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Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention

Jeremy M. Sharp

Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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Summary

This report provides material on the latest crisis in Yemen and the U.S. policy response.

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition it established (hereinafter referred to as the Saudi-led coalition) launched a military operation aimed at restoring the rule of Yemen's internationally recognized President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Prior to the start of hostilities, Hadi's government had been gradually supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Iran-supported Houthi movement and loyalists of the previous President, Ali Abdullah Saleh (hereinafter referred to as Houthi-Saleh forces).

After 20 months of war, battle lines in Yemen have hardened. The Saudi-led coalition has retaken the port city of Aden and the lowland areas of southern Yemen (traditionally Sunni). Houthi-Saleh forces remain ensconced in the capital Sana'a and the mountainous highlands of northern Yemen (traditionally Zaydi). In fact, the lines of control now somewhat resemble the previous division of Yemen into two separate countries, a political situation that lasted from 1918 to 1990.

By August 2016, the United Nations estimated that the war had killed at least 10,000 people. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, there were 3,980 civilian casualties from the start of hostilities through September 2016. The war has taken a devastating toll on the population in a country long-considered the least developed in the Middle East and one of the poorest in the world. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is severe, with 80% (21.2 million) of Yemen's population in need of humanitarian assistance.

As the conflict in Yemen has continued, the Administration seeks to work multilaterally through the United Nations to pursue a cease-fire that ultimately jumpstarts negotiations toward a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict. On November 14, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Oman, where he again tried to broker a new cessation of hostilities that would open the door toward renewed peace negotiations. After his visit, Secretary Kerry announced that Houthi-Saleh forces had agreed to "abide by the terms of the April 10 cessation of hostilities beginning on Nov. 17, provided the other party implements the same commitment." Days later, Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdel-Malek al Mekhlafi said: "I believe the current U.S. administration is incapable of providing any guarantees to any party and what Kerry has said is no more than a media bubble at our people's expense."

Since March 2015, the United States continues to be the largest contributor of humanitarian aid to Yemen, providing \$327.5 million in FY2016. On February 11, 2015, due to the deteriorating security situation in Sana'a, the Department of State suspended embassy operations and U.S. Embassy staff was relocated out of the country.

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Conflict Overview

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition¹ it established (hereinafter referred to as the Saudi-led coalition) launched a military operation aimed at restoring the rule of Yemen's internationally recognized President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Prior to the start of hostilities, Hadi's government had been gradually supplanted by an alliance comprised of the Iran-supported² Houthi movement³ and loyalists of the previous President, Ali Abdullah Saleh (hereinafter referred to as Houthi-Saleh forces).

As Houthi forces advanced on the southern city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and members of a coalition launched air strikes in response to a specific request from President Hadi "to provide instant support by all necessary means, including military intervention to protect Yemen and its people from continuous Houthi aggression and deter the expected attack to occur at any hour on the city of Aden and the rest of the southern regions, and to help Yemen in the face of Al Qaeda and ISIL."⁴ Saudi leaders reportedly are concerned that reported Iranian support for Houthi fighters will result in the creation of a Hezbollah-like threat on its southwestern border.

After 20 months of war, battle lines in Yemen have hardened. The Saudi-led coalition has retaken the port city of Aden and the lowland areas of southern Yemen (traditionally Sunni). Houthi-Saleh forces remain ensconced in the capital Sana'a and the mountainous highlands of northern Yemen (traditionally Zaydi⁵). In fact, the lines of control now somewhat resemble the previous division of Yemen into two separate countries, a political situation that lasted from 1918 to 1990.

¹ The coalition includes Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, and Senegal. The Saudi-led coalition also relies on local Yemeni forces to carry out ground operations. These allied units comprise a mix of army units, tribal forces, Islamist militias, and southern separatists opposed to Houthi rule.

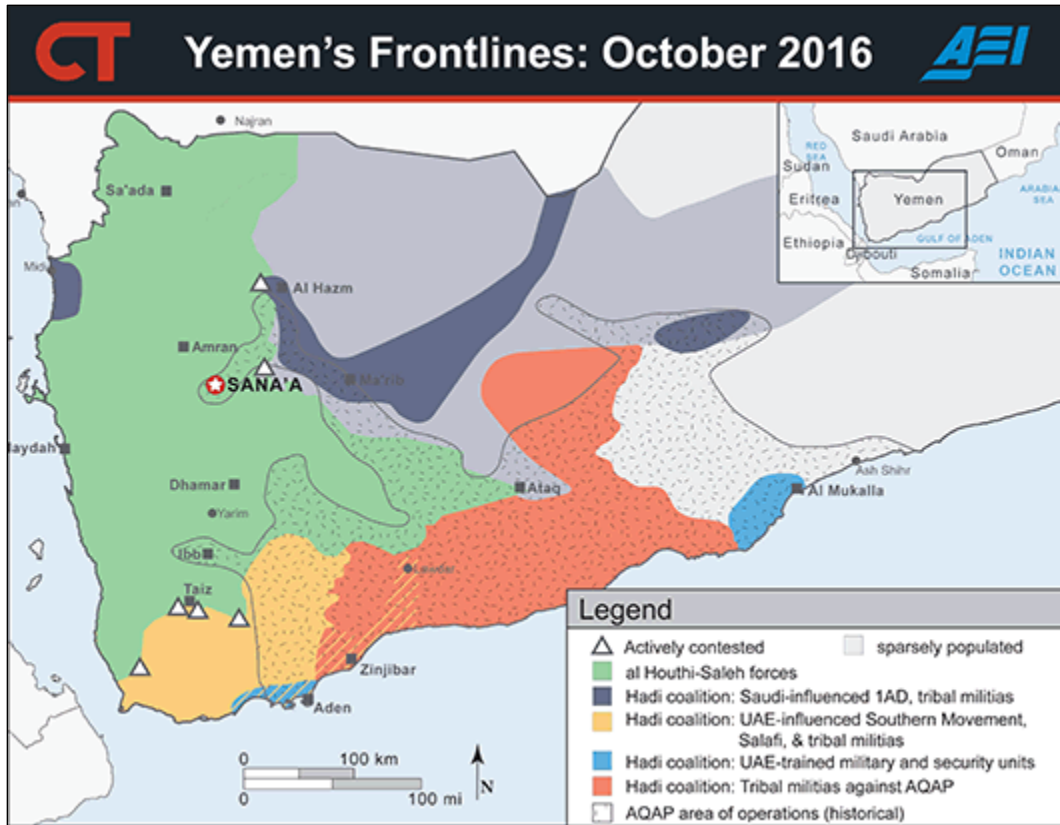
² The degree of Iran's military role in Yemen is a subject of much debate. Iran has been caught on multiple occasions attempting to smuggle weapons to the Houthis (see below). In repeated public statements by high level Saudi officials, Saudi Arabia has seized upon Iran's illicit support for the Houthis as proof that Iran is to blame for the Yemen conflict. In fact, Saudi officials frequently justify their intervention in Yemen as a defensive action in order to prevent "the country [Yemen] being taken over by a radical militia [Houthis] allied with Iran and Hezbollah." Overall, Iranian support to the Houthis provides the clerical regime with a relatively low cost way of countering Saudi influence in Yemen. However, many Western observers generally agree that Iranian aid to the Houthis does not match the scale of its commitments to proxies in other parts of the Middle East, such as in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. In April 2015, National Security Council spokeswoman Bernadette Meehan remarked that "It remains our assessment that Iran does not exert command and control over the Houthis in Yemen." See, "Iran Warned Houthis Against Yemen Takeover," *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2015

³ The Houthi movement (also known as *Ansar Allah* or Partisans of God) is a predominantly Zaydi Shiite revivalist political and insurgent movement that formed in the northern province of Sa'da in 2004 under the leadership of members of the Houthi family. It originally sought an end to what it viewed as efforts to marginalize Zaydi communities and beliefs, but its goals grew in scope and ambition in the wake of the 2011 uprising and government collapse to embrace a broader populist, anti-establishment message. Skeptics highlight the movement's ideological roots, its alleged cooperation with Iran, and the slogans prominently displayed on its banners: "God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

⁴ Text of Hadi request letter in "GCC statement: Gulf countries respond to Yemen developments," *The National* (UAE), March 26, 2015.

⁵ Yemen's Zaydis take their name from their fifth Imam, Zayd ibn Ali, grandson of Husayn. Zayd revolted against the Umayyad Caliphate in 740, believing it to be corrupt, and to this day, Zaydis believe that their imam (ruler of the community) should be both a descendent of Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad) and one who makes it his religious duty to rebel against unjust rulers and corruption. A Zaydi state (or Imamate) was founded in northern Yemen in 893 and lasted in various forms until the republican revolution of 1962. Yemen's modern imams kept their state in the Yemeni highlands in extreme isolation, as foreign visitors required the ruler's permission to enter the kingdom. Although Zaydism is an offshoot of Shia Islam, its legal traditions and religious practices are similar to Sunni Islam. Moreover, it is doctrinally distinct from "Twelver Shiism," the dominant branch of Shi'a Islam in Iran and (continued...)

Figure I. Yemen: Current Battle Lines



Source: American Enterprise Institute.

By August 2016, the United Nations estimated that the war had killed at least 10,000 people.⁶ According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, there were 3,980 civilian casualties from the start of hostilities through September 2016.⁷ The war has taken a devastating toll on the population in a country long-considered the least developed in the Middle East and one of the poorest in the world. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is severe, with 80% (21.2 million) of Yemen's population in need of humanitarian assistance. According to the World Health Organization, documented cases of cholera have reached over 1,400 due to damage to infrastructure and lack of access to clean water and sanitation. UNICEF estimates that 14 million Yemenis are malnourished, and that 370,000 children are estimated to be severely malnourished or starving, particularly in rural areas.⁸ According to the World Food Program, almost half of all children in Yemen are stunted in growth due to chronic malnutrition. Since the outbreak of hostilities, the Saudi-led coalition has enforced a maritime blockade of Yemen, which was authorized by United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216.

(...continued)

Lebanon.

⁶ "U.N. says 10,000 Killed in Yemen war, far more than other Estimates," *Reuters*, August 30, 2016.

⁷ Spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, September 23, 2016.

⁸ "More than One Million Children Starve as Yemen War Rages—U.N. agencies," *Reuters*, October 28, 2016.

A Prelude to War

Central governance in Yemen, embodied by the decades-long rule of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, began to unravel in 2011, when political unrest broke out throughout the Arab world. Popular youth protests in Yemen were gradually supplanted by political elites jockeying to replace then-President Saleh. Ultimately, infighting among various centers of Yemeni political power broke out in the capital, and government authority throughout the country eroded. Soon, militias associated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula seized territory in one southern province.

Concerned that the political unrest and resulting security vacuum were strengthening terrorist elements, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other members of the international community attempted to broker a political compromise. A transition plan was brokered, and in 2012 former Vice President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi became president.

With the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations Security Council, President Hadi attempted to reform Yemen's political system. Throughout 2013, key players convened a National Dialogue Conference aimed at reaching broad national consensus on a new political order. However, in January 2014 it ended without agreement.

One anti-government group in particular, the northern Yemeni Houthi movement, sought to use military force to reshape the political order. Within weeks of the National Dialogue Conference concluding, it launched a military offensive against various tribal allies of President Hadi. The Houthi were joined by the forces still loyal to former President Saleh, creating an alliance of convenience that was a formidable opponent to President Hadi and his allies.

In 2014, Houthi militants took over the capital and violated several power-sharing arrangements. In 2015, Houthi militants placed President Hadi under house arrest. Although he was able to escape to Aden in southern Yemen, his position became untenable, as Houthi forces advanced from the capital all the way to Aden. In March 2015, after President Hadi, who had fled to Saudi Arabia, appealed for international intervention, Saudi Arabia and a hastily assembled international coalition launched a military offensive aimed at restoring Hadi's rule and evicting Houthi fighters from the capital and other major cities.

As of November 2016, fighting continues throughout the country, most notably in and around the following.

- **Taiz.** Yemen's third largest city, Taiz (pre-war population of 300,000), continues to witness fierce fighting. Forces aligned with the coalition control most of Taiz city, but its environs are largely sealed off by Houthi-Saleh forces that surround the city on three sides. Houthi-Saleh forces only periodically permit humanitarian aid to reach city residents, and over 80% of the city's hospitals are closed. The city has been under siege since September 2015, and the humanitarian situation is dire, with reports of skyrocketing food prices and even starvation.⁹
- **Saudi-Yemeni Border.** In the far north along the Yemeni-Saudi border, Houthi-Saleh forces continue to target the kingdom. In the Saudi provinces of Najran and Jizan, Houthi-Saleh forces have launched offensives into Saudi territory and Scud and other ballistic missiles into Saudi territory and at coalition forces inside Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates each have multiple U.S.-supplied Patriot missile batteries protecting their respective forces.
- **Marib Province.** Bordering the capital province of Sana'a to the east, Marib governorate and city are strategically important areas that the Saudi-led coalition seeks to control. Marib province is where the country's main refinery is located, along with one of its two main oil pipelines. Houthi-Saleh forces have been attacking the Marib tribes and coalition forces. In late July 2016, two Saudi pilots were killed in Marib when their Apache helicopter crashed. The helicopter crash marked the first time the Saudi military acknowledged it had lost any aircraft in the war. Saudi Arabia maintains an air base north of Marib city.

⁹ "Yemen: 'Some people are living on one piece of bread a day,'" *The Guardian*, June 8, 2016.

- **Sana'a (Yemen's Capital).** From April 2016 to August 2016, the Saudi-led coalition had largely spared Sana'a from aerial strikes as part of its commitment to the cessation of hostilities. When U.N.-mediated peace talks collapsed in August 2016, the Saudi-led coalition resumed bombing.

Prospects for a Political Solution

Despite multiple attempts by U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed to broker a peace agreement, the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi-Saleh forces continue to disagree on the fundamentals of a political settlement. In late October 2016, the U.N. Envoy presented another peace plan to both sides. According to various reports, the Envoy's road map to peace included the following:¹⁰

- gradually transferring presidential power to either a new prime minister and/or vice president (the presidency would then become mostly a ceremonial position),
- the formation of a national unity government,
- gradually removing Houthi-Saleh forces from cities seized between 2014 and 2015,
- the formation of an international observation mission to verify Houthi withdrawal, and
- gradually transitioning toward presidential and parliamentary elections.

President Hadi rejected this plan. He claims that his abdication would legitimize Houthi-Saleh forces' capture of the capital, which Hadi calls a coup. Hadi also calls for Houthi-Saleh forces to relinquish their heavy weaponry (including ballistic missiles and launchers). Saudi Arabia demands that the Houthi-Saleh forces relinquish these weapons to a third party, and insists on a guarantee that a new unity government would prohibit the deployment of weapons that can threaten international waterways or Saudi territory. For their part, Houthi-Saleh forces seek Hadi's resignation and require an immediate formation of a unity government in which they play a significant role. They also seek to integrate their militiamen into the nation's armed forces.

On November 14, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Oman, where he again tried to broker a new cessation of hostilities that would open the door toward renewed peace negotiations. After his visit, Secretary Kerry announced that Houthi-Saleh forces had agreed to "abide by the terms of the April 10 cessation of hostilities beginning on Nov. 17, provided the other party implements the same commitment."¹¹ Days later, Yemeni Foreign Minister Abdel-Malek al Mekhlafi said: "I believe the current U.S. administration is incapable of providing any guarantees to any party and what Kerry has said is no more than a media bubble at our people's expense."¹²

¹⁰ "UN Envoy to Yemen hands peace plan outline to rival parties," *Associated Press*, October 25, 2016.

¹¹ "Kerry announces Yemen Cessation of Hostilities to start November 17," *Reuters*, November 15, 2016.

¹² "Yemen's Houthis say they want to End War, form Unity Government," *Reuters*, November 16, 2016.

Table I. Yemen Profiles



President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi

President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi – Originally a major general in the South Yemeni military, Hadi fled to North Yemen in 1986, where he became a close ally of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Hadi was eventually appointed Defense Minister and then Vice President of a unified Yemen. He served as Saleh’s vice president for 18 years, and became acting president following Saleh’s downfall in an Arab Spring-inspired uprising. The 69-year old President is supported by Saudi Arabia but rules mostly outside the country due to the security situation.



Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh governed the unified Republic of Yemen from 1990 to 2012; prior to this, he had headed the former state of North Yemen from 1978 to 1990. Under Saleh’s rule, political power gradually coalesced around his immediate family, whose members filled key posts in various security services. Corruption was rampant, and the country remained the poorest in the Arab world and one of the most destitute nations on earth. After stepping down from the presidency in 2012, Saleh remained ensconced as president of the General People’s Congress party, the former ruling party. Since 2014, Saleh has been widely seen as aiding the Houthis in their struggle against Hadi’s government, and in 2015 he publicly announced his support for the Houthis against the Saudi-led coalition. The alliance between the Houthis and Saleh, against whom they fought a bitter war for nearly a decade, is usually seen as one of convenience and thus fundamentally unstable.



Abdul Malik al Houthi

Abdul Malik became leader of the Houthi movement after the death of his brother, parliamentarian and Zaydi sheikh Hussein al Houthi, in 2004, shortly after Hussein began assembling forces against Saleh’s government in what eventually became the Houthi insurgency. That insurgency culminated in the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana’a, and Abdul Malik and his brother Yahia are generally recognized as leaders of the Houthi movement (officially known as Ansar Allah). Abdul Malik al Houthi comes from a prominent Zaydi family that seeks to restore the Zaydi Imamate, which ended in 1962.



Vice President Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar

Mohsen has been on nearly every side of Yemeni politics during his five decades of military service. He was an early ally of President Saleh, and played a central role in combating the nascent Houthi insurgency that began in 2004. In the 2011 uprising against Saleh’s rule, Mohsen defected and publicly declared his support for protestors, but in 2012 President Hadi removed him from his military command as part of an effort to restructure the military. Mohsen fled the country after the Houthi takeover, returning in late 2015 to lead military operations against the Houthis as part of the Saudi-led coalition. As one of the founding members of the Islah party, Mohsen reportedly has strong Salafist leanings and close relations with Saudi Arabia, and is a member of one of the nation’s largest tribal confederations, the Hashid.



U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed

Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed was appointed Special Envoy for Yemen in 2015 after the resignation of Jamal Benomar. Ould Cheikh Ahmed is a longtime UN official with previous experience in Yemen and Syria.

Political dynamics on the ground in Yemen are obstructing outside forces’ efforts to bring the current conflict to a close. It seems that even Saudi Arabia, President Hadi’s primary benefactor, cannot currently compel its Yemeni allies to reach a compromise deal. Neither President Hadi nor his vice president, General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, a powerful military commander who is a rival to both former president Saleh and the Houthis, is ready to resign or gradually transition out of power. President Hadi claims that United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 legitimizes his rule since it calls on all parties to refrain from taking any actions that undermine the legitimacy of the President of Yemen. There is some concern that even if the Saudi-led coalition abandoned the current president and vice president, it would not stop their associated militias from continuing the war.

At the same time, the status quo is problematic for the Saudi-led coalition. In late July 2016, Houthi-Saleh forces established their own alternative government, an unacceptable outcome for both the Saudis and the international community, which seek to maintain Yemen’s unity. For Houthi-Saleh forces, it seems their strategy is to survive, ensconced in the capital, in order to create facts on the ground. In the meantime, it would seem that continued Saudi-led coalition airstrikes targeting civilians, combined with Yemen’s dire humanitarian crisis, is increasing international criticism of the Saudi-led military operation.

With a political settlement seemingly distant, some analysts are calling for alternative arrangements. According to Bruce Riedel, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, “de facto partition may be the only realistic option for the foreseeable future. The international community should try to persuade the warring parties to adopt an open-ended cease-fire without conditions. Then a massive surge of humanitarian relief should begin.”¹³

Chronology of the Fighting

Date	Description
March 26, 2015	Saudi Arabia begins military operations with air strikes against Houthi-Saleh forces.
April 14, 2015	The United Nations Security Council adopts Resolution 2216, which imposes sanctions on individuals undermining the stability of Yemen, and authorizes an arms embargo against the Houthi-Saleh forces. It also demands that the Houthis withdraw from all areas seized during the latest 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.
June 16, 2015	Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) leader Nasser al-Wuhayshi is killed in an alleged U.S. drone strike in Yemen.
July 17, 2015	The Saudi-led coalition retakes Aden from Houthi-Saleh forces.
September 4, 2015	Houthi-Saleh forces fire a ballistic missile at a military base used by UAE forces in Yemen, killing at least 45 UAE soldiers and 5 Bahraini troops.
September 28, 2015	Saudi-led coalition airstrikes hit a wedding party, killing at least 81 civilians.
October 6, 2015	The Islamic State claims to carry out four suicide bombings against the Saudi-led coalition in Aden.
October 7, 2015	Saudi-led coalition airstrikes hit another wedding party, killing at least 23 people.
December 15, 2015	The United Nations negotiates a temporary cease-fire, as UN-mediated peace talks begin in the Swiss city of Biel. The cease-fire lasts two weeks, ending in early January 2016.
January 7, 2016	Human Rights Watch reports that the Saudi-led coalition had dropped cluster bombs on residential neighborhoods in Sana’a.
January 22, 2016	A United Nations Panel of Experts report concludes that roughly 60 percent of 2,682 civilian deaths since March 2015 were caused by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes.
February 4, 2016	AQAP operative Jelal al Balaidi is killed by an alleged U.S. strike.
April 10, 2016	A cessation of hostilities begins. Peace talks in Kuwait begin on April 22.
April 25, 2016	UAE troops uproot AQAP from Yemen’s third-largest port city, Al Mukalla.
August 6, 2016	UN-brokered Yemeni peace negotiations in Kuwait officially end with no agreement. Houthi-Saleh forces form their own governing council known as the Supreme

¹³ “Is Yemen headed for Partition?” *Al Monitor*, October 31, 2016.

	Political Council (SPC).
August 15, 2016	Saudi-led coalition airstrikes hit a Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders)-supported hospital for the fourth time in a 10-month period, killing 19.
August 29, 2016	An Islamic State suicide bombing kills more than 50 people.
October 1, 2016	Houthi-Saleh forces fire an anti-ship missile at the UAE vessel HSV-2 Swift, heavily damaging the transport ship, which was transiting the Red Sea near the port of Mokha. Houthi-Saleh forces are believed to have used Chinese-built C-802s in the attack.
October 3, 2016	The U.S. Navy dispatches three ships, the USS Mason, the USS Nitze, and the USS Ponce, to the southern coast of Yemen following the destruction of the UAE's HSV-2 Swift.
October 8, 2016	<p>Coalition air strikes hit a reception hall in Sana'a, where prominent Houthi members had gathered to mourn the death of the father of a senior Houthi official. The death toll is estimated to have been 130 to 150, with hundreds more wounded. Many senior Houthi political and military figures are killed, as well as dozens of civilians.</p> <p>In response to the strike, the Administration launches an "immediate review" of U.S. security cooperation with Saudi Arabia. According to a statement by National Security Council spokesperson Ned Price, "U.S. security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check. Even as we assist Saudi Arabia regarding the defense of their territorial integrity, we have and will continue to express our serious concerns about the conflict in Yemen and how it has been waged."</p>
October 9, 2016	Houthi-Saleh forces fire two coastal defense cruise missiles at the USS Mason and the USS Ponce. The USS Mason employs counter-measures and the missiles fail to hit the ship.
October 12, 2016	Houthi-Saleh forces target the USS Mason. The ship responds with defensive fire and the attack is thwarted.
October 13, 2016	Claiming self-defense, the USS Nitze fires Tomahawk cruise missiles at three Houthi-Saleh-controlled radar installations, A Pentagon spokesperson says, "These limited self-defense strikes were conducted to protect our personnel, our ships and our freedom of navigation in this important maritime passageway," Other U.S. officials reiterate that U.S. actions do not indicate deeper U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition or deeper military involvement in the conflict.
October 15, 2016	The USS Mason may have come under attack for a third time, though this latest incident is under investigation by naval authorities. The Mason is not struck and no injuries were reported.
October 19, 2016	A 72-hour new cessation of hostilities goes into effect. Violations occur and it lasts until October 23 without renewal.
October 27, 2016	The Saudi-led coalition claims that Houthi-Saleh forces fired a ballistic missile toward the holy Muslim city of Mecca. Houthi-Saleh forces claim to have targeted Jiddah's King Abdulaziz International Airport.

Humanitarian Situation

In a country with chronic natural resource and food shortfalls, Yemen is facing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. In his latest briefing to the United Nations Security Council, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, said, "This humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen is a man-made disaster, where conflict has

exacerbated and exponentially increased the suffering of the 50 per cent of the Yemeni population who already were in dire and extreme poverty.”¹⁴

Public health figures and statistics indicating the degree of human suffering are stark.

- As of August 2016, there are over 2.2 million internally displaced in persons in Yemen.¹⁵
- Since March 2015, 10,000 children under the age of five have perished from preventable diseases such as diarrhea and pneumonia.¹⁶
- As of August 2016, the United Nations funding requirement for Yemen has reached \$1.63 billion, of which donors have pledged only 43%.¹⁷ Prior to the start of the hostilities in March 2015, humanitarian funding needs were less than half the current figure.

The Coalition’s Maritime Blockade and Delivery of Emergency Aid

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216 authorizes member states to prevent the transfer or sale of arms to the Houthis or to former President Saleh and also allows Yemen’s neighbors to inspect cargo suspected of carrying arms to Houthi fighters. Iran reportedly continues to support Houthi militias with weapons shipments, fueling the desire of the Saudi-led coalition to thwart Iranian weapons smuggling by sea. However, while the coalition’s naval blockade has periodically intercepted Iranian arms shipments, it also has slowed the delivery of humanitarian aid. Near the Red Sea port city of Hodeida, which is controlled by Houthi-Saleh forces, ships filled with food and fuel routinely sit off-shore, as Arab coalition vessels search them for illicit arms.¹⁸

The UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) is a UN-led operation designed to inspect incoming sea cargo to Yemen for illicit weapons. UNVIM can inspect cargo, while also ensuring that humanitarian aid is delivered in a timely manner. Its participants are the European Union, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States.

While UNVIM has cleared nearly 200 commercial vessels at Hodeida and other ports, hundreds of thousands of metric tons of food await offloading. Port operations at Hodeida have been damaged by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes, and disputes between Houthi-Saleh authorities and shippers over customs fees further hampers the delivery of aid.¹⁹

¹⁴ Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O’Brien Statement to the Security Council on Yemen, October 31, 2016.

¹⁵ https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/yemen_ce_fs01_10-27-2016.pdf.

¹⁶ Stephen O’Brien Statement, op. cit.

¹⁷ Financial Tracking Service, Yemen : Funding received 2016.

¹⁸ “Arab Coalition Navy Inspections Paralyze Yemen Food Shipments,” *Reuters*, September 10, 2015. Reportedly, the United States has said that commercial vessels off the coast of Yemen should only be inspected when there are “reasonable grounds” to suspect illicit arms shipments. See, “U.S. tells U.N. it Wants to See Boost in Shipping into War-Torn Yemen,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2015.

¹⁹ Stephen O’Brien Statement, op. cit.

Iranian Arms Shipments to the Houthi-Saleh Forces

Recent statements by U.S. officials indicate that Iran has increased weapons shipments to Houthi-Saleh forces in Yemen. In late October 2016, after Houthi-Saleh forces targeted U.S. warships in the Bab Al Mandab, Vice Admiral Kevin Donegan, the head of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, said that “We believe that Iran is connected to this.”²⁰ The vice admiral also noted that since April 2015, U.S. warships have intercepted five Iranian shipments of weaponry to Houthi-Saleh forces.²¹ In September 2015, coalition naval forces, which have blockaded Yemen’s ports, seized an Iranian fishing boat carrying, according to a coalition spokesperson, “18 anti-armored concourse shells, 54 anti-tank shells, shell-battery kits, firing guidance systems, launchers and binoculars’ batteries.”²² In addition to maritime smuggling, Iran also has used overland routes through Oman to ship arms to Houthi-Saleh forces. According to one unnamed U.S. official, “We have been concerned about the recent flow of weapons from Iran into Yemen and have conveyed those concerns to those who maintain relations with the Houthis, including the Omani government.”²³

Yemen’s Banking Crisis

Approximately a quarter of all Yemenis’ livelihoods depend on the salary of a public sector employee. Government salaries are paid by the Central Bank, which, throughout the current conflict, had managed to stay relatively apolitical. However, after the August 2016 breakdown in peace talks, President Hadi moved the Central Bank’s operations to Aden, accusing Houthi-Saleh forces of adding thousands of militiamen to the Ministry of Defense’s payroll, which had been drawing down \$100 million a month in foreign reserves.²⁴ As of September 2016, total reserves had dwindled to \$1.3 billion from about \$4 billion in November 2014.

As a result of the Central Bank’s relocation, the payment of government salaries in Houthi-Saleh-controlled areas was halted, exacerbating already difficult living conditions for tens of thousands of Yemenis. Houthi-Saleh authorities had already reduced salaries for their fighters. In late September 2016, the U.S. State Department expressed concern about the “economic conditions in Yemen and recent developments associated with the Central Bank,” stressing the importance of the Central Bank serving the interests of all Yemenis.²⁵

Transnational Terrorist Groups Operating in Yemen

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

The Obama Administration has described Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as “the most active and dangerous affiliate of al-Qa’ida today,”²⁶ with “several thousand adherents and fighters” inside of Yemen.²⁷ The group has operated in Yemen since 2009, and has been the most active in the southern provinces that were formerly part of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, which reunited with northern Yemen in 1990. After unification, political and economic power became concentrated in the hands of northern leaders and tribes, and AQAP has benefitted

²⁰ “U.S. Officials: Iran Supplying Weapons to Yemen’s Houthi Rebels,” *NBC News*, October 27, 2016.

²¹ “US intercepts Multiple Shipments of Iranian Weapons going to Houthis in Yemen,” *CNN*, October 28, 2016.

²² “Weapons Bound for Yemen Seized on Iran Boat: Coalition,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2015.

²³ “Exclusive: Iran steps up Weapons Supply to Yemen’s Houthis via Oman—Officials,” *Reuters*, October 20, 2016.

²⁴ “Central Bank Crisis Risks Famine in Yemen,” *International Crisis Group*, September 29, 2016.

²⁵ Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. State Department, Communique on the Situation in Yemen, September 22, 2016.

²⁶ The White House, *Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Resolution*, June 13, 2016.

²⁷ Transcript, CIA Director John Brennan before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, June 16, 2016.

from southern resentment directed against the government. According to the State Department's 2015 Country Reports on Terrorism, AQAP has continued to take advantage of the political and security vacuum created by the ongoing fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and Houthi-Saleh forces. The conflict between these forces has contributed to AQAP's attempted expansion in the southern and eastern parts of Yemen since 2015.

Perhaps more than any other AQ affiliate, AQAP has attempted to carry out attacks in the United States and Europe. Between 2009 and 2012, AQAP was behind three attempts to down U.S.-bound commercial airliners, and officials note that the group likely "still harbors this intent and substantial capability to carry out such a plot."²⁸ In early 2015, AQAP claimed to have directed and funded the attack against the *Charlie Hebdo* satirical magazine in Paris.²⁹

The Defense Department reported that U.S. strikes had killed approximately 81 AQAP members in Yemen in the first half of 2016.³⁰ In June 2015, a U.S. strike killed AQAP leader Nasser al Wuhayshi. In April 2016, "small numbers" of U.S. military personnel were authorized to deploy to Yemen to support operations against AQAP.³¹ U.S. military officials confirmed in May 2016 that some U.S. military personnel had returned to Yemen and were operating in a liaison capacity out of the port city of Al Mukalla.³²

The Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL, ISIS, or the Arabic acronym Da'esh) claims to have several provinces operating in Yemen, where it has targeted Zaydi Shi'a, including their mosques. These types of attacks may increase sectarian tension in Yemen, which, though wracked by war, has not traditionally had the kind of sectarian animosity that has plagued states such as Iraq and Lebanon. Leadership and tactical disputes appear to have limited the Yemen-based IS affiliates' success to date, as has competition from rivals in the larger and more deeply rooted AQAP organization.

U.S. Policy

As the conflict in Yemen has continued, the Administration's position has moved away from strongly supporting the Saudi-led coalition's campaign and the restoration of Hadi's presidency and toward a more nuanced approach. The Administration has called for a political settlement that the parties themselves negotiate, emphasizing that "we're on the side squarely of the Yemeni people,"³³ while also stressing that Saudi Arabia itself is under daily attack and has a right to defend itself.

The Administration seeks to work multilaterally through the United Nations to pursue a cease-fire that ultimately jumpstarts negotiations toward a comprehensive political settlement to the

²⁸ Testimony of former NCTC Director Matthew Olsen before the House Homeland Security Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee, Joint Hearing on Terrorism Outlook, November 18, 2015.

²⁹ "Al Qaeda in Yemen Claims Responsibility for Charlie Hebdo Attack," *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2015.

³⁰ U.S. Defense Department, "Centcom Announces Yemen Counterterrorism Strikes," June 3, 2016.

³¹ The White House, *Letter from the President to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Resolution*, June 13, 2016.

³² Department of Defense Press Briefing by Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook in the Pentagon Briefing Room, May 9, 2016.

³³ John Kirby, Spokesperson, U.S. State Department, Daily Press Briefing, Washington, DC, November 1, 2016.

conflict. In late August, Secretary of State John Kerry traveled to Saudi Arabia, where he proposed a new peace initiative calling for the Houthis to withdraw from the capital, while having their heavy weapons and ballistic missiles transferred to a third party.

Overall, the Administration, like Saudi Arabia, does not want to see Houthi fighters who receive Iranian aid rule large swaths of Yemen. Additionally, some lawmakers see Iranian support for Houthi-Saleh forces as increasing, and therefore reiterate the need to counter Iran's regional meddling.³⁴ However, as the civilian death toll continues to climb and the humanitarian situation devolves, some observers assert that the political costs of the Saudi-led coalition's military campaign are becoming too high. According to Senator Chris Murphy in September 2016, "US support for Saudi Arabia's wars cannot be unconditional, especially when civilians are being killed and terrorist organizations are growing stronger."³⁵

International Scrutiny and U.S. Policy Debates

As the military campaign has continued, reports of civilian casualties and displacement; food, medicine, and water shortages; attacks on international shipping and U.S. military vessels; advances by AQAP forces; Islamic State attacks; and persistence by the Houthis and their pro-Saleh allies have fueled intensifying international criticism of Saudi policy. Congress has debated the provision of U.S. military assistance to Saudi Arabia in the context of the conflict, and the Senate in September considered (and ultimately rejected) a proposal that would have blocked a proposed sale of tanks to the kingdom.

In the wake of an October 2016 Saudi airstrike on a funeral hall in Sanaa that killed between 130 and 150 people, the Obama Administration announced that it was initiating a review of U.S. security assistance to Saudi Arabia. National Security Council spokesman Ned Price said,

U.S. security cooperation with Saudi Arabia is not a blank check. Even as we assist Saudi Arabia regarding the defense of their territorial integrity, we have and will continue to express our serious concerns about the conflict in Yemen and how it has been waged. In light of this and other recent incidents, we have initiated an immediate review of our already significantly reduced support to the Saudi-led Coalition and are prepared to adjust our support so as to better align with U.S. principles, values and interests, including achieving an immediate and durable end to Yemen's tragic conflict. We call upon the Saudi-led Coalition, the Yemeni government, the Houthis and the Saleh-aligned forces to commit publicly to an immediate cessation of hostilities and implement this cessation based on the April 10th terms.³⁶

Price's reference to "already significantly reduced" U.S. support for Saudi Arabia may allude to the withdrawal in June 2016 of many U.S. personnel assigned to a joint U.S.-Saudi planning cell that had been established to coordinate the provision of military and intelligence support for the campaign.³⁷ Administration officials have not publicly offered details of the precise nature and extent of current U.S. logistical and intelligence support for Saudi military operations in Yemen. On October 12, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that "this assistance that we provide is primarily logistical support. We do share some intelligence with them, but the United

³⁴ "Senate Tacitly Endorses U.S. Role in Yemen War," *Al Monitor*, September 21, 2016.

³⁵ "Senator Chris Murphy: US support for Saudi Arabia 'can't be unconditional,'" *Guardian (UK)*, September 22, 2016.

³⁶ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by NSC Spokesperson Ned Price on Yemen, October 8, 2016.

³⁷ Reuters, "U.S. withdraws staff from Saudi Arabia dedicated to Yemen planning," August 19, 2016.

States does not do targeting for them. The Saudis and their partners use some of the intelligence that we have collected, but they make their own targeting decisions.”³⁸

Leahy Law and Saudi-led Coalition Strikes in Yemen

Section 620M of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (FAA), as amended, prohibits the furnishing of assistance authorized by the FAA and the Arms Export Control Act to any foreign security force unit where there is credible information that the unit has committed a gross violation of human rights. The State Department and U.S. embassies overseas implement Leahy vetting to determine which foreign security individuals and units are eligible to receive U.S. assistance or training. In October 2016, Senator Patrick Leahy remarked that “The humanitarian crisis in Yemen has received too little attention, and it directly, or indirectly, implicates us.... The reports of civilian casualties from Saudi air attacks in densely populated areas compel us to ask if these operations, supported by the United States, violate [that law].”³⁹

On October 31, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Samantha Power said in a U.N. Security Council meeting on Yemen that “the United States calls on the parties to recommit immediately to the cessation of hostilities, which means halting all military actions on the ground, in the air, and at sea. That includes an end to shelling and an end to airstrikes.”⁴⁰ Ambassador Power condemned Saudi-led coalition strikes on civilian targets and Yemeni infrastructure and condemned cross border attacks on Saudi Arabia by its adversaries in Yemen, including recent ballistic missile attacks.

Select United Nations Reporting

In April 2016, the “Saudi Arabia-led coalition” was listed alongside other parties to the conflict in Yemen in the annex of the annual report of United Nations Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict for attacks that resulted in the killing and maiming attacks of children in Yemen.⁴¹ Specifically, the report states that the Saudi Arabia-led coalition was listed “for killing and maiming and attacks on schools and hospitals” in attacks verified by the United Nations to have resulted in the deaths of 510 children and the injury of 667 others. In July, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon alleged that Saudi Arabia had threatened to reduce its funding for U.N. programs if the coalition was not removed from the report annex, an allegation that Saudi leaders denied.⁴² In August, the Secretary General said, “After very careful consideration, the Saudi Arabia-led coalition was removed from the annexes, pending the conclusions of a review. ...I have since received information on measures taken by the coalition to prevent and end grave violations against children. We will continue our engagement to ensure that concrete measures to protect children are implemented. But I want to repeat: the content of the report stands.”⁴³ In August 2016, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights submitted an updated report on human rights conditions in Yemen to the U.N. Human Rights Council, attributing a range of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law to both the Saudi-led coalition and its adversaries in Yemen.⁴⁴

³⁸ White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest, Press Briefing, October 12, 2016.

³⁹ “U.S. Support for Saudi Strikes in Yemen Raises War Crime Concerns,” *Foreign Policy.com*, October 15, 2016.

⁴⁰ Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on Yemen by U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Samantha Power, New York City, October 31, 2016.

⁴¹ U.N. Document A/70/836-S/2016/360, Children and Armed Conflict: Report of the Secretary-General, April 20, 2016.

⁴² Somini Sengupta, “United Nations Chief Exposes Limits to His Authority by Citing Saudi Threat,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2016.

⁴³ Secretary-General’s remarks to Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict, August 2, 2016.

⁴⁴ U.N. Document A/HRC/33/38, Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, August 4, 2016

Yemen: Recent Attacks Against U.S. Naval Vessels in the Red Sea

In recent weeks, the United States has faced a number of challenges regarding the Yemen war. In October 2016, Houthi-Saleh forces reportedly launched anti-ship missiles at U.S. Navy vessels on patrol off the coast of Yemen. While no U.S. warship was damaged, a similar attack earlier in October damaged a U.S. transport ship leased by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The attacks against the U.S. ships marked the first time U.S. forces had come under direct fire in the near 20-month war.

The attacks may have been triggered by Saudi-led coalition airstrikes on October 8 that struck a funeral gathering of Houthi leaders in the capital Sana'a. Those strikes, which the coalition later described as having been mistakenly authorized, killed many civilians and prominent Houthi political and military leaders. Included among the casualties was the mayor of Sana'a, two Yemeni members of the U.N. cease-fire monitoring team, and several Houthi-Saleh high-ranking officers.

Such events in Yemen have elicited a multi-pronged Administration response. On the military front, the Administration responded to the attacks against U.S. naval vessels by firing cruise missiles against Houthi-Saleh radar installations. The Administration claims that those attacks were conducted in self-defense and has indicated that it does not want to deepen its direct involvement in the conflict. The October 8 Saudi airstrikes drew immediate condemnation and prompted the Administration to initiate an "immediate review" of U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition's military campaign. U.S. support had already been reduced in the preceding months amid concern that the coalition's repeated targeting of civilians was a violation of international law. From a diplomatic angle, the Obama Administration accelerated its efforts to broker a ceasefire in the hopes of deescalating the situation.

The rapid progression of events in Yemen from early to mid-October has forced the Administration to deepen its involvement in the Yemen conflict by

- deploying more naval assets to the Bab al Mandab to protect international shipping;
- attempting to deescalate tensions between combatants in order to restart negotiations; and
- delaying further U.S. support to the Saudi-led coalition out of increased concern regarding civilian casualties from coalition airstrikes.

U.S. Foreign Assistance to Yemen

Since the current conflict began in March 2015, the United States has increased its humanitarian assistance to Yemen while suspending nearly all other programming. On February 11, 2015, due to the deteriorating security situation in Sana'a, the Department of State suspended embassy operations and U.S. Embassy staff was relocated out of the country.

Since March 2015, the United States continues to be the largest contributor of humanitarian aid to Yemen. Funds were provided to international aid organizations from USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), USAID's Food for Peace (FFP), and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (State/PRM).

Table 2. Yemen Humanitarian Response
(in millions of dollars)

Account	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016
IDA (USAID/OFDA)	14.974	29.574	36.987	34.858	62.029	81.576
FFP (USAID/FFP)	20.200	67.856	75.046	70.000	71.486	196.988
MRA (State/PRM)	22.500	19.738	18.885	8.900	45.300	48.950
Total	58.346 (includes .672 from OTI)	117.168	130.919	113.758	178.816	327.514

Source: Yemen, Complex Emergency—USAID Factsheets.

U.S. bilateral economic funding supports basic education, maternal health, and agricultural assistance programs. Given the breakdown of Yemen's military assistance channeled through the State and Defense Departments has been suspended. In June 2015, the Department of Defense notified Congress that it was redirecting \$45.04 million worth of military equipment (obligated in FY2012, FY2013, and FY2014) to Tunisia, Jordan, and Lebanon.

Table 3. U.S. Bilateral Assistance to Yemen: FY2014-2016
(in millions of dollars)

Account	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016
ESF	13.000	19.200 (OCO)	29.300 (OCO)
Global Health	9.000	9.000	5.000
FMF	20.0	—	—
IMET	1.109	0.127	—
INCLE	3.000	1.000	1.000 (OCO)
NADR	3.920	3.150	6.000
DoD (1206/2282)	64.000	—	—
Total	114.029	32.477	41.300

Source: USAID Country Narrative

Author Contact Information

Jeremy M. Sharp
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs
jsharp@crs.loc.gov, 7-8687