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Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

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Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

For over a decade, the Republic of Yemen has been torn apart by multiple armed conflicts to which several internal militant groups and foreign nations are parties. Collectively, these conflicts have eroded central governance in Yemen, and have fragmented the nation into various local centers of power. The gradual dissolution of Yemen's territorial integrity has alarmed the United States and others in the international community. Policymaker concerns include fears that state failure may empower Yemen-based transnational terrorist groups; destabilize vital international shipping lanes near the Bab al Mandab strait (also spelled Bab al Mandeb, Bab el Mendeb); and provide opportunities for Iran to threaten Saudi Arabia's borders.

Beyond geo-strategic concerns, the collapse of Yemeni institutions during wartime has exacerbated poor living conditions in what has long been the most impoverished Arab country, leading to what is now considered the world's worst humanitarian crisis. This report provides information on these ongoing and overlapping crises.

In 2014, the northern Yemeni-based Ansar Allah/Houthi movement (referred to in this report as "the Houthis") took over the capital, Sanaa (also commonly spelled Sana'a), and in early 2015, advanced southward from the capital to Aden on the Arabian Sea. In March 2015, after Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia, appealed for international intervention, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition of several of its Arab partners (referred to in this report as "the Saudi-led coalition") and launched a military offensive aimed at restoring Hadi's rule and dislodging Houthi fighters from the capital and other major cities.

Since then, the conflict in Yemen has killed tens of thousands, caused significant humanitarian suffering, and has significantly damaged the country's infrastructure. One U.S.- and European-funded organization, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), estimates as of November 2020 that more than 130,000 Yemenis have been killed since 2015.

Although media coverage of the Saudi-led intervention has characterized the war as a binary conflict (the Saudi-led coalition versus the Houthis), there actually have been a multitude of combatants whose alliances and loyalties have been somewhat fluid. In summer 2019 in southern Yemen, long-simmering tensions between the internationally recognized Republic of Yemen government (ROYG) and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) boiled over, leading to open warfare between the local allies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In 2020, periodic clashes continued, though both sides finally implemented a power sharing agreement at the end of the year and formed a coalition government.

Many foreign observers have denounced human rights violations that they charge have been committed by all parties to the conflict. In the United States and some European countries, there has been vociferous opposition to coalition air strikes that hit civilian targets, leading Congress to debate and enact some legislation to limit U.S. support for the coalition. Some in Congress opposed to such efforts have highlighted Iran's support for the Houthis as a major factor in Yemen's destabilization.

For several years, Yemen has been considered the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, and public health experts warn that the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic may have significant negative effects on Yemen's vulnerable population. To date, most humanitarian agencies believe that the extent of the outbreak in Yemen has been underreported.

For additional information on Yemen, including a summary of relevant legislation, please see CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2020*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Sarah R. Collins.

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Overview

For over a decade, the Republic of Yemen¹ has been torn apart by multiple armed conflicts to which several internal militant groups and foreign nations are parties. Collectively, these conflicts have eroded central governance in Yemen, and have fragmented the nation into various local centers of power. The gradual dissolution of Yemen's territorial integrity has alarmed the United States and others in the international community. Policymaker concerns include fears that state failure may empower Yemen-based transnational terrorist groups; destabilize vital international shipping lanes near the Bab al Mandab strait² (also spelled Bab al Mandeb, Bab el Mendeb); and provide opportunities for Iran to threaten Saudi Arabia's borders. Beyond geo-strategic concerns, the collapse of Yemeni institutions during wartime has exacerbated poor living conditions in what has long been the most impoverished Arab country, leading to what is now considered the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

As of March 2021, Yemen remains beset by multiple armed and political conflicts which, in their totality, have crippled central governance, devastated the national economy, and exacerbated a long-standing humanitarian crisis. One U.S.- and European-funded organization, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), estimates that from the start of regional intervention in Yemen in March 2015 until November 2020, over 130,000 Yemenis had been killed in various acts of violence.³

Recent Changes in U.S. Policy

Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition it established have been engaged in military operations in Yemen against the Houthi movement, or *Ansar Allah*, which the U.S. government believes receives some material support from Iran. As of February 2021, the epicenter of fighting was around the northern governorate and city of Marib (see **Figure 2**), one of the last areas under the control of the internationally-recognized Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) led by Yemeni President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

¹ Since its 1990 unification, Yemen has been a republic in which, according to Article 4 of its 2001 constitution (as amended), "The people of Yemen are the possessor and the source of power, which they exercise directly through public referendums and elections, or indirectly through the legislative, executive and judicial authorities, as well as through elected local councils." In reality, the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh ruled a unified Yemen from 1990-2012. After popular uprisings swept across the Arab world in 2011, including in Yemen, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) helped broker a transition plan for Yemen, which was endorsed by the United Nations (see, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2014) and superseded the authority of Yemen's constitution. As part of Yemen's transition from the longtime rule of President Saleh to President Hadi, all of Yemen's various political factions (565 individual delegates) held what was called the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) from 2013-2014. That conference was intended to settle all of Yemen's outstanding political issues, including producing recommendations which were to be used by a Constitutional Drafting Committee to create a new constitution, which would then be voted on in a national referendum. However, in January 2014 the NDC ended without agreement and shortly thereafter, the Houthis launched a military offensive to seize large swaths of northern Yemen, culminating in their capture of the capital Sana'a in September 2014.

² After the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, the Bab al Mandab is one of the world's busiest chokepoints in terms of volume of crude oil and petroleum liquids transported through each day. According to the Energy Information Administration, "Total petroleum flows through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait accounted for about 9% of total seaborne-traded petroleum (crude oil and refined petroleum products) in 2017." See, U.S. Energy Information Administration, "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a Strategic Route for Oil and Natural Gas Shipments, August 27, 2019.

³ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), Dashboard, available online at: [<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>]

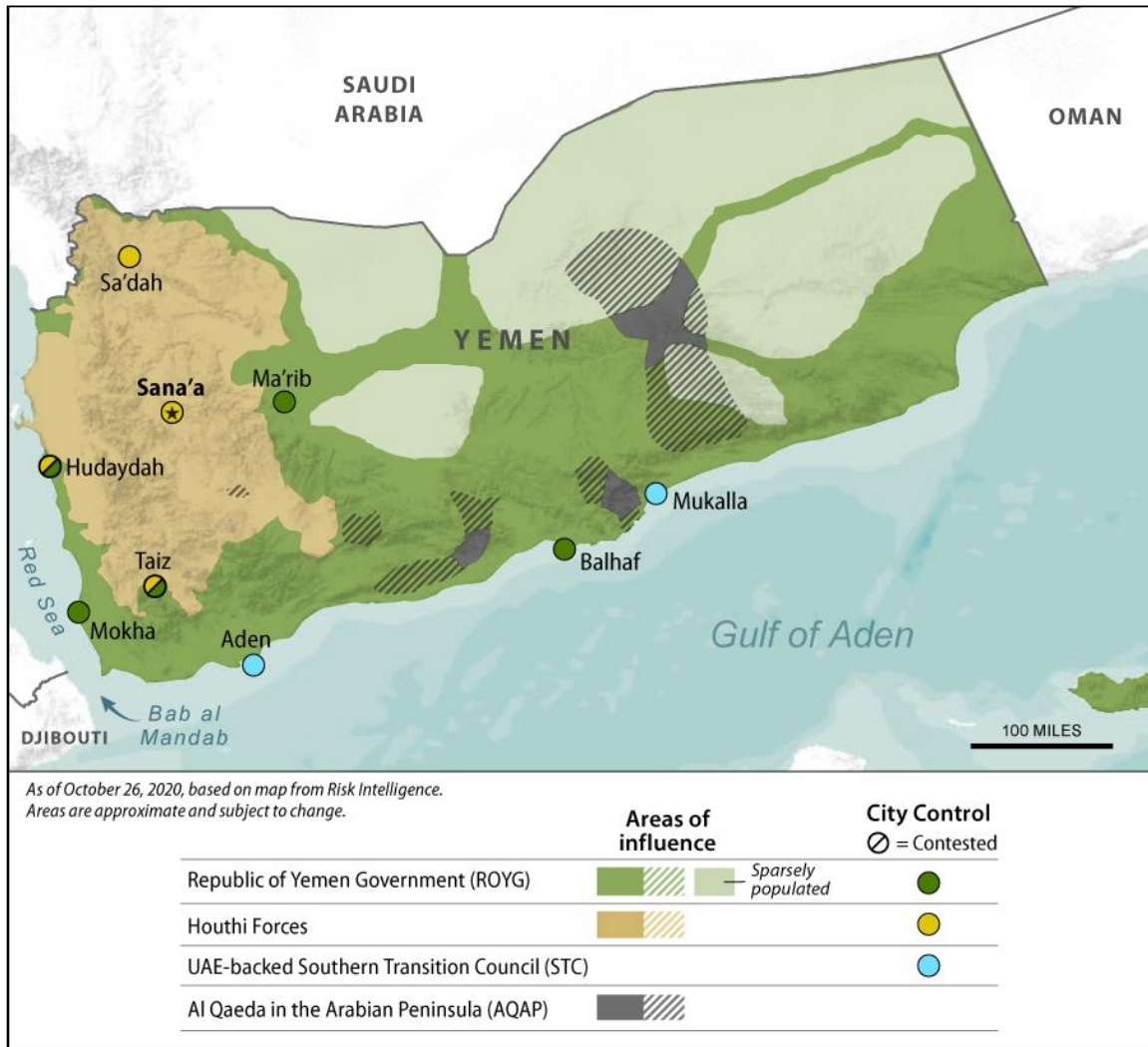
As of March 2021, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen Martin Griffiths continues his efforts to broker a nation-wide cease-fire that would ultimately lead to talks over a political settlement to Yemen's regional and national conflicts. In recent weeks, Griffiths has intensified his diplomatic outreach, traveling to various Gulf Arab states and Iran. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to resolving the war is that the Houthis seek international recognition of their de-facto authority in northern Yemen, a recognition of their legitimacy that neither President Hadi nor the Saudi government appear ready to bestow.

On January 19, 2021, the Trump Administration designated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity. In notifying Congress, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo identified that the Houthis were closely linked to Iran and that the designations were intended to hold the Houthis accountable for terrorist acts.⁴ The designations reportedly had been under consideration for months, though aid organizations repeatedly cautioned that designations would exacerbate what the United Nations presently considers the world's worst humanitarian crisis. On February 11, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken revoked the FTO and SDGT designations of the Houthis. The Secretary retained the designations of five Houthi individuals as Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13611. President Obama issued that order in 2012 to block property of persons threatening the peace, security, or stability of Yemen. On March 2, the Biden Administration designated two additional Houthi leaders under E.O. 13611.⁵

⁴ U.S. Department of State, "Terrorist Designation of Ansarallah in Yemen," Press Statement, Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State, January 10, 2021.

⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Public Affairs, "Treasury Sanctions Key Military Leaders of the Ansarallah Militia in Yemen," Press Release, March 2, 2021.

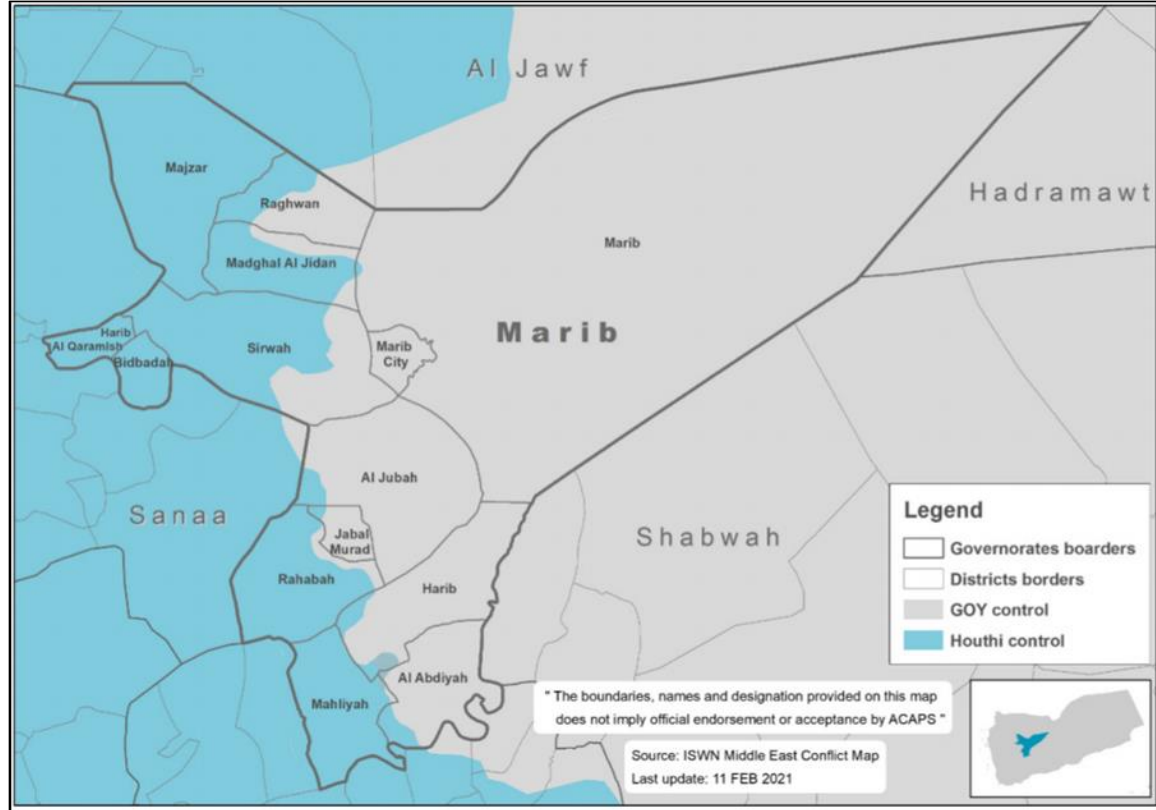
Figure I. Lines of Control in Yemen
As of October 2020



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

Since March 2015, the U.S. military has supported Saudi-led coalition military operations in Yemen, which have come under increasing scrutiny in Congress. However, on February 4, 2021, President Biden announced that his Administration would increase U.S. efforts to resolve the conflict in Yemen by: (1) appointing a special envoy to Yemen; (2) ending U.S. support for offensive operations in the war, including relevant arms sales; and (3) continuing to help Saudi Arabia defend its territory from Houthi attacks. According to one recent report, newly appointed U.S. Special Envoy to Yemen Timothy Lenderking met with Houthi officials in Muscat, Oman, in late February in order to press them to halt their military offensive in Marib (see below) and engage Saudi Arabia in ceasefire negotiations.⁶

⁶ “U.S. Officials have Met Yemen’s Houthis as Washington Seeks End to War: Sources,” Reuters, March 3, 2021.

Figure 2. Lines of Control in Marib Governorate

Source: ACAPS, *Yemen: Marib District Profiles*, Thematic Report, February 19, 2021

The Houthi-ROYG War in the North: The Battle for Marib

As of early March 2021, Houthi forces continue to launch attacks against the forces of the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) in Marib governorate. The Marib governorate is the last northern stronghold of the ROYG. An estimated 800,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have fled conflict in other parts of the country, are located there.⁷ Marib also is the center of Yemen's modest hydrocarbon sector and, while the country imports over 90% of its oil and gas, the oil refinery in Marib accounts for nearly 8% of Yemen's total energy needs.⁸

The Houthis began offensive operations in Marib over a year ago. They escalated their attacks in mid-February, perhaps in an effort to maximize their territorial gains in anticipation of renewed international efforts, including by the Biden Administration, to broker a cease-fire to the conflict. The Houthis may also be trying to consolidate their control over northern Yemen after the recent implementation of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement, which brought the Southern Transition Council (STC), a United Arab Emirates-backed southern Yemeni independence movement, into a unity government with the ROYG. Though it is unlikely that the STC would commit fighters to defend Marib, the Houthis may be pressing ahead now while the balance of power in northern Yemen is

⁷ United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner, "Press briefing notes on Yemen," February 19, 2021.

⁸ International Crisis Group, "Crisis in Marib: Averting a Chain Reaction in Yemen," February 22, 2021.

still in their favor. According to the International Organization for Migration, since January 2020, 140,000 Yemenis have fled from areas close to the frontlines in Marib and other governorates.⁹

Reports indicate that the Houthis have taken heavy casualties, as the front line remains approximately 10-15 miles outside of Marib city (see **Figure 2**). While the Houthis have advanced toward Marib city, military analysts suggest that their progress has been slowed. Saudi Arabia continues to support ROYG ground forces with targeted air strikes. The terrain of Marib city itself is relatively flat, which may further expose the Houthi ranks and make it more challenging for their fighters, who are accustomed to fighting on mountainous terrain.¹⁰

Clashes Continue in Hudaydah

In December 2018, Special Envoy Griffiths brokered a cease-fire, known as the Stockholm Agreement, centered on the besieged Red Sea port city of Hudaydah (also spelled Hodeidah, Al Hudaydah, see **Figure 1**). More than two years later, the agreement remains unfulfilled and, as of early March 2021, Houthi-ROYG clashes in Hudaydah continue. On March 1, the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) condemned a mortar attack in the city that killed five civilians. The United Nations did not attribute blame to a specific group and called on the Houthis and the ROYG to abide by the terms of the ceasefire, prevent civilian casualties, and allow U.N. monitors freedom of movement.¹¹

Currently, the Houthis control the port and city of Hudaydah itself, along with access to the city from the north. To the south along the Red Sea coast, a coalition of forces (dubbed the “Joint Resistance Forces”) led by Tareq Saleh, the nephew of the late former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, have remain ensconced since 2018, when the Saudi-led coalition attempted to seize Hudaydah from the Houthis before the Stockholm Agreement halted the fighting. Tareq Saleh’s forces are based out of the port town of Mokha and receive support from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. They are not formally part of the ROYG and operate independently from President Hadi.

Figure 3. U.N. Monitors in Hudaydah



Source: Twitter, U.N. Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement, October 15, 2020.

Failing Oil Tanker

Moored off of Yemen’s west coast north of Hudaydah, the 44-year-old floating storage and offloading (FSO) Vessel Safer (owned by the state-run Yemen Oil and Gas Corporation) has been deteriorating for years. It holds an estimated 1.4 million barrels of crude oil. Routine maintenance on the tanker stopped after the Saudi-led intervention began in March 2015. If the FSO Safer were to critically fail, it would likely cause environmental damage within the Red Sea, but would

⁹ IOM Yemen, “Displacement in Marib,” Flash Update, February 23, 2021.

¹⁰ Michael Horton, “Yemen’s Fate Hinges on The Battle for Marib,” *The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 19 Issue: 4, February 26, 2021.

¹¹ “Yemen: U.N. Ceasefire Monitoring Mission Condemns Attack on Civilians in Hudaydah,” U.N. News, March 1, 2021.

possibly put supplies of drinking water in danger due to its proximity to desalination plants. It could also force the port of Hudaydah to close for months, adding delay to the supply of humanitarian aid to north Yemen. In order to assess the danger, the United Nations had been negotiating with the Houthis to permit a technical team access to the tanker. Although the Houthis had indicated that they would issue entry permits to U.N. inspectors, they have not given their final authorization. One U.N. spokesperson said that while the U.N. has committed \$3.3 million to begin work on the Safer, the Houthis may be reconsidering allowing them access.¹²

The Houthi-Saudi Arabia Conflict

Since a Saudi-led coalition intervened on behalf of the ROYG in 2015, the Houthis and coalition forces have been engaged in what is referred to informally as an air or missile war. The Saudis have conducted numerous air strikes in northern Yemen, while the Houthis have launched ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into Saudi territory. As of early March 2021, reports of errant Saudi air strikes that have resulted in civilian casualties continue, though far less frequently than in earlier periods of the war (see **Figure 4**). The Yemen Data Project, a non-profit independent data collection project, has tallied over 22,700 Saudi-led coalition air strikes since March 2015, resulting in over 18,500 civilian casualties.¹³ Another monitoring organization, The Civilian Impact Monitoring Project (CIMP), a service under the United Nations Protection Cluster for Yemen, recorded 2,087 civilian casualties in 2020 (749 people killed and 1,338 injured), a decrease from 3,224 civilian casualties in 2019 (1,104 deaths and 2,120 injuries), and from 4,934 in 2018 (2,049 deaths and 2,885 injuries).¹⁴

While the Houthis do not possess manned aircraft, they have conducted persistent ballistic missile and UAV launches against Saudi territory in an ongoing campaign they claim is in response to the Saudi-led coalition's ongoing maritime blockade of Yemen's west coast and closure of Sana'a airport. In February 2021, a Houthi drone attack against Abha Airport in southern Saudi Arabia struck a civilian plane, though no casualties were reported. Secretary of State Blinken condemned the attack.¹⁵ In addition to aerial bombardment, the Houthis also have targeted vessels transiting the Red Sea or berthed in Saudi ports.¹⁶

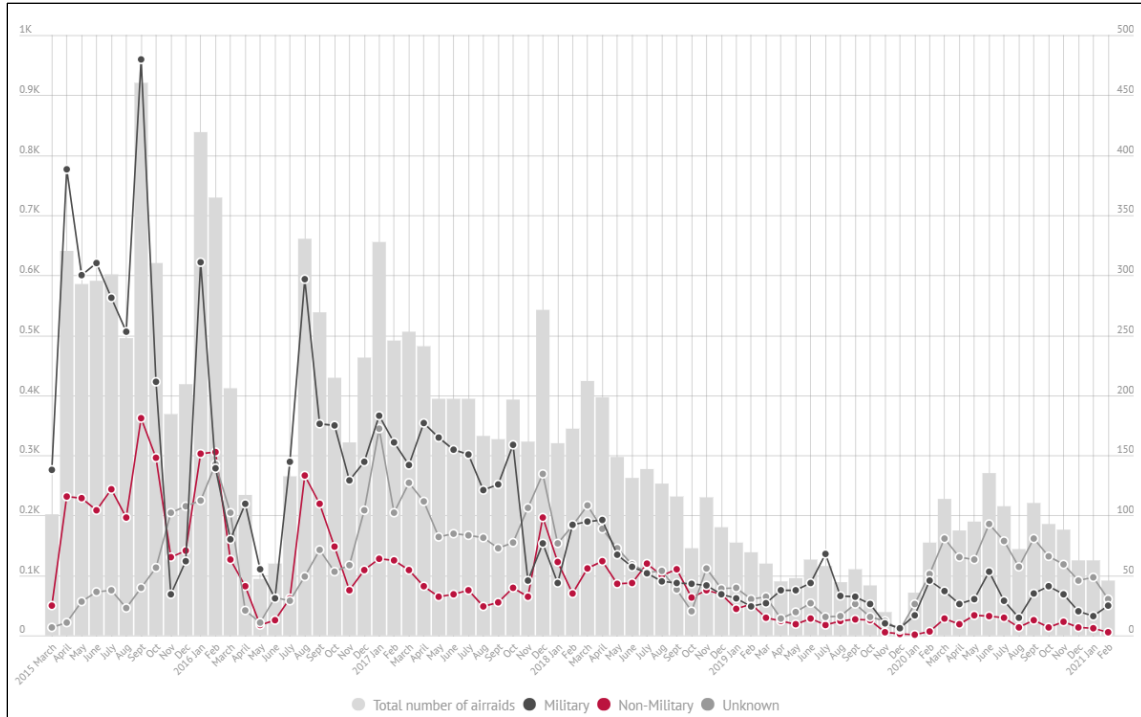
¹² Rick Gladstone, "U.N. Delays Salvage of Yemen Oil Tanker Amid Fears of Major Spill," *New York Times*, February 2, 2021.

¹³ Yemen Data Project, Air War Dataset, available online at <https://yemendataproject.org/data.html>.

¹⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Yemen Humanitarian Update, Issue 1, January 2021," February 12, 2021.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Secretary Blinken's Call with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud," Readout, February 10, 2021.

¹⁶ "FACTBOX-Attacks, Incidents on Ships and Oil Around Saudi Arabia," Reuters, December 14, 2020.

Figure 4. Saudi-led Coalition Air Strikes Per Month

Source: Yemen Data Project, February 2021

Southern Yemen: Tentative Unity between the ROYG and STC

In December 2020, the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) formally joined a unity government with the ROYG, ending several years of clashes in Aden between southern separatists and forces loyal to President Hadi. Saudi Arabia brokered the formation of the unity government after over a year of STC-ROYG negotiations that followed the two sides' commitment to cooperate as part of the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement. Under their unity arrangement, the STC received several cabinet positions and agreed to redeploy their military forces from Abyan and Aden. On December 30, 2020, as the new members of the government landed at Aden airport to assume their posts, the Houthis launched a coordinated missile attack against the airport, which killed 25 people, including three members of the International Red Cross.¹⁷

While the UAE formally withdrew its main military contingent from Yemen in 2019, it has retained a small military presence while working with proxies throughout southern Yemen, most notably the STC. According to the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen, "The United Arab Emirates is a member of the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen, yet its support to the Southern Transitional Council undermines the Government of Yemen."¹⁸

¹⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross, "Yemen: Three ICRC Staff Members Killed in Airport Blast," December 30, 2020.

¹⁸ See United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen, "Letter dated 22 January 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council," S/2021/79, January 25, 2021.

Iranian Support to the Houthis

Iranian knowledge transfer and military aid to the Houthis, in violation of the targeted international arms embargo (U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216), has increased the Houthis' ability to threaten Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations. According to the United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen, "An increasing body of evidence suggests that individuals or entities in the Islamic Republic of Iran supply significant volumes of weapons and components to the Houthis."¹⁹

In October 2020, Iran appointed Hassan Eyrlo (alt. sp. Irlu) as Ambassador to the so-called "National Salvation Government," the Houthi-run northern Yemeni authority. The appointment made Iran the first country to diplomatically recognize the Houthis as a legitimate government since they seized control of the capital city of Sana'a in 2014. On December 8, 2020, under the authority of E.O. 13224, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) designated Hassan Eyrlo as a Specially Designated National (SDN) due to his position as an "official in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and the Iranian regime's envoy to the Houthi rebels in Yemen..."²⁰ Eyrlo attended a January 2021 vigil in Sana'a to mark the one-year anniversary of the U.S. killing of former IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Soleimani.

Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis

The United Nations has described Yemen's humanitarian crisis as currently the worst in the world, with close to 80% of Yemen's population of nearly 30 million needing some form of assistance. In Yemen, myriad factors (e.g., war, loss of health services, funding shortages, currency depreciation) have combined to put the most vulnerable populations at risk. According to various United Nations agencies, acute malnutrition among children under the age of five in Yemen has hit the highest levels ever recorded; nearly 2.3 million children under age 5 in Yemen are at risk of acute malnutrition in 2021.²¹

Food Insecurity & Humanitarian Access

While the international community has not officially declared a famine in Yemen, food insecurity amongst large swaths of the population is increasing (see **Figure 5**). According to the December 2020 United Nations' Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projections for Yemen, 54% of the population (16.2 million) may experience high levels of acute food insecurity in the first half of 2021. Out of these, U.N. projections indicate an estimated 11 million people will likely be in crisis (IPC Phase 3), 5 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4), and 47,000 in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5, famine-like conditions).²²

Humanitarian workers have long documented the numerous challenges to working in Yemen, such as lack of access to areas in need of assistance. As Yemen has devolved into various centers of power, aid agencies have had to navigate competing rules and regulations between northern

¹⁹ Op.cit., Panel of Experts on Yemen.

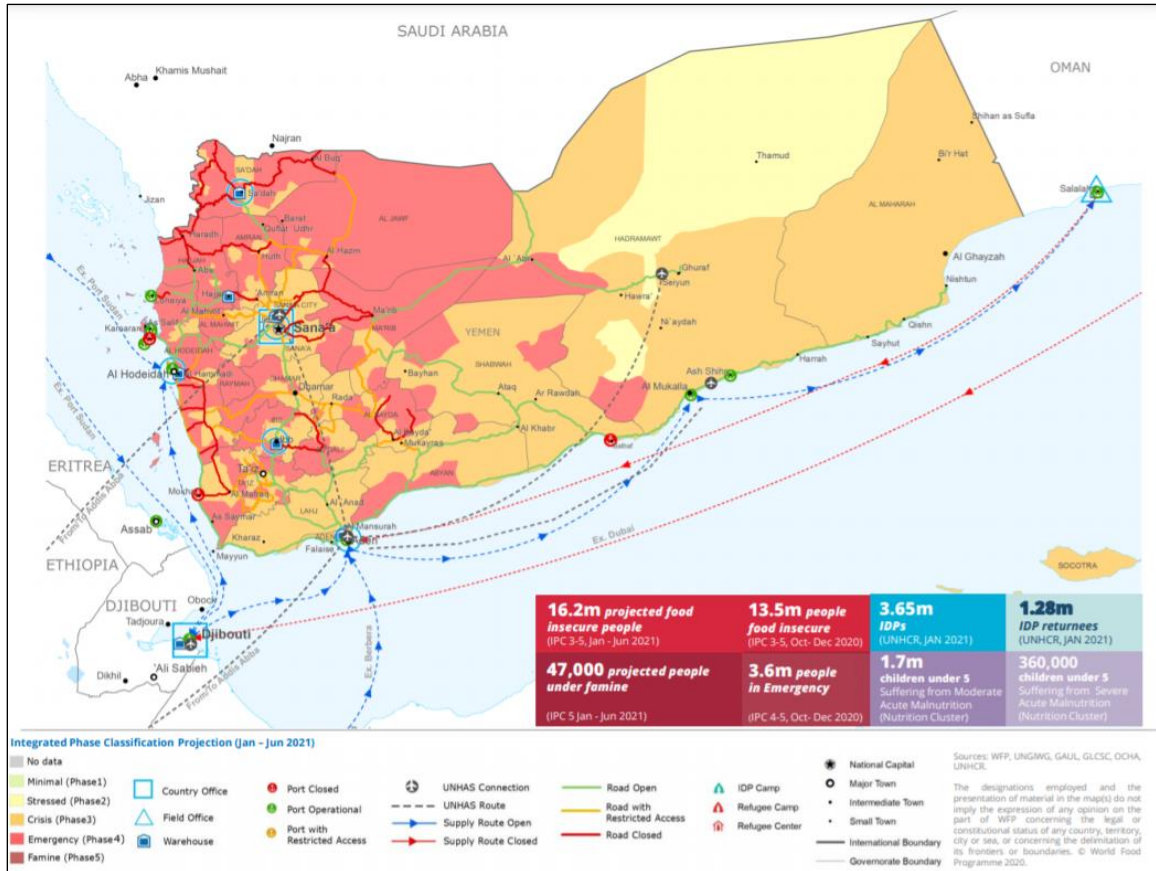
²⁰ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Iran's Envoy in Yemen and University Facilitating Recruitment for Qods Force," Press Release, December 8, 2020.

²¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Yemen Situation Report*, February 14, 2021.

²² Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), "Yemen: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October - December 2020 and Projection for January - June 2021."

and southern Yemen and sometimes within individual governorates. According to one account, “Institutional overlap between rival governments has created numerous logistical issues, such as humanitarian workers needing to obtain duplicate visas and permits from multiple ministries.”²³

Figure 5. World Food Programme: Emergency Dashboard Yemen
January 2021



Source: World Food Programme, Yemen Emergency Dashboard January 2021, updated February 2021.

As the Houthis have become further ensconced in northern Yemen and placed key members in positions of authority, Houthi restrictions on humanitarian aid agencies working in northern Yemen have grown more onerous.²⁴ Control and diversion of aid is one means Houthi forces, Houthi partners, and other parties to the conflict have used to finance their operations.²⁵

²³ Jan Egeland, Alex Harper, Emma Beals, and Jomana Qaddour, “Humanitarian Aid and the Biden Administration: Lessons from Yemen and Syria,” Policy Forum Report, The Washington Institute, January 25, 2021.

²⁴ According to senior U.N. officials, Houthi obstructions include: obstacles to beneficiary registration, attempts to divert aid, efforts to control selection of implementing partners, detention and arrest of humanitarian workers, and intimidation and harassment of aid workers at Sana’a airport. See Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock, “Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Yemen - As Delivered,” New York, NY, September 16, 2019. See also “UN: Houthi Rebels Impeding Aid Flow in Yemen,” *Al Jazeera English*, February 19, 2020.

²⁵ Sam Kiley, Sarah El Sirgany and Brice Lainé, “CNN exposes systematic abuse of aid in Yemen,” CNN, May 20, 2019.

In 2020, as international frustration over Houthi obstruction of humanitarian assistance mounted, the international community warned that if the Houthis do not abide by the principles of international humanitarian law and allow for unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance, they will risk losing aid. In March 2020, USAID initiated a partial suspension of its funding to support humanitarian operations in northern Yemen. The suspension followed several weeks of warnings from U.S. officials that the Trump Administration was extremely concerned over Houthi obstruction of aid.²⁶

As of March 2021, USAID has continued its partial suspension of \$50 million in humanitarian programming in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen due to continued “Houthi-imposed bureaucratic impediments.” USAID continues to fund more than \$13 million in humanitarian NGO activities in northern Yemen for programs that can be conducted without Houthi interference.²⁷

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Yemen

The COVID-19 pandemic has added an additional layer of concern for Yemen’s already depleted health system. U.N. statistics from December 2020 indicate a total of 2,103 COVID-19 cases with 611 deaths; most health experts believe that these figures vastly underestimate the extent of COVID-19 in Yemen.²⁸ The United Nations has procured medical equipment, testing kits, and medicine while seeking additional supplies. Aid groups also have increased the capacity of intensive care units (ICUs) in COVID-19 designated hospitals from 38 in May 2020 to 59 as of December 2020.²⁹

The Public Broadcasting Service’s documentary series *Frontline* has reported on how Houthi authorities in northern Yemen have concealed the impact of COVID-19 in areas under their control. According to one reporter who was permitted to visit northern Yemen in the summer of 2020, Houthi authorities “put out very little public information about the spread of COVID. But they’ve promoted propaganda videos...showing them mobilizing against the virus.”³⁰ The Houthis claim that the Saudi-led coalition’s blockade of Hudaydah and the Sana’a airport have prevented them from procuring the supplies they need to combat the virus.

International Pledges for Yemen

On March 1, 2021, the United Nations hosted the virtual High Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen. For 2021, the U.N. is seeking \$3.85 billion for operations in Yemen; however, donors pledged \$1.7 billion. Secretary Blinken spoke at the event, announcing that the United States would contribute \$191 million in additional assistance, bringing total U.S. spending in FY2021 to \$350 million. The United States provided \$630.4 million in total humanitarian aid for the crisis in Yemen in FY2020, close to the annual average U.S. allocation over the last four fiscal years (\$644 million). Secretary Blinken called on other donors,

²⁶ Ambassador Kelly Craft, “Remarks at a U.N. Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Yemen,” U.S. Mission to the United Nations, February 18, 2020.

²⁷ USAID, “Yemen – Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #1, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021” January 22, 2021.

²⁸ United Nations, *COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Monthly Report*, December 2020.

²⁹ Op.cit., *COVID-19 Preparedness and Response*.

³⁰ Public Broadcasting Service, “Yemen’s COVID Cover-Up,” *Frontline*, February 9, 2021.

“especially those in the region – to step up.”³¹ Other donations include \$430 million from Saudi Arabia, \$244 million from Germany, and \$230 million from the UAE.³²

Conflict Analysis

The Biden Administration has made a number of changes in U.S. Yemen policy designed to emphasize its peacemaking role and prioritize efforts to resolve the humanitarian crisis. While the Biden Administration lifted the Trump Administration’s terrorism designations of the Houthis,³³ it has targeted additional Houthi leaders using Yemen-specific authorities (E.O. 13611), while also condemning Houthi attacks against civilians and Saudi Arabian territory.³⁴ To date, the Biden Administration has not publicly clarified what it means by its decision to no longer support Saudi-led coalition offensive operations in Yemen, or what its defensive support to Saudi Arabia would entail.³⁵ According to one report, U.S. officials are currently assessing existing and potential sales of U.S. equipment and training to Saudi Arabia in order to determine what U.S. support may be considered defensive.³⁶

Despite these tangible and rhetorical steps, one could argue that developments in the war in northern Yemen may be the most important factor in determining whether outside actors, like the United States, are capable of bringing Yemen’s various internal factions to the negotiating table. A rapid Houthi advance in Marib and/or the seizure its eponymous provincial capital are not a foregone conclusion; for the ROYG government and many northern Yemenis opposed to Houthi rule, it is a last stand. Therefore, fighting has been, and may continue to be, intense, with heavy casualties on both sides. If the Houthis are thwarted, it would signal, at least temporarily, a geographic limit to their rule, and perhaps an incentive for reaching a cease-fire. Such a ceasefire would do little to resolve Houthi control over most of the rest of northern Yemen, including the capital, Sana’a.

The extent of Saudi Arabia’s intervention using air power to support ROYG ground forces in Marib may be pivotal, but many questions remain. How Saudi Arabia uses its air power in Marib and elsewhere may greatly depend on understandings between it and the Biden Administration over what constitutes a defensive or offensive air strike. Furthermore, even if Saudi preemptive air strikes against Houthi military targets inside Yemen adhere to understandings between it and the Biden Administration, it remains to be seen how the Biden Administration may react if Saudi air operations kill civilians. U.S. officials have demanded a halt to the Houthi offensive in Marib,

³¹ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 2021 High-Level Pledging Event for the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen,” Remarks, March 1, 2021.

³² A complete list of donors is available online at www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/20210103-YemenHLE2021_AnnouncementsResults.pdf.

³³ U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing, February 16, 2021,” Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, February 16, 2021.

³⁴ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Houthi Attacks Impacting Civilians,” Press Release, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, February 7, 2021.

³⁵ In a recent State Department press conference, Spokesperson Ned Price remarked “The broader point is that for any weapons sales or transfers [to Saudi Arabia], there is now a process in place, thanks to President Biden and his efforts to recalibrate this relationship from the start, that will evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, proposed weapons sales and transfers based on two criteria: our interests and our values. And that second point, that latter point, is incredibly important in this case.” See, U.S. Department of State, “Department Press Briefing, March 2, 2021.”

³⁶ Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, “Exclusive: Biden Team Considering a Halt to 'offensive' Arms Sales for Saudis,” Reuters, February 26, 2021.

but the Administration has not indicated what specific military, advisory, or assistance steps, if any, it may be willing to take to ensure that outcome.

Overall, while many in the international community wish to foster a political solution to the Yemen conflict and thereby alleviate the dire humanitarian conditions, many internal and external parties to the Yemen conflict do not appear presently to have clear political, military, or financial incentives to negotiate. According to the latest U.N. Panel of Experts Report on Yemen, the war in Yemen has witnessed widespread “profiteering and control over economic resources by individuals and entities.”³⁷ For the Houthis, the longer they remain the de-facto authority in northern Yemen, the more their rule becomes an accepted norm, with increased potential that such legitimacy could gain more acceptance internationally. For the STC, the war has provided them with a foreign patron in the UAE and a degree of local autonomy not seen since before the unification of Yemen in 1990. For Iran, its military support to the Houthis has allowed it to again demonstrate how projecting power through proxy warfare is arguably a successful strategy for expanding its regional influence. Finally, while the UAE may have suffered reputational damage due its conduct in the Yemen war, the Emirates have gained influence along several Yemeni coastal port towns and islands, such as Socotra, Mayyun, Belhaf, and Mukalla (see **Figure 1**).

Leaders in Saudi Arabia, who have arguably suffered the most reputational damage over their forces’ conduct in Yemen, may feel motivated to reduce the kingdom’s military footprint in Yemen for a number of reasons including costs, stress on military forces and platforms, and the prospect of improved relations with the United States. However, the Houthis, and more specifically their apparently deepening partnership with Iran, pose a key threat to Saudi security, and military withdrawal seems likely to leave the Houthis’ militia and control over northern Yemen intact. If the Houthis cannot be militarily defeated, then Saudi leaders may weigh whether or not the kingdom should legitimize Houthi rule by lifting its blockade of Yemen and negotiating a cease-fire. Alternatively Saudi Arabia could seek to continue to pressure the Houthis by sponsoring its own Yemeni proxies in the hopes that one day, the balance of power will shift in its favor. Saudi officials also may consider seeking additional U.S. engagement to combat objectionable Iranian intervention in Yemen in connection with broader U.S. efforts to negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program and regional policies.

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³⁷ Op.cit., Panel of Experts.

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