V. Armed conflict and peace processes in Yemen

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The roots of the current multiparty war 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 became known as the Houthis (the official name is Ansar Allah). 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.[2] 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 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 (including arms transfers) from Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States.[4]

Despite attempts mediated by the United Nations to end the civil war—including the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, the 2019 Riyadh Agreement and fresh attempts to broker a nationwide ceasefire in 2020—the armed conflict continued throughout the year, further exacerbating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.[5] In October 2020 Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, warned the country was on the brink of a

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[1] See Davis, I., 'Armed conflict in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 80–82. See also e.g. Orkaby, A., 'Yemen's humanitarian nightmare: The real roots of the conflict', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2017; and al-Hamdani, R. and Lackner, H., 'Talking to the Houthis: How Europeans can promote peace in Yemen', European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy Brief, Oct. 2020.

[2] On the national dialogue process in 2014 that failed to avert war see Elayah, M., van Kempen, L. and Schulpen, L., 'Adding to the controversy? Civil society's evaluation of the national conference dialogue in Yemen', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2020), pp. 431–58.

[3] On the role of the UAE in Yemen see Juneau, T., 'The UAE and the war in Yemen: From surge to recalibration', *Survival*, vol. 62, no. 4 (2020), pp. 183–208.

[4] Pradhan, P. K., 'Five years of military intervention in Yemen: An assessment', *Strategic Analysis* (2020). On arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and the UAE see also chapter 9, sections II and III, in this volume. On the United Nations arms embargo on Yemen see chapter 14, section II, in this volume.

[5] On the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements and other developments in Yemen in 2018–19, see Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 108–14; and Davis, I., 'Armed conflict and peace processes in Yemen', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 163–70.

Figure 6.2. Areas of control and conflict in Yemen, May 2020

UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Source: 'Yemen crisis: Why is there a war?', BBC News, 19 June 2020.

catastrophic food security crisis, with almost 100 000 children under the age of five at risk of dying from hunger.[6]

In recent years there have been at least three main conflict zones to this major internationalized civil war in Yemen (see figure 6.2): (*a*) in the north, between the coalition-backed Yemeni Government and Houthi forces, including a Saudi Arabia–Yemen border conflict; (*b*) on the Red Sea coast, between Houthi and UAE-backed forces (that also oppose the Yemeni Government); and (*c*) in the south between the Yemeni Government and the Southern Movement, a fragile coalition of separatist groups operating in Aden, Hadramaut and Shabwa and represented politically by the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC). Another dimension to the

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[6] Ahmed, K., 'Yemen on brink of losing entire generation of children to hunger, UN warns', *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2020.

armed conflict is the US-led counterterrorism campaign against radical Islamist groups—mainly al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local affiliate of the rival Islamic State—that have taken advantage of the chaos by carrying out attacks and seizing territory in the south. A UN panel of experts on Yemen concluded: 'The country's many conflicts are interconnected and can no longer be separated by clear divisions between external and internal actors and events'.[7]

Key developments in the three conflict zones in 2020

After a Houthi missile allegedly struck a military compound in Marib governorate on 18 January 2020, killing over 100 soldiers, there was a sudden escalation in the fighting between the Houthis and coalition-led forces on several northern front lines.[8] The Houthis made major territorial gains in Al Jawf governorate between January and March 2020 and threatened an offensive on Marib city and governorate. There was also an upsurge in the Saudi Arabian–Yemeni air war, with Houthi missile strikes targeting cities in Saudi Arabia and retaliatory air strikes of Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.[9] The UN panel of experts concluded the pattern of conflicts in 2020 had shifted, with economic drivers predominantly motivating all Yemeni conflict parties.[10]

A short-lived Covid-19 ceasefire

On 23 March 2020 UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire in order to better address the Covid-19 pandemic. In Yemen with Covid-19 threatening to compound an already dire humanitarian crisis, Secretary-General Guterres launched a specific appeal on 25 March for a Yemeni ceasefire. The domestic parties to the conflict and the coalition led by Saudi Arabia backing the UN-recognized government indicated an interest—informal talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis towards agreeing a border ceasefire had been taking place since September 2019.[11] While the coalition declared a unilateral two-week ceasefire on 8 April 2020 and then extended it by a month on the 24 April 2020, it was dismissed by

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[7] United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the panel of experts on Yemen, S/2020/70, 27 Jan. 2020, p. 2.

[8] International Crisis Group, 'Breaking a renewed conflict cycle in Yemen', 24 Jan. 2020.

[9] International Crisis Group (note 8); AFP, 'Yemen airstrikes kill 31 civilians after Saudi jet crash', *The Guardian*, 16 Feb. 2020; and Reuters, 'Houthis launch air attack on Saudi capital', *The Guardian*, 30 Mar. 2020.

[10] United Nations, Security Council, Final report of the panel of experts on Yemen, S/2021/79, 25 Jan. 2021, p. 6.

[11] On the UN global ceasefire call see chapter 2, section I, in this volume. On the Houthi–Saudi talks see Jalal, I., 'Saudi Arabia eyes the exit in Yemen, but Saudi-Houthi talks alone won't resolve the conflict', Middle East Institute, 15 Apr. 2020.

the Houthis for not lifting the blockades on Sanaa and Hodeidah.[12] Fighting continued on multiple old and new fronts, especially around Marib city.[13]

The southern governorates

Meanwhile, in Yemen's fractured south the Riyadh Agreement, signed in November 2019 by the Yemeni Government (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the STC (backed by the UAE), was beginning to unravel.[14] With both sides accusing each other of violating the agreement, on 25 April 2020 the STC declared a state of emergency and the creation of self-rule in the regions under its control.[15] In May tensions flared again in Aden, Abyan and Taiz governorates. Although a ceasefire was agreed in Abyan on 22 June 2020 and coalition ceasefire monitors were deployed two days later, fighting resumed almost immediately with STC forces taking control of the strategic Socotra island.[16] In late July Martin Griffiths, special envoy of the secretary-general for Yemen, reported a reduction in the level of military activity in the southern governorates.[17] On 29 July 2020 the coalition announced the Yemeni Government and STC had renewed their commitment to the Riyadh Agreement, with the STC abandoning its 25 April declaration of self-rule.[18] However, on 25 August 2020 the STC suspended its participation in the consultations to implement the agreement.[19]

In December 2020 there was a breakthrough when the STC agreed to join a newly constituted Hadi government in exchange for allowing the government to move back to Aden. This may eventually unify the southern

[12] 'The Joint Forces Command of the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen declares a comprehensive ceasefire in Yemen for a period of two weeks, starting on Thursday, April 9, 2020. at 12:00 KSA time. The two-week period is subject to extension', Saudi Press Agency, 8 Apr. 2020; and 'The Joint Forces Command of the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen: Announcing a one-month extension of a comprehensive ceasefire in Yemen', Saudi Press Agency, 24 Apr. 2020.

[13] Salisbury, P., 'Behind the front lines in Yemen's Marib', International Crisis Group, 17 Apr. 2020; Benmansour, M., 'Yemen's Houthis reach Saudi capital with missiles for first time since Covid ceasefire', 23 June 2020; and United Nations, Security Council, 'The situation in the Middle East', S/PV.8757, 15 Sep. 2020, p. 2.

[14] Reuters, 'Yemen's Government signs peace deal with southern rebels', *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2019.

[15] International Crisis Group, 'Heading off a renewed struggle for Yemen's south', Commentary, 29 Apr. 2020; and Lackner, H., 'The Yemen conflict: Southern separatism in action', European Council on Foreign Relations, 8 May 2020.

[16] Mukhashaf, M., 'Yemen separatists seize remote Socotra island from Saudi-backed government', Reuters, 21 June 2020; 'Yemen government, southern separatists agree to ceasefire', Al Jazeera, 22 June 2020; and 'Saudi-led coalition in Yemen monitoring cease-fire in Abyan', Al-Monitor, 24 June 2020.

[17] United Nations, Security Council, 'The situation in the Middle East', S/PV.8753, 28 July 2020, p. 3.

[18] 'Official source: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia proposes to Yemeni Government, Southern Transitional Council mechanism to accelerate implementation of Riyadh Agreement', Saudi Press Agency, 29 July 2020; and 'Yemen conflict: Southern separatists give up on self-rule', BBC News, 29 July 2020.

[19] 'Yemen southern separatists pull out of Riyadh agreement talks', Reuters, 25 Aug. 2020.

secessionist groups and the Hadi government against Houthi forces. However, an attack on Aden airport on 30 December 2020—which caused multiple casualties and appeared to target a plane carrying members of the newly formed unity government—reaffirmed the continuing fragility of the situation.[20]

The Red Sea coast

UN Security Council Resolution 2534 (2020) extended the mandate of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA), which was created in January 2019 to lead and support the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC)—a Houthi–Hadi working group formed to oversee the Hodeidah ceasefire—until 15 July 2021.[21] Fighting continued intermittently in and around Hodeidah, with multiple ceasefire violations throughout 2020. Accusing the Houthis of violating the agreement and the failure of UNMHA to control the situation, in April the Yemeni Government stated the Stockholm Agreement had collapsed.[22] In July it was reported the RCC and the joint mechanisms to implement the Stockholm Agreement were still not functioning.[23] The wider security situation around Hodeidah deteriorated in October.[24]

Throughout the year there was also an increasing risk of a major oil spill posed by the *Safer* oil tanker, moored off the west coast of Yemen, 60 kilometres north of Hodeidah. With almost no maintenance since 2015, the *Safer*—carrying 1.1 million barrels of oil (four times the amount involved in the *Exxon Valdez* spill in 1989)—risked causing a major oil spill with catastrophic environmental and humanitarian consequences. The UN has been seeking to deploy an expert team to assess the damage and conduct repairs since mid 2019, but has been denied entry by the Houthis who control the territory where the vessel is moored.[25]

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. The frequency of US air strikes against AQAP has been steadily decreasing, with only three reported (and a further

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[20] McKernan, B., 'Aden airport blasts kill 26 in attack "directed at Yemen government"', *The Guardian*, 30 Dec. 2020.

[21] UN Security Council Resolution 2534, 14 July 2020.

[22] 'Yemeni Government calls for ending UN's Hodeidah mission', Asharq Al-Awsat, 20 Apr. 2020.

[23] United Nations, S/PV.8753 (note 17), p. 2.

[24] United Nations, S/2021/79 (note 10), p. 10.

[25] United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 18 August 2020 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2020/808, 18 Aug. 2020; and United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 23 September 2020 from the Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2020/940, 24 Sep. 2020.

15 suspected air strikes) in 2020.[26] A US air strike in January 2020 killed the leader of AQAP, Qassim al-Rimi.[27] AQAP appeared to be in decline by the end of the year, with its presence mainly focused in Al Bayda governorate.[28]

UN peace talks

UN-brokered negotiations between the Government of Yemen and the Houthis started in March 2020. The negotiations sought to reach agreement on a joint declaration that would include a nationwide ceasefire, economic and humanitarian measures, and the resumption of the political process aimed at comprehensively resolving and ending the conflict. In short, the UN was trying to sequence three distinct tracks—the Stockholm Agreement, the Riyadh Agreement and the Saudi Arabia–Houthi border de-escalation talks—into a single UN-led process to end the war. In mid September Griffiths reported negotiations were continuing on a draft joint declaration.[29]

On 27 September 2020 the two parties agreed to release 1081 prisoners—an important step in the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement and a significant confidence-building measure in the wider peace process.[30] The prisoner exchange—the biggest since the conflict began—took place in October. The Houthis also freed two US hostages, and 200 of their fighters were allowed to return from Oman.[31] However, in Yemen as a whole, by the end of October there were 47 active front lines, as compared to 33 at the beginning of the year.[32]

The humanitarian crisis, fatalities and alleged war crimes

The UN has been describing the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as the worst in the world since 2018. The situation deteriorated further in 2020, driven by escalating conflict, an economic crisis and currency collapse, and exacerbated by heavy rains and flooding, fuel and aid funding shortages, the Covid-19 pandemic, and other diseases such as cholera and poliomyelitis.[33]

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[26] 'Declared and alleged US actions in Yemen', Airwars, [n.d.].

[27] 'AQAP confirms death of leader Qassim al-Rimi', Al Jazeera, 23 Feb. 2020.

[28] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 'The wartime transformation of AQAP in Yemen', 14 Dec. 2020.

[29] United Nations, S/PV.8757 (note 13), pp. 2–3.

[30] Nebehay, S., 'Yemen's warring parties agree to their largest prisoner swap as UN seeks ceasefire', Reuters, 27 Sep. 2020.

[31] 'Yemen war: Houthis and government complete prisoner exchange', BBC News, 16 Oct. 2020; and Nissenbaum, D., 'Two Americans held hostage by Iran-backed forces in Yemen freed in trade', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 Oct. 2020.

[32] UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2021* (UN OCHA: 2020), p. 111.

[33] On the impact of Covid-19 in Yemen see 'The invisible outbreak: Covid-19 quietly sweeps across Yemen', *The Economist*, 4 June 2020; and 'A tipping point for Yemen's health system: The impact of Covid-19 in a fragile state', MedGlobal, Project Hope and The Center for Global Health at the University of Illinois, July 2020.

Six years of armed conflict has contributed to the collapse of critical health and social systems and infrastructure within Yemen.[34] An estimated 80 per cent of the population (24.1 million people) required some form of humanitarian or protection assistance in 2020, with 14.3 million in acute need, and an estimated 3.65 million people displaced, including a further 156 000 in 2020.[35]

By mid 2020 Yemen had returned to high levels of acute food insecurity, in part because the Houthis' systemic interference in relief operations led to a dramatic drop in overall aid as funders refused to continue indirectly financing the Houthi movement.[36] In 2019 the UN received $3.2 billion in aid donations for Yemen, but by May 2020 it had received only $474 million and the aid operation was described as being 'on the verge of collapse'.[37] On 2 June 2020 the UN and Saudi Arabia held a virtual donors' conference that raised $1.35 billion for Yemen, although the UN estimated around $2.4 billion of emergency aid was needed to deal with the worsening situation, including the Covid-19 pandemic.[38] By the end of October 2020 only $1.43 billion of the 2020 financial appeal (for $3.38 billion in total) had been received, forcing 31 of 41 of the UN's major humanitarian programmes in Yemen to close or reduce support.[39]

Armed conflict fatalities

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project estimates approximately 130 000 people have been killed in the Yemeni war since 2015 (including over 13 000 civilian fatalities in direct attacks).[40] Over 19 700 people were killed in 2020 alone (table 6.7)—almost a 30 per cent reduction on 2019 but still the third deadliest year of the war. Moreover, these estimates almost certainly undercount the true extent of casualties, and exclude deaths from disease, malnutrition and other consequences of the crisis.[41]

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[34] See e.g. McKernan, B., 'Yemen: In a country stalked by disease, Covid barely registers', *The Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2020; and 'Death sentence to civilians: The long-term impact of explosive weapons in populated areas in Yemen', Humanity & Inclusion, May 2020.

[35] UN OCHA, 'Yemen: Situation report', 11 Nov. 2020.

[36] Ahmado, N., 'UN to reduce aid to Houthi-controlled Yemen', Voice of America, 9 Feb. 2020; and Human Rights Watch, *Deadly Consequences: Obstruction of aid in Yemen during Covid-19* (Human Rights Watch: Sep. 2020).

[37] Nichols, M., 'UN seeks $2.4 billion for Yemen, warns aid operation nearly broke', Reuters, 28 May 2020; and United Nations, S/PV.8753 (note 17), p. 5.

[38] Kossaify, E., '$1.35 bn raised for Yemen in virtual donors conference hosted by Saudi Arabia, UN', *Arab News*, 3 June 2020.

[39] UN OCHA (note 35); Slemrod, A. and Parker, B., 'Funding, fuel, and "famine": Unpacking Yemen's overlapping crises', New Humanitarian, 7 Oct. 2020; and United Nations, Office of the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, 'Lack of funding cripples humanitarian operations in Yemen', Press release, 23 Sep. 2020.

[40] Sulz, M. J., 'Yemen: High risk of humanitarian fallout amidst the offensive on Marib', *Ten Conflicts to Worry about in 2021* (ACLED: Feb. 2021), p. 27.

[41] See e.g. Moyer, J. D. et al., *Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen* (UN Development Programme: 2019).

Table 6.7. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 2015–20

Event type	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Battles	9 167	8 508	10 857	21 748	16 630	14 761
Explosions/remote violence	8 054	6 895	6 538	12 041	10 887	4 315
Protests, riots and strategic developments	77	14	17	40	174	77
Violence against civilians	228	243	206	418	339	604
Total	**17 526**	**15 660**	**17 618**	**34 247**	**28 030**	**19 757**

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', accessed 5 Feb. 2021.

Allegations of war crimes

All parties to the conflict have faced allegations of crimes under international law over the past five years, including from a UN-established group of experts. Repeated calls by the group for prompt investigations into alleged violations and prosecutions of those responsible have so far had no practical effect.[42]

Conclusions

At the end of 2020 the Houthis continued to dominate the Yemeni political, economic and military landscape, controlling one third of the country's territory and two thirds of the population. With support from Iran, the Houthis have held off a coalition led by Saudi Arabia armed with expensive and sophisticated military technology. The coalition setbacks and stalemated conflict suggest Saudi Arabia may come to believe the costs of involvement in Yemen outweigh the benefits—the UAE reached a similar conclusion in 2019 leading to its partial withdrawal—and will look for a deal with the Houthis to end the crisis with a face-saving exit. However, agreeing a lasting political settlement remains fraught with difficulty as the Houthis are unlikely to stop fighting until they fully control Marib, Hodeidah and Taiz. At the end of the year the prospect of the USA designating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization further complicated the peace process and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.[43]

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[42] United Nations, Human Rights Council, 'Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014', Report of the group of eminent international and regional experts on Yemen, A/HRC/45/6, 28 Sep. 2020. Also see United Nations, Human Rights Council, 'Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014', Detailed findings of the group of eminent international and regional experts on Yemen, A/HRC/45/CRP.7, 29 Sep. 2020; and United Nations, S/2021/79 (note 10), pp. 39–46.

[43] Johnsen, G. D., 'The mistake of designating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization', Lawfare, 1 Dec. 2020.