V. Armed conflict and peace processes in Yemen

IAN DAVIS

The roots of the current conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen are complex and contested.\(^1\) The Houthi insurgency began in 2004 when Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a leader of the Zaidi Shi’a, launched an uprising against the Yemeni Government. Al-Houthi was killed in that uprising, and the insurgents have been known as the Houthis since then (the official name is Ansar Allah).\(^2\) In 2014 after several years of growing violence, the country descended into a new phase of civil war between the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and an uneasy alliance of Iran-backed Houthis and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdallah Saleh that controlled the capital, Sanaa, and large parts of the country.

Since March 2015 a coalition led by Saudi Arabia has been intervening militarily on the side of President Hadi, although the coalition itself is divided by conflicts and rivalries. In addition to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the coalition has included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar (until 2017), Senegal and Sudan, either supplying ground troops or carrying out air strikes.\(^3\) The coalition has also received substantial international support. United States assistance has included intelligence, training and arms sales, while several European countries, including France and the United Kingdom, have also been key suppliers of major weapon systems to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.\(^4\)

---


\(^2\) On the goals of and divisions within the Houthis, see Al-Hamdani, S., ‘Understanding the Houthi faction in Yemen’, Lawfare, 7 Apr. 2019.


Armed conflict in 2019 and allegations of war crimes

At the end of 2018 there were at least four separate but interlinked armed conflicts in Yemen: (a) the main civil war, with a focus on the Red Sea coast, where government forces backed by the UAE pushed up from the south and threatened Hodeidah, the fourth largest city in Yemen and its principal port on the Red Sea for importing food—although a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations centred on Hodeidah agreed on 13 December 2018 provided fresh grounds for optimism; (b) the Saudi Arabia–Yemen border, including increased Houthi missile strikes targeting cities in Saudi Arabia and retaliatory air strikes; (c) a secondary civil war within the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE—between the central government (normally based in the north) and the Southern Movement, a fragile coalition of separatist groups operating in Aden, Hadramaut and Shebwa in the south, and represented politically by the Southern Transitional Council (STC); and (d) a US-led counterterrorism campaign against radical Islamist groups,
including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). A UN panel of experts on Yemen concluded that many of the armed groups were trying to achieve two primary objectives: ‘a monopoly over armed violence within the territory under their control and control over revenue streams’. Figure 6.4 shows areas of control within Yemen in late 2019.

The main civil war between Houthi and government forces

While the Hodeidah-wide ceasefire agreed in Stockholm in December 2018 continued to hold and the warring parties took initial steps to implement the agreement (see the discussion on implementation of the Stockholm Agreement below), fighting occurred in other areas not covered by the agreement, including among supposed allies: in the north between Houthi rebels and the Hajour tribe and in the southern city of Taiz among nominally allied pro-government groups. Factional clashes within the Houthi–Saleh alliance were a regular occurrence during 2019, especially in Ibb governorate. The Houthis continued to suppress dissent in areas under their control.

The Saudi Arabian–Yemeni air war

Houthi forces have been carrying out missile attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia since late 2016. Between June and September 2019 the pace of cross-border Houthi–Saudi Arabian attacks intensified. The Houthis launched multiple unmanned aerial vehicle and cruise missile attacks into Saudi Arabia, including against regional airports. In turn, the coalition intensified bombing of Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, including Sanaa. In September Yemen risked becoming further embroiled in the wider regional Iranian–Saudi Arabian/US conflict, when the Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities, which was more widely attributed to Iran. In response, forces led by Saudi Arabia launched air strikes close to Hodeidah. The situation de-escalated when the Houthis suspended cross-border attacks and the Saudi Arabians reduced air strikes in Yemen.
Yemen’s fractured south

On 10 August after fighting that killed at least 40 people, UAE allies seized the city of Aden from the government of President Hadi that was backed by Saudi Arabia. The rivalry within the anti-Houthi coalition risked escalating into a fully fledged civil war within a civil war. However, in October, control of the city was handed back to the government after the withdrawal of UAE forces. A peace deal was concluded between the two sides in November (see the discussion on the Riyadh Agreement below).

The counterterrorism campaign against radical Islamist groups

The USA has been carrying out regular air strikes against AQAP, or its antecedents, in Yemen since at least 2009. From 2009 to 2019 the USA carried out more than 336 air strikes, causing between 174 and 225 civilian deaths. A US air strike on 1 January 2019 reportedly killed Jamal al-Badawi, a Yemeni al-Qaeda operative accused of leading the 2000 attack on the USS Cole that killed 17 US sailors. However, the frequency of US air strikes against AQAP decreased, with only nine reported in 2019. In June Saudi Arabian special forces captured the Islamic State leader in Yemen, Abu Osama Al-Muhajir.

Allegations of war crimes

All parties to the conflict have faced allegations of crimes under international law over the past four years, and fresh allegations surfaced in 2019. In particular, the air strikes by the coalition led by Saudi Arabia have been repeatedly criticized for targeting civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and detention centres. A report by the international Group of...
Eminent Experts on Yemen (created by the UN Human Rights Council in December 2017) detailed a wide range of possible war crimes committed by various parties to the conflict over the past five years, including air strikes, indiscriminate shelling, snipers, landmines, arbitrary killings and detention, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, and preventing access to humanitarian aid. The group of experts also identified individuals involved in the conflict who may be responsible for international crimes.

The humanitarian crisis

According to the UN the humanitarian crisis in Yemen remained the worst in the world in 2019. The cholera epidemic—more than 1.36 million suspected cases between late 2016 and December 2018, and nearly 2800 associated deaths—continued into 2019, with more than 56 000 new cases reported in the first nine months of the year. Outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria were also reported. In addition to endemic diseases an estimated 80 per cent of the population (24 million people) required some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, with 15.9 million people in urgent need of food and livelihood assistance at the beginning of 2019. An estimated 4 million people remained displaced, including 375 000 during 2019.

In February 2019 international donors (led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE), pledged $2.6 billion in funding towards the UN 2019 $4.2 billion humanitarian plan for Yemen—the single largest UN humanitarian appeal ever. The distribution of humanitarian aid within Yemen is itself a component of the conflict, especially in areas controlled by the Houthis.

At the end of October 2019 the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) estimated that over 100 000 people had been killed in the Yemeni war since 2015 (including over 12 000 civilian fatalities in direct

---

29 OCHA (note 28).
attacks).\textsuperscript{32} Over 25 800 people were killed in 2019 alone, making it the second most lethal year in a row (table 6.6). This estimate almost certainly undercounts the true extent of casualties and excludes deaths from disease, malnutrition and other consequences of the crisis. The UN Development Programme, for example, estimated that by the end of 2019 total conflict fatalities from fighting and indirect deaths (due to lack of food, health services and infrastructure) would be 233 000 (or 0.8 per cent of the country).\textsuperscript{33}

**Implementation of the Stockholm Agreement**

The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement between the Houthis and the Yemeni Government included several confidence-building measures: a commitment to exchange almost 5000 prisoners, an immediate ceasefire across the governorate of Hodeidah, demilitarization of the Red Sea trade corridor, transfer of Hodeidah port to UN management and the reopening of a humanitarian corridor linking Hodeidah with Sanaa.\textsuperscript{34} A Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC)—a Houthi–Hadi working group—was formed to oversee the ceasefire, mine action operations and the ‘mutual redeployment of forces’, including the difficult question of the make-up of the ‘local security forces’ that would subsequently police the city and ports.\textsuperscript{35} While implementation of the agreement in 2019 went through several ups and downs, especially in the first half of the year, significant progress was made.\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{table66.png}
\caption{Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 2015–19}
\label{table:6.6}
\end{figure}

**Table 6.6.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 2015–19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event type</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battles</td>
<td>9 097</td>
<td>8 366</td>
<td>10 634</td>
<td>20 575</td>
<td>15 686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosions/remote violence</td>
<td>7 884</td>
<td>6 712</td>
<td>6 346</td>
<td>11 314</td>
<td>9 687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protests, riots and strategic developments</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against civilians</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17 265</td>
<td>15 341</td>
<td>17 196</td>
<td>32 352</td>
<td>25 890</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The first available year for data on Yemen in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2015. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].


\textsuperscript{33} Moyer, J. D. et al., *Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen* (UN Development Programme: 2019).


On 16 January 2019 Houthi and government delegates met in Amman, Jordan, to discuss implementation of the prisoner exchange arrangements, but failed to reach agreement. Thereafter, the issue remained unresolved, although the Houthis unilaterally released 290 prisoners on 30 September 2019, and the coalition forces released 128 Houthi prisoners in November 2019.

*The United Nations support mission and withdrawal of forces from Hodeidah*

On 16 January 2019 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2452 (2019) that established the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA). On 31 January a Danish general, Michael Anker Lollesgaard, was appointed to head the newly constituted mission. With an initial mandate of six months and an authorized personnel of up to 75 monitors as well as additional support staff, UNMHA will lead and support the RCC in monitoring compliance with the ceasefire and work with parties to ensure that security is assured by local security forces. In July the UNMHA mandate was extended for a further six months under UN Security Council Resolution 2481 (2019). In September, a retired Indian general, Abhijit Guha, took over leadership of the mission.

In the first quarter of 2019 the RCC worked to resolve technical disagreements over the redeployment of military forces from front-line positions in and around Hodeidah, and in mid-April UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths announced that a detailed plan for troop withdrawal had been agreed. However, the issue of who would control the area after the withdrawal remained unresolved. On 11 May Houthi forces began withdrawing from Hodeidah in accordance with the plan, and in June they agreed a mechanism to allow UN inspection of ships entering the ports. In early July the UAE announced a withdrawal of its forces from the city and a partial drawdown in other parts of the country. In August 2019 Special

---


Envoy Griffiths reported that there had been no major military operations in Hodeidah or in the surrounding area since the signing of the Stockholm Agreement. In September 2019 the RCC deployed monitoring teams in four locations on the front lines of the city as an initial step to sustain the ceasefire.45

**The Riyadh Agreement**

Extending the peace process to include the STC was a significant development during the year. On 5 November 2019 a deal was signed by the government (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the STC (backed by the UAE) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, after more than a month of negotiations. Saudi Arabia’s crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, said the deal—which stipulates the formation of a new, Aden-based, 24-member government comprising equal numbers of northern and southern ministers, integration of STC-affiliated forces into national military and security structures, and inclusion of the STC in government delegations to future UN-led talks with the Houthis over a political settlement to end the war—was a positive step on the path towards resolving the multifaceted conflict in Yemen.46 However, the Houthis rejected the agreement; at the end of 2019 it had largely not been implemented and clashes were continuing.47

**Conclusions**

The combined Stockholm and Riyadh agreements provide a path towards national-level peace talks and a political settlement of the Yemen civil war. Saudi Arabia is likely to be pivotal in shaping any subsequent security and political arrangement, having taken over coalition command in the south from the UAE. Talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabians aimed at ending cross-border attacks could be the prelude to the start of a national political process under UN auspices. While the Riyadh Agreement might provide a negotiating platform for the fragmented anti-Houthi bloc, there is also a risk of intra-coalition fighting during its implementation as parties strive for advantage on paper and on the ground.