Arabia agreed to a ceasefire in several areas of Yemen, including the capital of Sana'a, which is controlled by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

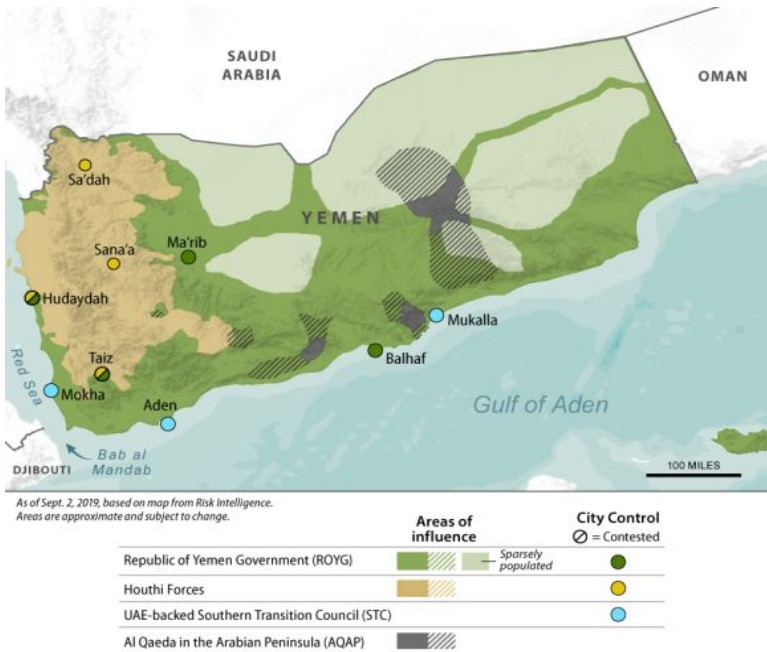
This was followed by an agreement between the STC and the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) in **October**, with the aim of achieving a lasting peace.

On the **5th November**, a power-sharing deal, Riyadh Agreement on Yemen was signed between the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and the UAE-backed southern separatists. It was seen as a wider political solution to end the conflict in Yemen. Despite the agreement, clashes between the STC and Hadi government forces took place in **December**.

On the **31st January 2020**, Houthi fighters recaptured the entire Sana'a province including Nihm district from the Hadi Government.

The attacks occurred despite the UN Secretary-General António Guterres and other organizations asking to maintain a ceasefire during the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to mitigate the spread of the illness. Only on the **9th April** the Saudi-led coalition called a unilateral ceasefire.

Despite the break, on the **26th April**, the STC announced its self-rule in the parts of south Yemen under their control. They succeeded in capturing twelve districts, basically North Yemen as a whole.



On the **19th May**, the President of STC visited Riyadh, in order to discuss the prolonged stalemate with the Hadi government. The conflict between the two sides reflected differences within the Saudi-led coalition, causing a “war within a war” fought against the Houthi rebels. On the **19th August**, Houthi forces said they captured part of Al Bayda after they launched an offensive.

Graphic created by CRS using data from Risk Intelligence (2020); Esri (2017 & 2018); NOAA (2018); USGS (2018); Department of State (2015).

4. Background Information

The Republic of Yemen is a country in the south-west of the Arabian Peninsula, its population is over 30,000,000 people. The capital city Sana'a, which is also where most Yemenis (2,700,000 inhabitants) live, is still under control of the Houthi armed movement, forcing the executive administration to reside in Riyadh, the capital city of

Saudi Arabia. Due to the persistent civil war, Yemen has been undergoing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world: continuous air and sea blockade make it almost impossible for aid to reach civilians, who suffer heavily from lack of potable water, food, electricity, shelter and medical supplies.

Despite all the sorts of cruelties that the conflict has brought about since 2014, all experts agree when it comes to saying that the ongoing fight is worsened by the alleged insinuation of Iran and the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia, along with the presence of several separatist groups, among which the Houthis are only the most strategically advanced. Ultimately, the country's exposure to terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, exacerbate the conflict to its core.

5. Major Countries Involved

- **Iran:** The Islamic Republic of Iran is a Shia Muslim State whose economy is prevalently oil-based, as the one in Saudi Arabia is. These two States have been trying to prevail one over the other since the 1980's, in what is considered by historians as "the New Cold War", given that Iran and Saudi Arabia intervene in other countries' conflicts, such as the war in Iraq, the Syrian or the Yemeni civil wars, only to affirm their supremacy on the Middle East. Although Iran's role in militarily and economically financing the Houthis is not official, Saudi Arabia seems fairly certain about it being an active one: accurate studies have been carried out about the origin of the weapons in Houthi hands, and all answers lead to Iran.
- **Saudi Arabia:** Former part of the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, independent since 1932, saw its power escalating after the discovery of massive oil reserves in 1938. Huge significance is also given to the country by the presence of La Mecca and Medina, the two most important cities for Muslims, as part of their religious heritage. After experiencing a great development, Saudi Arabia has always attempted to spread its influence in the Middle East, and this worsened the clear rivalry with Iran, tackling any diplomatic intention. It is therefore immediate to think of the Yemeni civil war as an Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy conflict: the two counterparts never actually declared war on each other, instead they took part in various fights as opposing belligerents.
- **The Saudi-led military coalition:** It is an alliance that consists of several countries, among which Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, Senegal and Sudan took part in the most active ways over the years, along with the logistic help of the US and the UK.
- **United States:** The US have always been allied to Saudi Arabia since the end of World War II, providing the Middle East country with military aid and strategies to strengthen the army. In recent years, the US has sold great amounts of arms,

whose value adds up to billions of dollars, yet the American intervention is also helping Saudi Arabian refuel their airships, thanks to airborne recharges that give planes a much longer range, allowing airstrikes to become more lethal, as aircrafts can stay in the air longer. There are three reasons on top of the US intervention in the Yemeni conflict: the first one is the long-lasting alliance with Saudi Arabia, the second is the Iran Nuclear Deal signed in 2015, in which the Obama administration promised they would drop its sanctions on Iran if the country limited the development of a nuclear program; the elimination of those sanctions worries Saudi Arabia, as Iran could gain more power, so the Arabian Kingdom wanted the US help fighting their antagonist back. The third purpose is a counterterrorist strategy carried against the Al-Qaeda branch in Yemen, whom the US hope to eradicate.

- **United Kingdom:** The British, alongside with the French, are considered guilty of backing the Saudi-led coalition, giving logistical and military support, although there is no certain proof to allow such information to be relied upon.

6. UN Involvement

The UN has always been taking active part in the Yemeni conflict, not only in terms of humanitarian aid for civilians, but also diplomatically, by sponsoring peace talks and ceasefires, which gave new impetus to end the crisis in Yemen and created hope for alleviating the humanitarian crisis. The United Nations also collaborated with 254 humanitarian partners to agree on priorities and a coherent strategy to meet the needs of 13 million people in 2018.

In november 2020 UN Secretary-General António Guterres alerted that Yemen was in “imminent danger of the worst famine the world has seen for decades” and Henrietta Fore, head of the UN International Children’s Fund (UNICEF), said the country was facing “an imminent catastrophe”. These statements show the high level of awareness of the international community, in spite of the ongoing global pandemic.

Moreover, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said it was very difficult to bring aid into Yemen, citing an extremely restricted operating environment and a huge funding shortfall that had crippled the humanitarian response. “By mid-2020, Yemen had returned to alarming levels of food insecurity and acute malnutrition. All indications suggest that the severity of needs for large sections of the population is increasing. COVID-19 has compounded food insecurity, mainly due to limited work opportunities, lower incomes and reduced remittances”, OCHA said.

Specifically, since 2015, the UN and its partners have been on the ground providing lifesaving assistance and protection:

- Each month, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) distributes more than 100,000 metric tons of food commodities at 5,000 points, reaching more than 8 million Yemenis;
- The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have reached more than 300,000 people with cholera vaccines;
- The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has provided health services to 250,000 women.
- OCHA works closely with the government and humanitarian partners at all levels to enhance coordination.

This video shows a speech by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoZt_XK8Wms

7. Official documents and treaties about the issue

Security Council-The Stockholm Agreement: UN-sponsored talks held in December 2018 in Stockholm, aimed at ending the brutal conflict.

<https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/1134>

Security Council-Resolution 2451: Following the Stockholm Agreement, this document establishes the presence of a team to monitor a ceasefire in the area of the city of Hudaydah, along with the port.

Security Council-Hudaydah Agreement: <https://undocs.org/en/S/2018/1134>

Security Council-Resolution 2452: Establishes a New Special Political Commission, known as the United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA). The UN further underlined their intention aimed at supporting the Hudaydah Agreement until July 2021.

8. Impact of the issue

The Yemeni civil war has had severe consequences that threaten especially water and food supplies, further worsening the life of civilians, who find themselves in danger at any moment, due to malnutrition, airstrikes and illnesses, such as the cholera epidemic that broke out in 2018.

Vital infrastructures have been destroyed, for example hospitals and houses have been bombed for years, along with schools and market squares; airstrikes often occur without previous warning, moreover any zone can be attacked with no criteria, so there is no safe place for Yemenis to hide.

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) nearly 100,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the conflict in 2015, including 17,000 civilians. Furthermore, the UN estimates that nearly 130,000 more deaths have occurred on account of indirect causes.

Furthermore, about 24 million people (80% of the entire population) depend on humanitarian aid to survive, and even that support is at risk due to the Covid-19 pandemic, that spread widely in Yemen, too. Not only did Coronavirus spread in the country, but studies also suggest it has a mortality rate way higher than the average (the global average mortality rate is 4%): it is estimated that 30% of the Yemenis who contracted the virus have died from it.

Finally, another data that is worth considering is the number of displaced people, which amounts to about 4 million according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

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