

## 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.<sup>1</sup> The Houthi insurgency began in 2004 when Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a leader of the Zaidi Shia, launched an uprising against the Yemeni government. Al-Houthi was killed in that uprising, with the insurgents going on to become 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 includes Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar (until 2017), Senegal and Sudan, either supplying ground troops or carrying out air strikes. The coalition has also received substantial international support (including arms transfers) from Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States.<sup>3</sup> A United Nations arms embargo on Yemen, which prohibits transfers to non-state actors in the country, has been continuously violated since it was imposed in 2015. In 2021, for example, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen revealed that the Houthis had been able to produce uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) and rockets using components sourced from the commercial market in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.<sup>4</sup>

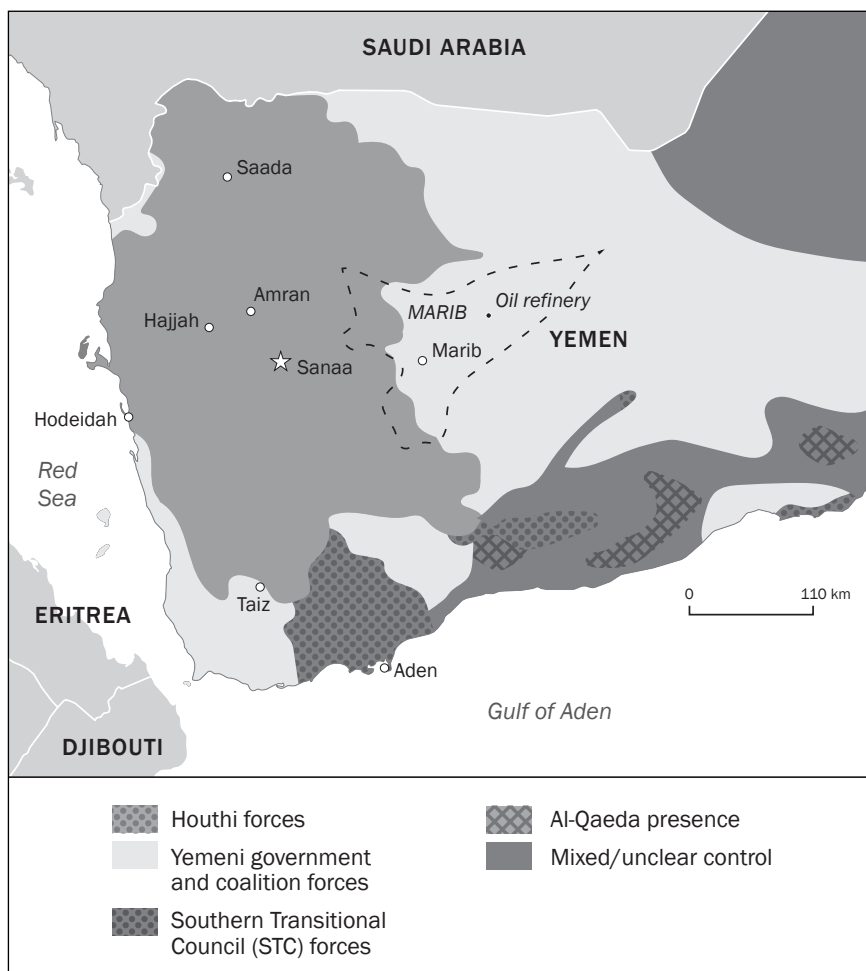
Despite UN-mediated attempts to end the civil war—including the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, the 2019 Riyadh Agreement, and fresh attempts to broker a nationwide ceasefire in 2021—the armed conflict continued

<sup>1</sup> See *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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> On arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and the UAE see chapter 9, sections II and III, in this volume. For a list of the main conflict actors and armed groups see 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/48/20, Advanced edition, 10 Sep. 2021, Annex IV.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Security Council, ‘Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)’, S/2022/50, 26 Jan. 2022, pp. 23–25. On the UN arms embargo on Yemen see chapter 14, section II, in this volume.



**Figure 6.1.** Areas of control and conflict in Yemen, May 2021

UAE = United Arab Emirates

Source: 'Houthi rebels look to take Marib, prolonging Yemen's war', *The Economist*, 8 May 2021.

throughout 2021, further exacerbating one of the world's worst humanitarian crisis.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years there have been at least three main conflict zones to this major internationalized civil war in Yemen (see figure 6.1): (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 Joint Forces (that are only loosely affiliated with the

<sup>5</sup> On the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements and other developments in Yemen in 2018–20 see *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 108–14; *SIPRI Yearbook 2020*, pp. 163–70; and *SIPRI Yearbook 2021*, pp. 175–82.

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 armed conflict is the US-led counterterrorism campaign against radical armed groups—mainly al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local affiliate of the rival Islamic State—that operate mainly in the south. 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 none officially reported in 2021 (although five were suspected by an independent monitor).<sup>6</sup>

### Key developments in the three conflict zones in 2021

Military activity in Yemen continued to ebb and flow during 2021, with oil- and gas-rich Marib and Shabwa governorates the strategic focus of intermittent fighting. In February 2021 the Houthis began their attack on Marib governorate, and within weeks there were escalations on other frontlines. Heavy fighting continued for much of the year across frontlines in Marib governorate and by mid 2021 came within kilometres of Marib city.<sup>7</sup> The Houthi offensive led to large waves of displacement within the governorate. The Houthis also carried out multiple cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia (including on oil facilities) using a combination of UAVs, short-range artillery, and cruise and ballistic missiles, with Saudi Arabia conducting retaliatory airstrikes on Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen.<sup>8</sup>

In the southern governorate in 2020 there were indications that 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. The situation seemingly improved when the STC agreed in December 2020 to join a newly constituted Hadi government in exchange for allowing the government to move back to Aden. However, on 30 December 2020 an attack was launched on Aden airport, moments after a plane carrying members of the new government landed.<sup>9</sup> The fractured relationship between the STC and the Yemeni government was reaffirmed on 16 March 2021 when

<sup>6</sup> Airwars, 'Declared and alleged US actions in Yemen'.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 2, 8–9, 61–65; 'Houthi rebels look to take Marib, prolonging Yemen's war', *The Economist*, 8 May 2021; and 'Dozens killed in northern Yemen as battle for strategic city of Marib flares', *France 24*, 19 June 2021.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 2, 20–23; Reuters, 'Saudi-led coalition launches air strikes on Yemeni capital', *France 24*, 7 Mar. 2021; Reuters, 'US "alarmed" by frequency of attacks on Saudi after Houthis target oil heartland', 8 Mar. 2021; and 'Saudi forces intercept ballistic missiles and drones fired from Yemen', *The Guardian*, 5 Sep. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> McKernan, B., 'Aden airport blasts kill 26 in attack "directed at Yemen government"', *The Guardian*, 30 Dec. 2020.

supporters of the STC stormed the Maasheq Presidential Palace in Aden. As of the end of 2021 the STC and its affiliated forces continued to control the governorate and the Yemeni government had no effective security presence in Aden.<sup>10</sup>

On the Red Sea coast, UN Security Council Resolution 2586 (2021) 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 2022.<sup>11</sup> In the first half of 2021, while ceasefire violations and spikes in hostilities persisted, there was a continued reduction in reported violence and no major territorial shifts between the parties.<sup>12</sup> In November, however, the Joint Forces evacuated their positions from large parts of the governorate to reinforce the Marib and Shabwa fronts, with Houthi forces taking control of most of the vacated areas.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the year there was a continued risk of a major oil spill from 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. While the UN has sought to undertake assessment and salvage operations, the Houthis have not yet provided the necessary written security guarantees.<sup>14</sup>

### The peace process

UN-brokered negotiations between the Yemeni government 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 resumption of the political process aimed at comprehensively resolving 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. However, the process was criticized for excluding women and civil society groups.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 14–15.

<sup>11</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2586, 14 July 2021.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, Security Council, Letter dated 3 June 2021 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2021/528, 4 June 2021.

<sup>13</sup> United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 9–12.

<sup>14</sup> Wintour, P., 'Rotting Red Sea oil tanker could leave 8m people without water', *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2021.

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Case for More Inclusive—and Effective—Peacemaking in Yemen*, Middle East Report no. 221 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 18 Mar. 2021).

*Impact of the new US presidency and a new Saudi initiative*

In February 2021 the new US administration announced changes in its policy towards Yemen, including ending the designation of the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization and terminating support for what it called the Saudi-led coalition's 'offensive operations' in the conflict. President Biden also appointed a new US envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking.<sup>16</sup> However, the 'new' US approach appeared to have little impact on the conflict in 2021. Despite the commitment to a more diplomatic approach, the USA in practice remained a staunch Saudi ally—for example, supporting proposed weapons sales of air-to-air missiles and related equipment to Saudi Arabia worth a reported \$650 million. A US Senate resolution that would have banned the sales was defeated in December 2021.<sup>17</sup>

On 22 March 2021 Saudi Arabia proposed a nationwide ceasefire in Yemen, with the plan including the reopening of some air and sea links, as well as the start of political negotiations. The Houthis, though, claimed that the initiative fell short of their demands.<sup>18</sup> At the regional level, Saudi–Iranian direct talks began in April 2021 in Iraq (see section I), while from June 2021 Oman led a mediation effort in the Yemen conflict backed by both the USA and Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> However, the US criticized the Houthis for continuing to refuse to engage meaningfully on a ceasefire and political talks in Oman.<sup>20</sup> In September 2021 the new UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, declared that the country was 'stuck in an indefinite state of war' and that resuming negotiations to end the conflict would not be easy.<sup>21</sup> As of the end of 2021, movement towards a sustainable political solution to end the conflict remained stalled.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> White House, 'Remarks by President Biden on America's place in the world', 4 Feb. 2021. On the impact of the US terrorist designation system on the conflict see van der Kroft, L., 'Yemen's Houthis and the terrorist designation system', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, Policy Brief, June 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Desiderio, A., 'Senate backs Biden admin weapons sale to Saudi Arabia', Politico, 7 Dec. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> 'Yemen conflict: Saudi Arabia puts forward peace plan', BBC News, 22 Mar. 2020; and El Yaakoubi, A., 'Saudi Arabia proposes ceasefire in Yemen, Houthis sceptical', Reuters, 22 Mar. 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Kharusi, M. and Borck, T., 'Omani mediation: A chance for Yemen?', RUSI Commentary, 7 Sep. 2021; and 'Riyadh and Washington back Oman as mediator in Yemen conflict', Intelligence Online, 15 Oct. 2021.

<sup>20</sup> 'US envoy says Yemen Houthi militia not trying to reach cease-fire', *Arab News*, 5 June 2021.

<sup>21</sup> The meeting record of the first briefing by the Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, in United Nations, Security Council, 'The situation in the Middle East', S/PV.8854, 10 Sep. 2021, pp. 2–3. On the UN envoy appointment see Salisbury, P., 'A new UN envoy is an opportunity for a new approach in Yemen', International Crisis Group Commentary, 18 June 2021.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 'Warring parties in Yemen must talk even if they "are not ready" to put down arms, Special Envoy tells Security Council, describing escalating violence', SC/14735, 14 Dec. 2021.

**Table 6.6.** Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 2015–21

Event type	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Battles	9 167	8 508	10 884	21 801	16 646	14 777	12 407
Explosions/remote violence	8 048	6 895	6 519	12 010	10 897	4 299	5 697
Protests, riots and strategic developments	77	14	17	40	174	77	74
Violence against civilians	228	242	169	418	339	613	276
<b>Total</b>	<b>17 520</b>	<b>15 659</b>	<b>17 589</b>	<b>34 269</b>	<b>28 056</b>	<b>19 766</b>	<b>18 454</b>

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, 'Dashboard', accessed 17 Feb. 2022.

### The humanitarian crisis, conflict fatalities and alleged war crimes

The UN has described the humanitarian crisis in Yemen as the worst in the world since 2018, and in February 2021 the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator warned of the 'worst famine the world has seen in decades'.<sup>23</sup> According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, around 20.7 million people in Yemen currently require some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, as a result of protracted conflict, disease outbreaks, the Covid-19 pandemic, flooding, import restrictions, and an economic and fuel crisis. More than 16.2 million of them (over half the population) faced significant food insecurity in 2021.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, international funding fell far short of the levels required to address the humanitarian crisis. In March 2021 the UN Secretary-General said the \$1.7 billion that had been pledged was less than half the \$3.85 billion it was seeking for 2021.<sup>25</sup>

The UN Development Programme estimates that 377 000 people have died in the Yemeni war since 2015 (including 154 000 due to direct attacks and 223 000 indirectly caused by disease, malnutrition or other consequences of the conflict), with over 18 400 people killed in direct attacks in 2021 alone (see table 6.6).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> United Nations, 'Five million Yemenis "one step away from famine"—UN relief coordinator tells Security Council', UN News, 18 Feb. 2021.

<sup>24</sup> UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2022* (UN OCHA: 2021), pp. 115–18; Schulman, S., 'Yemenis' daily struggles between conflict and climate change', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 166, no. 1 (2021), pp. 82–92; and Cole, J. et al., 'Conflict, collapse and Covid-19', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 166, no. 3 (2021), pp. 10–19. On food insecurity in Yemen see also Murugani, V. et al., *Food Systems in Conflict and Peacebuilding Settings: Case Studies of Yemen and Venezuela* (SIPRI: Stockholm, Dec. 2021). On the economic conflict in Yemen see International Crisis Group, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, Middle East Report no. 231 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 20 Jan. 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Nichols, M., 'UN says disappointing \$1.7 billion pledged for Yemen, impossible to avert famine', Reuters, 1 Mar. 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Hanna, T., Bohl, D. K. and Moyer, J. D., *Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen: Pathways for Recovery* (UN Development Programme: Sana'a, Nov. 2021), p. 32.

All parties to the conflict have faced allegations of crimes under international law over the past six years, including from a UN-established group of experts. Repeated calls by the expert group for prompt investigations into alleged violations and prosecutions of those responsible were ignored.<sup>27</sup> In October 2021 the UN Human Rights Council narrowly voted against a resolution to extend the work of the group. This marked the first time in the Council's 15-year history that a resolution had been defeated, reflecting international divisions on the issue. Human rights groups accused Saudi Arabia of heavy lobbying against the resolution.<sup>28</sup> The Houthis continued to recruit child soldiers and between 1 January 2020 and 31 May 2021 nearly 2000 child recruits died on the battlefield.<sup>29</sup>

## Outlook

The political, security, military, economic and humanitarian situation in Yemen deteriorated further during 2021. The Houthis made significant territorial gains, and despite Saudi Arabia increasingly looking for a means to exit the war, the prospects of a political settlement in Yemen remain remote. After seven years of territorial fragmentation and the proliferation of armed groups and sub-conflicts, the UN Special Envoy reported at the end of 2021 that the conflict was escalating and could open a new chapter in the multi-party war in Yemen.<sup>30</sup> If the armed conflict continues through 2030, the total conflict-attributable death toll could reach 1.3 million people.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> United Nations, A/HRC/48/20 (note 3). See also United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 39–45.

<sup>28</sup> Reuters, “‘We have failed Yemen’: UN human rights council ends war crime probe”, *The Guardian*, 7 Oct. 2021; and Kirchgassner, S., ‘Saudis used “incentives and threats” to shut down UN investigation in Yemen’, *The Guardian*, 1 Dec. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations, S/2022/50 (note 4), pp. 44, 134–48.

<sup>30</sup> United Nations, Security Council, 8929th meeting, ‘The situation in the Middle East’, S/PV.8929, 14 Dec. 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Estimated by the UN Development Programme see Hanna, Bohl and Moyer (note 26).