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Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

Updated November 23, 2021

Congressional Research Service
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R43960

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

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SUMMARY

R43960

November 23, 2021

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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 one of 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, Sana'a (also commonly spelled Sanaa), 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 that as of October 2021 more than 145,000 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. Since then, periodic clashes have continued, though both sides finally implemented a power sharing agreement at the end of 2020 and formed a tenuous coalition government.

Since early 2020, Houthi forces have continued to launch attacks against the ROYG in Marib governorate. The Marib governorate is the last northern stronghold of the ROYG. During summer and fall 2021, momentum shifted in favor of the Houthis, as their fighters have gradually attempted to encircle Marib city, the governorate's eponymous capital. Between September and October 2021, the Houthis captured five districts in the governorates of Marib and Shabwa, effectively cutting off the southern road linking Marib City to Shabwa—a key route for the resupply of ROYG forces. The Houthis have made significant territorial gains in Marib and may be on the cusp of forcing ROYG forces to surrender or negotiate a cease-fire.

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 Saudi-led 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 one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, and public health experts warn that the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having 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 legislation under consideration in the 117th Congress, please see CRS Report R45046, *Congress and the War in Yemen: Oversight and Legislation 2015-2021*, by Jeremy M. Sharp, Christopher M. Blanchard, and Sarah R. Collins.

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Overview

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.[1] 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[2] (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 one of the world's worst humanitarian crises.

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 November 2021, the epicenter of fighting was around the northern governorate and city of Marib, 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.

As of November 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. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) estimates that from the start of regional intervention in Yemen in March 2015 until October 2021, over 145,000 Yemenis had been killed in various acts of violence.[3]

[1] Formerly the Republic of North Yemen and the People's Democratic Republic of [South] Yemen, Yemen has been a unified republic since 1990 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, from 1990 to 2012, the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh ruled the unified Yemen continuously, centralizing power and control under his auspices through partnerships with foreign powers and local power brokers. 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 interim President Hadi (Saleh's long-time Vice President), 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 Sanaa 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 at https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard.

Conflict Update

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

Since early 2020, Houthi forces have continued 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. Marib is the center of Yemen's modest hydrocarbon sector and, while the country imports over 90% of its oil and gas, Marib contains several oil fields (where Exxon and Total SA have concessions) and an oil refinery that accounts for nearly 8% of Yemen's total energy needs.[4] Marib also contains a power plant and a liquefied petroleum bottling plant that produces cooking gas for a significant segment of the population.

At first, the Houthi's offensive against Marib made only incremental progress.[5] During the spring and early summer of 2021, the Houthis took heavy casualties from Saudi-led coalition air strikes. The terrain near Marib city itself is relatively flat desert plain, which exposes the Houthi ranks and make it more challenging for their fighters, who are accustomed to fighting on mountainous terrain.[6]

During summer and fall 2021, momentum shifted in favor of the Houthis, as their fighters have gradually attempted to encircle Marib city, the governorate's eponymous capital. Between September and October 2021, the Houthis captured five districts in the governorates of Marib (see **Figure 1**) and Shabwa (a governorate which also has oil fields and the country's sole liquefied natural gas terminal), effectively cutting off the southern road linking Marib City to Shabwa—a key route for the resupply of ROYG forces.[7]

In early 2021, Marib was home to an estimated 800,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), who fled conflict in other parts of the country.[8] Now, with the conflict having spread throughout the province, Marib residents are now being displaced. In early October 2021, the International Organization for Migration announced fighting during September had displaced 10,000 people, the most in a single month in 2021.[9]

In an attempt to support ROYG forces and prevent further Houthi encroachment on Marib City, the Saudi-led coalition has repeatedly conducted air strikes against Houthi ground forces. Throughout September and October 2021, the Saudi Press Agency has published near daily reports of the Houthi death toll from coalition air strikes. From October 12 to October 26, the coalition claims to have killed over 1,800 Houthi fighters.[10] However, according to Elana DeLozier, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, "You can't really win a war with air power.... And this is where the government really gets itself into trouble because it

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

[5] Samy Magdy, "Grueling Battle for Key Yemeni City; Toll Keeps Rising as Rebels Try to Complete Their Hold on the North But Gain Little," *Associated Press*, July 12, 2021.

[6] Michael Horton, "Yemen's Fate Hinges on The Battle for Marib," *The Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor*, Volume: 19 Issue: 4, February 26, 2021.

[7] "Yemen's Houthis Advance in Shabwa and Marib," *Reuters*, October 17, 2021.

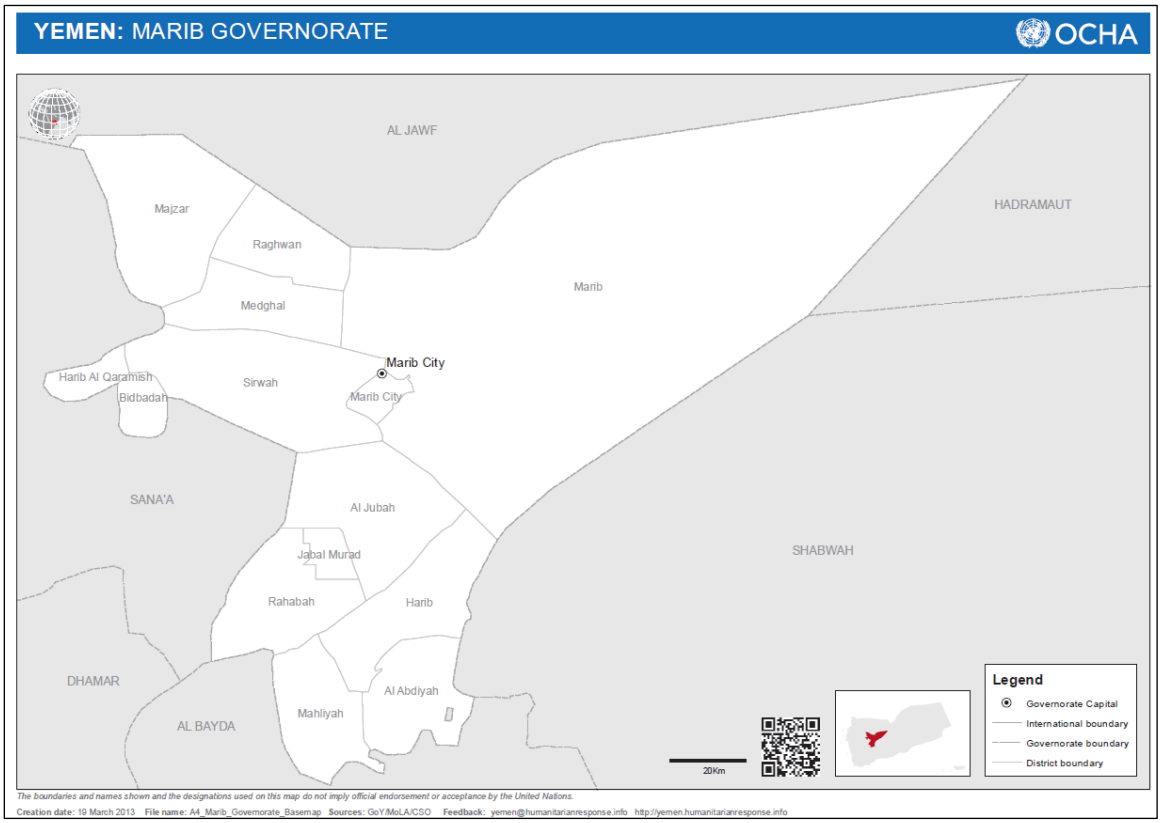
[8] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), "Press briefing notes on Yemen," February 19, 2021.

[9] Samy Magdy, "UN: 10,000 Displaced as Clashes Escalate Over Key Yemen City," *Associated Press*, October 7, 2021.

[10] "Saudi Coalition Says Killed 85 rebels Around Yemen's Marib," *Agence France Presse*, October 26, 2021.

doesn't have enough oomph to push out the Houthis, so it's just the Saudi airstrikes [holding them back]."[11] According to one estimate, the Houthis have lost nearly 15,000 fighters since June, while ROYG-aligned forces fighting in Marib have lost 1,200.[12]

Figure 1. Marib Governorate



Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Other Houthi Military Gains

Beyond Marib, the Houthis continue to gain territory on the ground, while using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and rockets and missiles to threaten their opponents in other parts of Yemen beyond their immediate control. Recent notable Houthi campaigns/attacks include

- In 2021 in the central governorate of Al Bayda, forces aligned with the ROYG initially pushed the Houthis back. However, in September 2021, the Houthis declared full control over the governorate. According to the International Crisis Group, "Since late September [2021], the Houthis have used al-Bayda as the launching pad for a multi-front campaign in western Shebwa [Shabwa] and northern Abyan.... These moves appear to be aimed at cutting off the major roads linking the three governorates, and the various anti-Houthi forces based inside

[11] Siobhán O'Grady and Ali Al Mujahed, "Battle for the Badlands: Yemen's Seven-Year Civil War Could Turn on Fierce Fighting in Remote Marib Province," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2021.

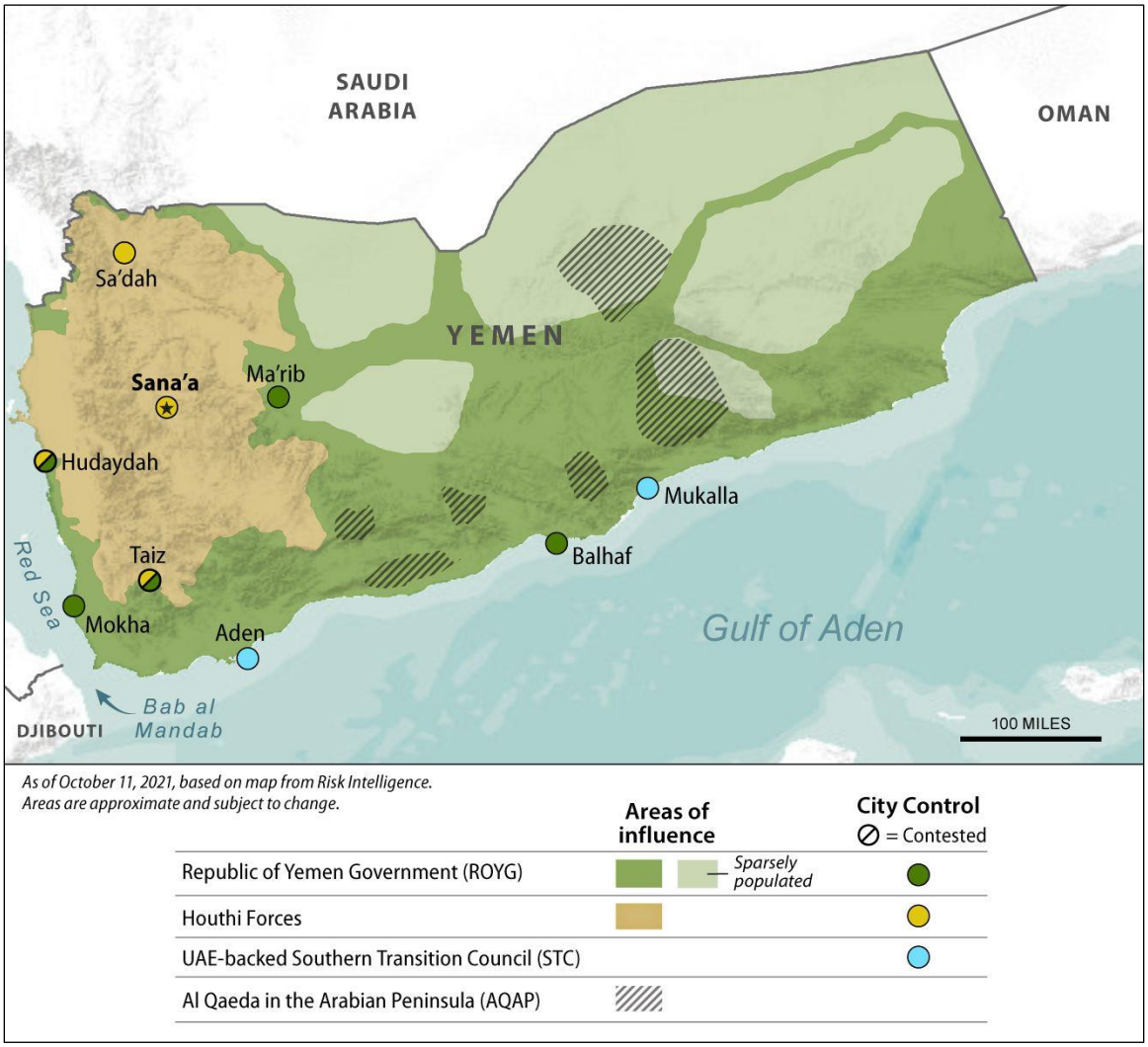
[12] Talek Harris, "Yemen 'Confident' of Holding Key City of Marib, FM Says," *Agence France Presse*, November 21, 2021.

them, as well as at providing Houthi forces with new routes into southern Yemen."[13]

- In August 2021, a Houthi UAV attack against a military base in the southern governorate of Lahj killed at least 30 soldiers.[14] A month later, a combined Houthi UAV/missile attack struck the port of Mokha, destroying several warehouses filled with humanitarian goods. The attack coincided with the visit of the ROYG Ministry of Transportation to mark the reopening of Mokha commercial port, which had been closed for several years.

Figure 2. Lines of Control in Yemen

As of October 2021



Sources: Graphic created by CRS using data from Risk Intelligence (2021); Esri (2017 & 2018); NOAA (2018); USGS (2018); Department of State (2015).

[13] International Crisis Group, "After al-Bayda, the Beginning of the Endgame for Northern Yemen," Briefing 84, Middle East & North Africa, October 14, 2021.

[14] Olivia Harper, "Ansar Allah Ballistic Missile and UAV Attack Demonstrates Extensive Weapons Arsenal and Enhanced Operational Capabilities," *Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor*, September 8, 2021.

The Port of Hudaydah

In December 2018, the United Nations brokered a cease-fire, known as the Stockholm Agreement,[15] centered on the besieged Red Sea port city of Hudaydah (also spelled Hodeidah, Al Hudaydah). Nearly three years later, the agreement remains unfulfilled.

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, had remained ensconced there 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 had been 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.

In November 2021, elements of the Joint Resistance Forces suddenly withdrew from their positions around Hudaydah City. Houthi forces then immediately moved in. However, other militias within the Joint Resistance Forces opted to fight Houthi forces in Hudaydah governorate, as major clashes and air strikes resumed in and around Hudaydah for the first time since 2018. After the reported redeployment of the Joint Resistance Forces, Saudi Arabia denied that it was abandoning its support for local Yemeni forces and withdrawing from Yemen.[16] It is possible that Saudi Arabia may be seeking local reinforcements to counter the Houthis siege of Marib.

The Maritime Blockade and Fuel Shipments into Hudaydah

On April 14, 2015, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution (UNSCR) 2216, which imposed sanctions on individuals undermining the stability of Yemen and authorized an arms embargo against the Houthis and their allies. The resolution also demanded that the Houthis withdraw from all areas seized during the current conflict, relinquish arms seized from military and security institutions, cease all actions falling exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen, and fully implement previous Council resolutions.

UNSCR 2216 authorizes U.N. member states to prevent the transfer or sale of arms to the Houthis and allows "states neighboring Yemen" to inspect cargo suspected of carrying arms to Houthi

[15] The Stockholm Agreement consists of three components: (1) a cease-fire around the port city of Hudaydah, (2) a 15,000-person prisoner swap, and (3) a statement of understanding that all sides would form a committee to discuss the war-torn city Taiz. The United Nations agreed to chair a Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) to monitor the cease-fire and redeployment. In January 2019, the United Nations Security Council passed UNSCR 2452, which authorized the creation of the United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA), of which the RCC was a significant component. It has since been reauthorized until July 2022.

[16] "Clashes Erupt in Yemen's Hodeidah as Pro-Coalition Forces Cede Ground to Houthis," *Reuters*, November 14, 2021.

fighters. Since the start of hostilities in Yemen, Iran has continued to support Houthi militias with weapons shipments, fueling the desire of the Saudi-led coalition to thwart Iranian weapons smuggling by sea (see below).

Between 2015 and 2016, the Saudi-led coalition conducted its own exclusive naval blockade of Yemen's ports in order to deter Iranian weapons smuggling. The initial blockade also slowed the delivery of commercial goods to Yemen. Before the war, Yemen imported nearly 90% of all food. Near Hudaydah, ships filled with food and fuel routinely sat off-shore, as Arab coalition vessels searched them for illicit arms.[17]

In order to implement the cargo inspection authority delineated in UNSCR 2216 and expedite the delivery of commercial goods while maintaining the arms embargo, the international community created a new inspections regime. In early 2016, the United Nations, at the request of the ROYG, established the U.N. Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM).[18] UNVIM is a U.N.-led operation designed to inspect vessels sailing to Yemeni ports not under ROYG control for illicit weapons. UNVIM can inspect cargo, while also ensuring that commercial items are imported in a timely manner.

Typically, UNVIM processes clearance requests from commercial shippers. After reviewing each request, UNVIM decides to either (1) not require inspection and grant vessel clearance; or (2) inspect the vessel in territorial or international waters based on suspicions of the vessel's movements, crew, documents, or prohibited cargo. If prohibited items are found during an inspection, they are to be seized and disposed of by the Government of Djibouti in the presence of UNVIM Monitors. If a vessel fails to adhere to UNVIM procedures, standard operating procedure dictates that UNVIM will contact the Saudi-led coalition's Evacuation and Humanitarian Operation Cell (EHOC) at the Saudi Ministry of Defense.

One challenge to ensuring timely delivery of commercial goods to Yemen is that the ROYG and Saudi-led coalition employ an additional vessel clearance process subsequent to the UNVIM clearance. This "secondary" vessel clearance process occurs after UNVIM completes its due diligence. After UNVIM clears a vessel, it must proceed to what is referred to as the "Coalition Holding Area" or CHA off the coast of Saudi Arabia, where it must await permission from the ROYG and the EHOC to dock in Houthi-controlled Yemeni ports.[19] Depending on the level of acrimony between the ROYG and the Houthis, the delay from this secondary clearance process can range from minimal to a serious impediment to the importation of products into Yemen.

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[17] "Arab Coalition Navy Inspections Paralyze Yemen Food Shipments," *Reuters*, September 10, 2015, and "U.S. Tells U.N. it Wants to See Boost in Shipping into War-Torn Yemen," *Reuters*, September 30, 2015.

[18] For background, see United Nations, "In Hindsight: The Story of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism in Yemen," *UN Security Council Report*, September 2016.

[19] The United States has been working with ROYG and Saudi officials for several years to reduce the waiting time for vessels in the CHA. In a 2018 hearing on Yemen, a USAID official said, "We have been working very carefully—the State Department, USAID, other donors—with the coalition to reduce the time that the EHOC process—that is the coalition's Evacuation Humanitarian Assistance Operations Cell. In the month of April 3rd [2018], we got that down to about 3 to 4 days. So it is not 100 days. There has been a lot of work done getting the communication between that process and the U.N. verification and inspection mechanism process together. The U.N. system, UNVIM, gets back within 48 hours on a determination of whether or not a vessel actually needs to be searched or not, and then it goes through the EHOC process. We have seen, particularly in the last 6 weeks, significant progress on that, and we are looking forward to reducing those times even more. What we do need is we need shippers in the region to know how long it will take and that will, hopefully, get more shipping back into Hudaydah Port, particularly compartmentalized cargo." Testimony of USAID Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance Deputy Assistant Administrator Robert Jenkins, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Policy in Yemen, hearing, 115th Cong., 2nd sess., April 17, 2018, S.Hrg. 115-778 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2020).

Earlier in 2021, a dispute between the ROYG and the Houthis led ROYG officials to deny clearance to fuel tankers, some of which lingered off the shores of Hudaydah port for months. This led to fuel price shortages and rising prices inside Yemen.[20] According to a U.S. State Department spokesperson, the U.S. government opposes arbitrary restrictions of commodities entering Yemen, but respects "the right of the government to control its access to ports."[21] As of July 2021, USAID reported

> Fuel shortages continue to contribute to sharp increases in fuel prices across Yemen, limiting access to essential services. The Republic of Yemen Government (RoYG) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)-led Coalition approved four vessels carrying approximately 89,000 metric tons (MT) of fuel to discharge at Al Hudaydah Port—the primary entry point for fuel in northern Yemen—during June, according to the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM). UNVIM reports a 38 percent decrease in fuel discharged at Al Hudaydah in June 2021 compared with the average fuel discharged monthly in 2020; to date in 2021, fuel imports at Al Hudaydah are down by approximately 82 percent compared with the total amount of fuel imports at the port in 2020.[22]

In October 2021, the United Nations Security Council called on the government of Yemen to

> facilitate, regularly and without delay, the entry of fuel ships into Hudaydah port and emphasized the importance of all parties ensuring the free flow of fuel inside the country to deliver essential commodities and humanitarian aid, and underscored that fuel that arrives through Hudaydah port should not be used for personal profit or to fund escalation of the conflict. They urged the parties to work towards the stability of Hudaydah, including through cooperation with the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA). They called for an end to the encirclement of Al-Abdiyah.[23]

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 and would 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, which would obstruct 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.[24]

In October 2021, researchers from Stanford University, Harvard University, and UC Berkeley published research on the possible impact of an oil spill from the FSO Safer. According to their

[20] Nima Elbagir and Angela Dewan, "First Fuel Ship this Year Docks in Hodeidah as Saudi-led Coalition Relaxes Blockade," *CNN*, March 26, 2021.

[21] "'It is not a Blockade': US says Saudi Arabia isn't to Blame for Yemen's Fuel Shortage," *Vox.com*, April 14, 2021.

[22] USAID, Yemen, Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #6, July 16, 2021.

[23] United Nations, Security Council Press Statement on Yemen, U.N. Document SC/14671, October 20, 2021.

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

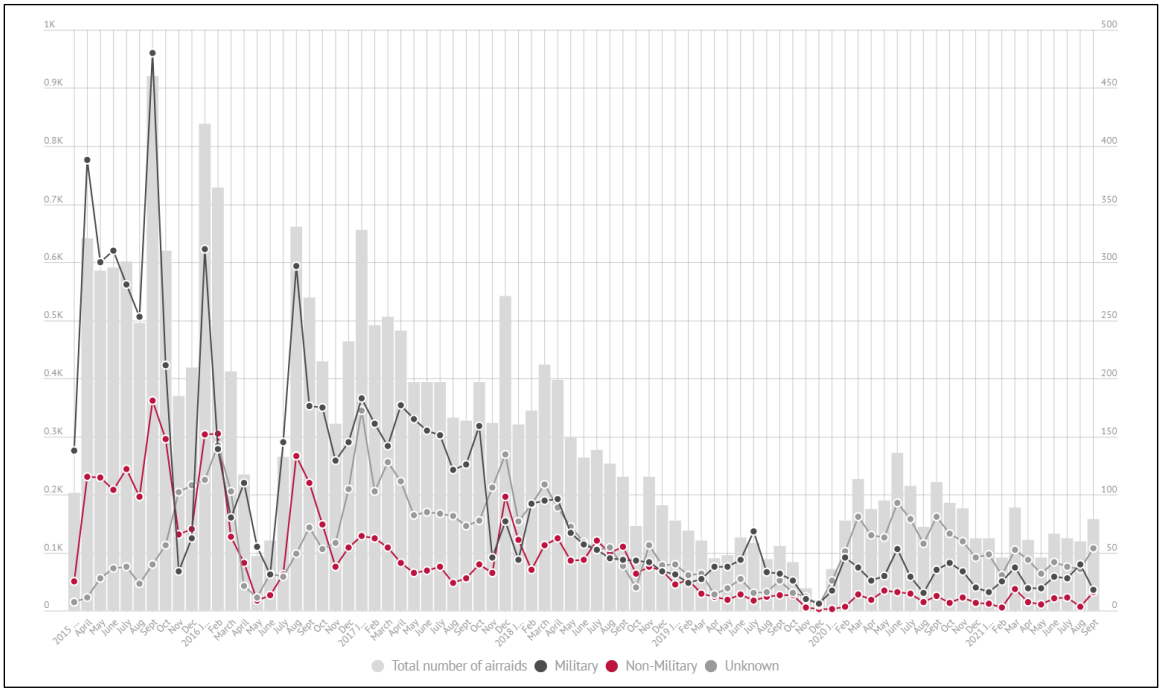
model, a serious rupture of the FSO Safer would result in a spill that could lead to "nine million [people] losing access to clean water and seven million losing access to food supplies."[25]

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 and 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 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. The Yemen Data Project, a non-profit independent data collection project, has tallied over 23,627 Saudi-led coalition air strikes since March 2015, resulting in over 18,600 civilian casualties.[26]

While the Houthis do not possess manned aircraft, they have conducted persistent ballistic missile and UAV launches against Saudi territory in a campaign they now describe as a response to the Saudi-led coalition's ongoing maritime blockade of Yemen's west coast and closure of Sana'a airport. In September 2021, Secretary of State Blinken condemned an attack against the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia that injured two children and damaged several homes.[27]

Figure 4. Saudi-led Coalition Air Strikes per Month



Source: Yemen Data Project, November 2021.

[25]Abubakr Al Shamahi, "'Looming Disaster': Oil Ship Leak Threatens Millions of Yemenis," *Al Jazeera English*, October 11, 2021. See also, Benjamin Q. Huynh et al., "Public Health Impacts of an Imminent Red Sea Oil Spill," *Nature Sustainability*, (2021), October 11, 2021, and Janelle Weaver, "Anticipated Spill from Deteriorating Red Sea Oil Tanker Threatens Public Health, Stanford-led Study Finds," *Stanford School of Medicine*, October 11, 2021.

[26] Yemen Data Project, Air War Dataset, available online at https://yemendataproject.org/data.html.

[27] U.S. Department of State, The United States Condemns Houthi Attack Against Saudi Arabia, Press Statement, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, September 5, 2021.

Peace Efforts Stall

Throughout 2021, various third parties, including special envoys from the United Nations and United States as well as Omani officials, have attempted to work in concert in order to reach a cease-fire between the Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition. These efforts have coincided with a separate track of talks hosted by the Iraqi government between high level Saudi and Iranian officials, reportedly aimed at deescalating regional tensions in various locales, including Yemen.[28]

In March 2021, Saudi Arabia offered a nationwide ceasefire that was praised by U.S. officials.[29] Specifically, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan proposed that, if the Houthis agreed to a nationwide ceasefire under U.N. supervision, Saudi Arabia would (1) adhere to a U.N.-supervised ceasefire, (2) reopen Sana'a International Airport to direct flights, (3) allow fuel into Hudaydah port with revenues deposited in a joint Houthi-ROYG bank account, and (4) restart political negotiations for a permanent settlement to the conflict. The Houthis almost immediately dismissed the Saudi proposal as "nothing new" and reiterated their demands for the Saudis unilaterally to lift their blockade of Sana'a airport and Hudaydah port.[30]

In late summer 2021, Swedish diplomat Hans Grundberg became the U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen. Upon taking office, Grundberg acknowledged the difficult path toward brokering peace in Yemen, saying "The conflict parties have not discussed a comprehensive settlement since 2016.... It is therefore long overdue for the conflict parties to engage in peaceful dialogue with one another under U.N. facilitation on the terms of an overarching settlement, in good faith and without preconditions."[31]

As of November 2021, the Houthis have continued to demand that the coalition agree to lift restrictions on access to airports and ports in northern Yemen prior to any ceasefire agreement. With the Houthis continuing to advance on multiple fronts throughout Yemen, many observers doubt that third-party mediation will result in any diplomatic breakthroughs. According to Peter Salisbury of the International Crisis Group, "From an Iranian perspective, their ally in Yemen the Houthis appear very close in effect to winning the war in the north, if not the entire country. It is extremely difficult to understand why they or the Houthis would feel this is the right moment to stop."[32]

Iranian Support to the Houthis

Iranian knowledge transfer and military aid to the Houthis, in violation of UNSCR 2216, has increased the Houthis' ability to threaten Saudi Arabia, other Gulf nations, and waters adjacent to Yemen. According to the U.N. 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."[33]

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[28] "Iran-Saudi Talks have Gone a 'Good Distance'—Iran's Foreign Minister," *Reuters*, October 7, 2021.

[29] U.S. Department of State, Briefing on Yemen with Timothy Lenderking, U.S. Special Envoy for Yemen; and Sarah Charles, USAID Assistant Administrator for Humanitarian Assistance, August 9, 2021.

[30] Reuters, "Houthis say nothing new in Saudi peace offer, will keep talking," March 22, 2021.

[31] Edith M. Lederer, "New UN envoy: Yemen is stuck in 'indefinite state of war'," *Associated Press*, September 10, 2021.

[32] Mohammed Ghobari and Ghaida Ghantous, "Yemen's Marib City Battens Down as Houthis Advance Through Energy-Rich Province," *Reuters*, November 2, 2021.

[33] See United Nations Panel of Experts on Yemen, "Letter dated 22 January 2021 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen

The United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Saudi Arabia all have offered evidence throughout 2021 of extensive Iranian military involvement in Yemen. In April 2021, Iran acknowledged that one of its vessels in the Red Sea had been attacked. Subsequent reports suggested that Israel may have attacked the *MV Saviz*, a suspected Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps floating base used, according to Saudi sources, to conduct surveillance and facilitate weapons transfers into Yemen.[34] In May 2021, the U.S. Navy announced that the guided-missile cruiser *USS Monterey* intercepted a stateless dhow in the northern reaches of the Arabian Sea. After sailors boarded it, they uncovered 3,000 Chinese Type 56 assault rifles, hundreds of other heavy machine guns, sniper rifles, and dozens of advanced, Russian-made anti-tank guided missiles.[35] In September 2021, Israel identified an Iranian base (Kashan Base north of Esfahan) used to train foreign militants, including the Houthis, on drone technology.[36] In October 2021, a report prepared for the British government found that Iran has used a network of global commercial companies to procure components for Houthi arms.[37]

Missile and drone attacks perpetrated by Iran and Iran-supported militant groups represent a significant threat inside and outside of Yemen. Iran has supplied Yemen-based Houthis and other regional proxy groups with weapons to conduct destructive and sometimes lethal attacks using drones, missiles, and rockets against a variety of Saudi sites, including critical infrastructure, civilian airports, military bases, and energy facilities throughout the country, as well as vessels in Red Sea shipping lanes. Recent attacks were aimed at targets throughout Saudi Arabia including Riyadh, Jeddah, Dhahran, Jizan, Khamis Mushayt, the civilian airport in Abha, Al Kharj, and military installations in the south, as well as oil and gas facilities. Debris from intercepted drones and missiles represents a recurrent risk to civilian areas and populations.[38]

In October 2020, Iran appointed Hassan Eyrlo (also spelled Irlu) as Ambassador to the so-called "National Salvation Government," the Houthi-run northern Yemeni authority. The appointment made Iran the first country to recognize the Houthis diplomatically 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 Executive Order 13224, the U.S. Department of the Treasury'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."[39] 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.

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addressed to the President of the Security Council," U.N. Document S/2021/79, January 25, 2021.

[34] Jon Gambrell, "Iran Ship said to be Red Sea Troop Base off Yemen Attacked," *Associated Press*, April 7, 2021.

[35] Jon Gambrell, "US Navy seizes Arms Shipment in Arabian Sea likely bound for Yemen," *Associated Press*, May 9, 2021.

[36] Jeremy Binnie, "Israeli Defence Minister Identifies Iran's UAV Training Base for Foreigners," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, September 14, 2021.

[37] Benoit Faucon and Dion Nissenbaum, "Iranian Drones Reshape Mideast Security," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2021.

[38] U.S. Department of State, Saudi Arabia Travel Advisory, September 17, 2019.

[39] 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.

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.[40]

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. In 2021, there have been several reports alleging that the UAE, either unilaterally or through local proxies, has been constructing infrastructure or asserting influence on the Red Sea volcanic island of Mayun and in the Socotra archipelago, both of which are strategically located in the Arabian Sea-Bab al Mandeb corridor.[41] 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."[42]

As the Houthis advance into Yemen's southern provinces, such as Shabwa, home to the Balhaf Liquefied Natural Gas Facility,[43] their presence is exacerbating tensions between the STC and ROYG.[44] Fighting in Marib governorate displaced units affiliated with the Islamist political movement *Al Islah* to Shabwa, placing them in close proximity to the STC, which the latter claims is a violation of the Riyadh Agreement.[45]

Biden Administration Policy

After President Biden took office, one of his first foreign policy priorities was to review the previous Administration's recent actions on Yemen. On February 4, 2021, President Biden

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

[41] For example, see Jon Gambrell, "Mysterious Air Base Being Built on Volcanic Island off Yemen," *Associated Press*, May 25, 2021; and, Quentin Muller, "UAE Wants Control of the Gulf of Aden; Tensions Mount over Yemen's Contested Islands," *Le Monde diplomatique*, September 2021.

[42] 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.

[43] Several key foreign investors are involved in natural gas production in Yemen. For Balhaf, the French company Total SA has a 39.6% interest alongside U.S.-based Hunt Oil (17.2%); South Korea's SK Innovation, and Hyundai and Kogas (a combined 21.4%).

[44] In Yemen, the tribal/Sunni Islamist movement known as *Al Islah* (Reform) has been a major player in national politics for decades and, since the Houthi offensive in 2014, it aligned itself with the ROYG and Saudi Arabia. In order to counter the ROYG-Saudi-Islah alliance, the UAE chose to align itself with southern separatists.

[45] "Separatists and Islamists Vie for Power in Southern Yemen," *Economist Intelligence Unit—ViewsWire*, October 27, 2021.

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. A week later, Secretary of State Antony Blinken revoked the previous Administration's January 2021 designations of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs).[46] The Secretary retained the designations of three Houthi individuals as SDNs under Executive Order (E.O.) 13611.[47] 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.[48]

Since the President's February 2021 policy pronouncement on Yemen, the United States has ceased support to offensive operations by Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners and made some changes to U.S. missile and air defense posture in Saudi Arabia. In April 2021, CENTCOM Commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr. told one reporter that in Marib, "We're not doing anything in terms of ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) … on things happening in Marib or places like that."[49] Nevertheless, Administration officials have reiterated U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's territorial defense. In April 2021 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Amanda Dory, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, stated

> Our second line of effort is to provide limited, non-combat support to the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC) focused on defending Saudi Arabia from external threats. This non-combat support is consistent with President Biden's February 4, 2021, announcement to increase U.S. diplomatic efforts to end the war in Yemen and cease U.S. support to SLC offensive operations in Yemen. Continued U.S. assistance is designed to reassure U.S. partners of our commitment to their defense so that they can meaningfully engage in the United Nations political process to end the war. In support of the President's policy, roughly 60 DoD military advisors are deployed to help Saudi Arabia's Armed Forces defend their territory from threats emanating from Yemen.[50]

In June 2021, President Biden reported to the Congress that

> A small number of United States military personnel are deployed to Yemen to conduct operations against al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS. The United States military continues to work closely with the Government of the Republic of Yemen and regional partner forces to degrade the terrorist threat posed by those groups. I have directed an end to United States support for the Saudi-led Coalition's offensive military operations against the Houthis in Yemen. United States Armed Forces, in a non-combat role, continue to provide military advice and limited information to regional forces for defensive and training purposes only as they relate to the Saudi-led Coalition's campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Such support does not involve United States Armed Forces in hostilities with the Houthis for the purposes of the War Powers Resolution. United States Armed Forces are deployed to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to protect United States forces and

[46] U.S. Department of State, Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah, Press Statement, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary Of State, February 12, 2021.

[47] *Ibid*., U.S. Department of State, February 12, 2021.

[48] 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.

[49] "US-Made Drones Downed over Yemen weren't Military's, CENTCOM says," *Al Monitor*, June 24, 2021.

[50] Testimony of Amanda Dory, Acting Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Department of Defense, Hearing entitled, "National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa," House Armed Services Committee, April 20, 2021.

> interests in the region against hostile action by Iran or Iran-backed groups. These forces, operating in coordination with the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, provide air and missile defense capabilities and support the operation of United States fighter aircraft. The total number of United States forces in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is approximately 2,742.[51]

By summer 2021, with little progress toward peace negotiations, the Biden Administration had become more openly critical of the Houthis for rejecting repeated attempts at brokering a cease-fire while continuing their ground offensive in Yemen and their aerial assaults against civilian targets inside Saudi Arabia.[52] Throughout 2021, the Biden Administration has continued to use its authority to sanction individual Houthi leaders who have obstructed Yemen's stability.[53] In May 2021, the Biden Administration, pursuant to Executive Order 13611, designated two senior Houthis leaders as SDNs for their role in the offensive against Marib.[54] On June 10, 2021, under the authority of Executive Order 13224, the Treasury Department designated several members of a smuggling network that "helps fund Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and the Houthis in Yemen."[55] In November 2021, the Administration designated Saleh Mesfer Alshaer, the commander of the Houthi-controlled military logistics organization, as an SDN for smuggling weapons and misappropriating state funds designated for hospitals.[56]

Houthis Storm U.S. Embassy

In early November 2021, Houthi gunmen entered the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a, where they captured 39 local Yemeni staff who maintain the compound. The U.S. State Department and Members of Congress immediately denounced the action and called on the Houthis to release all personnel.[57] According to the State Department, "The Houthis' unprovoked abuse of these Yemeni citizens is a gross disregard of diplomatic norms, as is the Houthis' flagrant breach of the compound used by the U.S. Embassy prior to 2015."[58] Several weeks later, most employees who were kidnapped were released, though as of November 23 several remain in Houthi custody. On February 11, 2015, due to the deteriorating security situation in Sana'a, the State Department suspended embassy operations and U.S. Embassy staff was relocated to Saudi Arabia. Since then, the embassy has been primarily maintained and protected by local Yemeni employees.

[51] The White House, Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report, June 8, 2021.

[52] See, U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, July 1, 2021, and United States Mission to the United Nations, Ambassador Richard Mills, U.S. Deputy Representative to the United Nations, New York, NY, September 10, 2021.

[53] Pursuant to, inter alia, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (50 U.S.C. §§1701 et seq.) and the National Emergencies Act (50 U.S.C. §§1601 et seq.). The President has extended the national emergency declared in Executive Order 13611 of May 16, 2012, with respect to Yemen to continue in effect beyond May 16, 2021. See, Congressional Record, House Executive Communications, Page H2183, May 11, 2021, Continuation of the National Emergency with Respect to Yemen—Message from the President of the United States (H. Doc. No. 117-37).

[54] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Senior Houthi Military Official Overseeing Group's Offensive Operations," press release, May 20, 2021.

[55] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Network Financing Houthi Aggression and Instability in Yemen," press release, June 10, 2021.

[56] U.S. Department of State, Designation of Houthi Official in Yemen, Press Statement, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, November 19, 2021.

[57] See, McCaul, Meeks, Risch, Menendez Joint Statement on Houthi Breach of U.S. Embassy in Yemen, Press Release, November 12, 2021.

[58] U.S. State Department, The United States Condemns the Houthi Detention of Yemeni Staff of the U.S. Embassy in Sana'a and Breach of Embassy Compound, Press Statement, Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State, November 19, 2021.

As of early November 2021, the Administration has continued to single out the Houthis as the primary party responsible for perpetuating conflict. According to U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price, "The Houthis, despite their claims to the contrary, have been a primary cause of the hardship that the people of Yemen face today. There have been credible proposals put on the table, proposals that the Republic of Yemen Government, proposals that Saudi authorities have also been behind that—on which the Houthis have so far been unwilling to engage."[59]

Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis

The United Nations has described Yemen's humanitarian crisis as currently one of 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.[60] Over 10,000 children have been killed or injured in Yemen since 2015; currently 4 in 5 children are in need of humanitarian assistance, 400,000 are suffering from severe acute malnutrition, and 2 million are out of school.[61]

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 widespread (see **Figure 5**). According to the World Food Program in October 2021, 16.2 million people are food insecure, and 47,000 face famine-like conditions.[62] While the conflict continues to be the main driver of food insecurity across the country, a worsening economic crisis in the form of rising prices and an increasingly high exchange rate in southern Yemen is creating additional burdens for many Yemenis.[63]

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 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."[64]

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

[59] U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, November 3, 2021.

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

[61] UN News, "Yemen war reaches 'shameful milestone'—10,000 children now killed or maimed," October 19, 2021.

[62] World Food Programme, "Yemen Situation Report #9, September 2021," October 18, 2021.

[63] USAID, "Yemen—Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021" September 23, 2021.

[64] Jan Egeland et al., "Humanitarian Aid and the Biden Administration: Lessons from Yemen and Syria," Policy Forum Report, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 25, 2021.

Yemen have grown more onerous.[65] Control and diversion of aid is one means Houthi forces, Houthi partners, and other parties to the conflict have used to finance their operations.[66]

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.[67] The Biden Administration lifted the suspension in March 2021,[68] and in September announced nearly $291 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Yemen as "ongoing hostilities, a deepening economic crisis, acute food insecurity, and the spread of COVID-19 continue to generate humanitarian needs in the country."[69]

[65] 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 Sanaa 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.

[66] Sam Kiley, Sarah El Sirgany, and Brice Lainé, "CNN exposes systematic abuse of aid in Yemen," *CNN*, May 20, 2019.

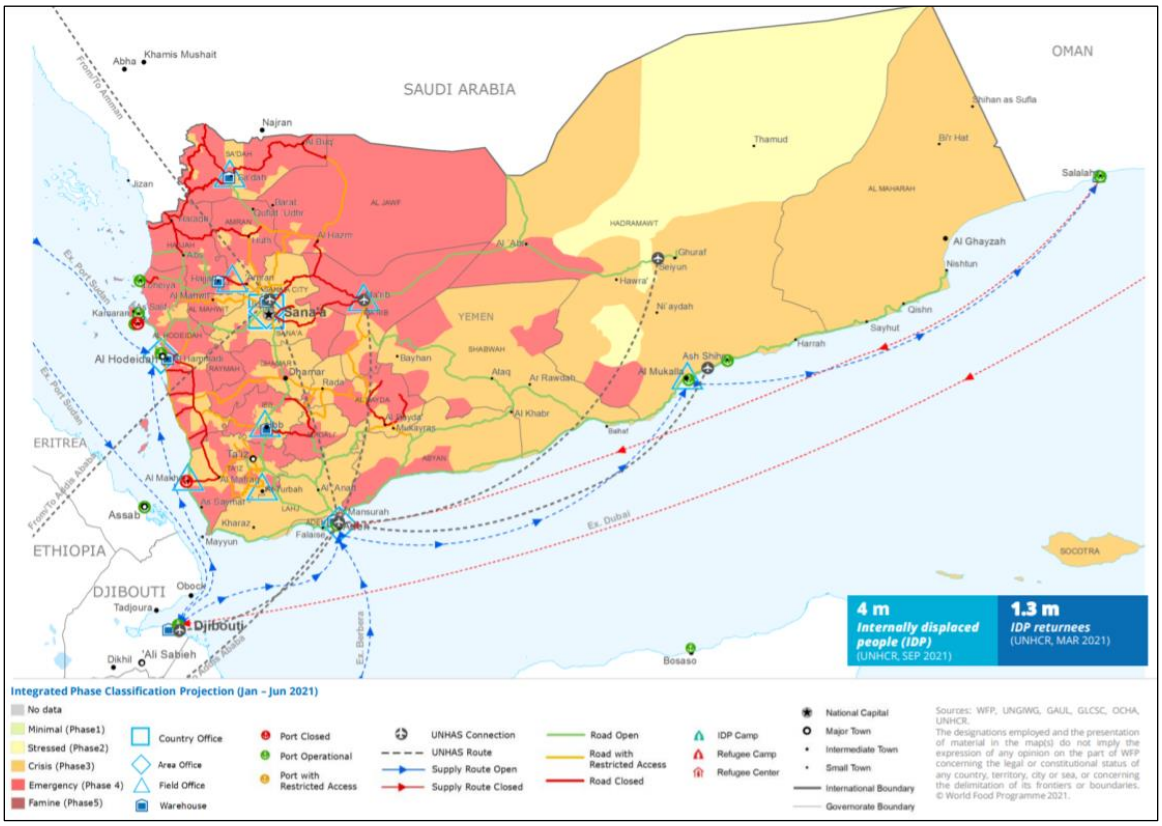
[67] Ambassador Kelly Craft, "Remarks at a U.N. Security Council Briefing on the Situation in Yemen," U.S. Mission to the United Nations, February 18, 2020.

[68] Katrina Mason, "US resumes aid to rebel-controlled regions of Yemen," *Financial Times*, March 11, 2021.

[69] USAID, "Yemen—Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021" September 23, 2021.

Figure 5. World Food Programme: Emergency Dashboard Yemen

August 2021



Source: World Food Programme, Yemen Emergency Dashboard August 2021, updated September 2021.

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Yemen

The COVID-19 pandemic has added an additional layer of concern for Yemen's already depleted health system. Data from the World Health Organization from November 2021 indicate a total of 9,806 COVID-19 cases with 1,894 deaths; most health experts believe that these figures vastly underestimate the extent of COVID-19 in Yemen.[70] Nearly 550,000 vaccine doses have been administered in the country.[71] A delivery of approximately 151,200 doses of Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccines provided by USAID through COVAX, the global COVID-19 vaccination distribution program arrived in August 2021, as the country was beginning to witness a third wave of cases in September-October 2021. Yemen previously received 360,000 AstraZeneca vaccines in March through COVAX, and the United States has agreed to provide an additional 350,000 doses through COVAX.[72] The United Nations has procured medical equipment, testing kits, and medicine while seeking additional supplies. Aid groups also have increased the capacity

[70] United Nations, *COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Monthly Report*, December 2020.

[71] World Health Organization, "COVID-19 Dashboard," accessed November 4, 2021.

[72] USAID, "Yemen—Complex Emergency, Fact Sheet #8, Fiscal Year (FY) 2021" September 23, 2021.

of intensive care units (ICUs) in COVID-19 designated hospitals from 38 in May 2020 to 59 as of December 2020.[73]

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."[74] 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. Human Rights Watch reports that Houthi authorities maintain a policy of withholding data on cases and deaths, and continue to block vaccination efforts and spread disinformation about the virus.[75]

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, "especially those in the region—to step up."[76] Other donations include $430 million from Saudi Arabia, $244 million from Germany, and $230 million from the UAE.[77]

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,[78] it has targeted additional Houthis leaders using Yemen-specific authorities (E.O. 13611), while also condemning Houthi attacks against civilians and Saudi Arabian territory.[79] 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 entails.[80] According to one report, U.S. officials assessed existing and potential sales of U.S.

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[73] United Nations, *COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Monthly Report*, December 2020.

[74] Public Broadcasting Service, "Yemen's COVID Cover-Up," *Frontline*, February 9, 2021.

[75] Human Rights Watch, "Yemen: Houthis Risk Civilians' Health in Covid-19," June 1, 2021.

[76] 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.

[77] A complete list of donors is available online at http://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/20210103-YemenHLE2021_AnnouncementsResults.pdf.

[78] U.S. Department of State, "Department Press Briefing, February 16, 2021," Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, February 16, 2021.

[79] U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "Houthi Attacks Impacting Civilians," Press Release, Ned Price, Department Spokesperson, February 7, 2021.

[80] In a recent State Department press conference, Spokesperson Ned Price stated, "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

equipment and training to Saudi Arabia in order to determine what U.S. support may be considered defensive.[81]

Despite these tangible and rhetorical steps, the Houthis have made significant territorial gains in recent months and may be on the cusp of forcing the ROYG and its tribal allies in Marib to negotiate an orderly surrender and power-sharing agreement. If the Marib front is then pacified, additional Houthi forces would be free to advance further southward into other governorates, such as Shabwa, where it could threaten Yemen's other key energy facilities, such as the Liquefied Natural Gas Facility of Balhaf. In the view of David Schenker, a former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, "The Houthi inclination toward a military rather than a negotiated solution is paying off. Two years into their military campaign in Marib—a strategic governorate named for its capital city—the rebels are on the verge of conquering both."[82]

Overall, while many in the international community wish to foster a political solution to the Yemen conflict to form a unified government with which to work to alleviate the dire humanitarian conditions, the reality on the ground resembles a fractured state, bereft of a central authority seen as legitimate by powerful actors, where internal and external parties seek to maximize control over territory and scarce resources. 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."[83]

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.

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 acquiesce to Houthi rule by ending its enforcement of control over air and sea access to Yemen and negotiating a cease-fire. Alternatively, Saudi Arabia could seek to continue to pressure the Houthis by sponsoring its own Yemeni proxies. 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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important in this case." See, U.S. Department of State, Department Press Briefing, March 2, 2021.

[81] Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, "Exclusive: Biden Team Considering a Halt to 'offensive' Arms Sales for Saudis," *Reuters*, February 26, 2021.

[82] David Schenker, "Biden Needs a Plan B for Yemen if Houthis Win," *Foreign Policy*, November 4, 2021.

[83] 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," U.N. Document S/2021/79, January 25, 2021.

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