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GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES

Snakes and Ladders: The Regional and International Dimensions of Yemen's Civil War

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The Global Transitions Series looks at fragmentations in the global order and how these impact peace and transition settlements. It explores why and how different third-party actors – state, intergovernmental, and non-governmental – intervene in conflicts, and how they see themselves contributing to reduction of conflict and risks of conflict relapse. The series critically assesses the growth and diversification of global and regional responses to contemporary conflicts. It also asks how local actors are navigating this multiplicity of mediators and peacebuilders and how this is shaping conflict outcomes and post-conflict governance.

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This report seeks to explain how trends towards fragmentation and complexity have made the current Yemeni war harder to end than past conflicts. The report describes the current war in detail and examines diplomatic efforts to end it. The author concludes that the war will be extremely difficult to end without a political process that explicitly acknowledges and deals with the multidimensional nature of the conflict.

Key Findings

- Yemen's civil war pits the group commonly known as the Houthis – who call themselves Ansar Allah or "Partisans of God" – against a loose coalition of rival forces. These include the remnant of Yemen's pre-war military and security forces, key tribal and political groupings, and southern secessionists who operate under the banner of the Presidential Leadership Council, and is Yemen's internationally recognised government.

- Multiple external powers back the warring parties. Notably, Iran has transferred and facilitated the Houthis' launching of long-range ballistic missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and even the Red Sea, resulting in the mutually hurting stalemate that emerged in early 2022. Saudi Arabia's early military intervention was intended to prevent the Houthis – and by extension Iran – from gaining a permanent foothold along the Kingdom's southern border. But Riyadh has struggled to unify the anti-Houthi war effort. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Riyadh's main ally at the beginning of the war, supports forces who have repeatedly clashed with key Saudi allies.

- Complex shifts in regional and global politics have accompanied changes in the conflict's nature across several distinct phases, particularly the cross-border war that has seen the Houthis and Saudis exchange missile and drone attacks for airstrikes.

- World powers also play a role in the conflict, providing intelligence and arms to the Saudi-led coalition. This support, however, has become more limited as political discourse in Europe and North America has turned against the war and Saudi Arabia. Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all sought to distance themselves from the physical conflict while maintaining a degree of influence over its trajectory and outcome, and over formal and other mediation initiatives.

- The Houthis' deployment of missiles, drones, and water-based explosives in cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and on Red Sea shipping, has threatened global economic security. Since October 2023, the Houthis have targeted Israel and Israel-linked maritime traffic passing through the Red Sea with missile and drone attacks and have repeatedly sought to interdict ships passing through Yemeni waters. At the time of writing, Houthis have captured one cargo vessel, the Galaxy Leader, and are holding it off the Red Sea port of Hodeida.

- At the time of writing, the main negotiation track is a bilateral series of talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. The UN is the default mediator in Yemen but has a weak hand. Like his predecessors, the current UN envoy, Sweden's Hans Grundberg, has little leverage with any of the Yemeni or regional parties to the conflict. He now faces the prospect of being left to implement a bilateral agreement between the Houthis and Saudis that does not account for the multidimensional nature of Yemen's conflict. The conflict's complexities are not matched by the current diplomatic efforts to end it.

Recommendations

- Grundberg may soon experience a moment of opportunity. If the Saudis and Houthis do agree to a ceasefire, the agreement should trigger a return to UN-led mediation. While the Houthis may not intend to engage in the process, Grundberg could – and should – initiate a more ambitious negotiation process than Riyadh or the Houthis' de facto authorities have envisioned.

- Steps the UN can take include the formation of an international working group including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, particularly Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Iran; the permanent members of the UN Security Council; the United Kingdom and the European Union.

- In parallel, the UN envoy should outline the rationale and structure for a more inclusive political process that goes beyond the Houthis and the PLC. This could include the component parts of the leadership council, Yemeni political parties, women's, youth and civil society representatives, and regional leaders.

- The structure, sequencing and timing of a political process will also need to respond to the multidimensional nature of Yemen's conflict. Rushing towards unity government – the standard approach to 'post-conflict' governance – could be a mistake, as it may simply exacerbate tensions and lead to a zero-sum competition, as the previous transition did.

- One potential approach is to build interim governance around governorates first, and national institutions second. The conflict has almost, but not entirely, divided Yemen along existing governorate lines. Military and security forces, moreover, are increasingly drawn from localities, and often correspond to a particular external patron. Providing governorate-level representation in interim governance structures – for example a presidential council, formed of key armed and political factions, and governors – might help assuage Yemeni and regional fears over marginalisation, and foster at least a degree of internal cooperation.

- The long-term challenge will be creating a system of conflict resolution, rather than conflict management. In Libya and Syria, conflict has been de-escalated and partially frozen, but not resolved via political process.

Introduction: Outside in – Yemen's War in International Context

In April 2023 Mohammed al-Jaber, Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Yemen, arrived in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, for face-to-face talks with leading officials of the group most Yemenis call the Houthis, but which calls itself Ansarallah, or Partisans of God (*Asharq al-Awsat*, 2023). The trip was the first to the capital by a Saudi official since 2015, when Riyadh hastily evacuated its embassy in Sanaa. It was, therefore, anticipated by regional analysts with qualified optimism (Magdy, 2023). Tellingly, the negotiations – widely described as "peace talks" – were taking place between the Houthis and the Saudis, rather than the Houthis and Yemen's internationally recognised government. Yemen's war, it appeared, would not be ended via Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue, but an accommodation between a nonstate armed group and a regional power.

In March 2015, Riyadh had intervened to prevent the Iran-aligned Houthis from taking full control of Yemen. Alongside loyalists of Yemen's former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Houthis had seized the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, the previous September. Fearful of a Hezbollah-like entity on the Kingdom's border – an armed, militant proxy of Iran – the Saudis unleashed a blistering campaign of aerial bombardment against the Houthis and their allies (Hiltermann & Alley, 2017). Officials in Riyadh predicted a short conflict, perhaps weeks long. Riyadh sought, and obtained, a UN Security Council resolution, calling in effect for a complete surrender and disarmament by the Houthis (Salisbury, 2016).

But by the time al-Jaber touched down in Sanaa, the war had dragged on for eight more years. Over time, it had been transformed into a complex, multiparty, regionalised conflict. The Houthis consolidated their power in the northwest after killing their former ally, Saleh, in 2017, while the loose coalition of anti-Houthi forces that control the rest of the country have fragmented down lines of those aligned with Riyadh and others more closely tied to Abu Dhabi (ICG, 2022).

The war has also evolved into a cross-border conflict. Since 2016, the Houthis have targeted Saudi Arabia and the UAE with an increasingly audacious series of cross-border missile and drone attacks, and less frequent attacks on maritime trade in the Red Sea, signalling their ability to disrupt a major global trade chokepoint (Williams & Shaikh, 2020). Saudi Arabia, which had spent the better part of a decade backing anti-Houthi forces on the ground with money, materiel and air support, had had enough.

The Kingdom was in the midst of a strategic pivot away from the confrontational posture it adopted in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, and towards regional accommodations with both Israel and Iran, as part of efforts to diversify and reform its economy under the banner of Vision 2030. Having taken a maximalist stance on the conflict in its early years, Riyadh now sought a solution that would leave the Houthis in a significant position of power.

Less than a day into negotiations, pro-Houthi social media channels erupted in indignation. During the talks, al-Jaber had proposed that a new ceasefire agreement would affirm Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen not as a party to the conflict, but as a mediator seeking to end it. How, Houthi officials and supporters asked, could a country bomb another and support one faction in its war, while simultaneously performing the role of honest broker trying to end the war and build peace? (*Reuters,* 2022). The Saudis backtracked, and the negotiations were unsuccessful.

Al-Jaber's attempt to recast Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen's war was not as farfetched as it initially appeared. Many powerful countries have sought to end conflicts they were a party to from the position of mediator rather than belligerent. In recent years, regional and international powers have played important roles in brokering ceasefires and other diplomatic initiatives for conflicts in which they were direct participants, and have similarly sought to transform themselves from co-belligerents into peacemakers. Between 2017 and January 2023, for example, key foreign powers involved in the Syrian civil war – Iran, Russia, and Turkey – held around 20 meetings in Astana, Kazakhstan, that produced a series of de-escalation agreements (Abbas Mohammad, 2023). In Libya, meetings in Berlin in 2020 and 2021, again attended by outside powers with a direct hand in the conflict, like Egypt, Russia and Turkey, produced a fragile ceasefire that has largely held since (Federal Foreign Office of Germany, 2021).

There is also precedent for similar mediation in Yemen's recent past. An eight-year civil war in what was then north Yemen only ended in 1970 when Riyadh, which had backed a monarchist faction in the conflict, agreed to terms with the Republicans who controlled Sanaa, and effectively forced a settlement on the Monarchist camp (Halliday, 1985). The deal reflected a marriage of internal and regional reconciliation. It came after Egypt, which had supported the Republican cause, sought détente with Riyadh after a crushing defeat in its 1967 war with Israel. The accord also reflected a degree of local compromise: elites from the Royalist camp were integrated into new ruling authorities in Sanaa *(ibid).*

Half a century later, regional circumstances echoed the 1970 settlement. A month before al-Jaber travelled to Sanaa, the Chinese government announced an accord between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic ties (Baker, 2023). Regional media outlets claimed the agreement included a tacit understanding on de-escalation in Yemen. The US, meanwhile, had been pressuring Saudi officials to end the war for several years (*Amwaj Media*, 2023); relations between the two becoming increasingly strained since the latter's intervention and military conduct in the Yemen War. Many Yemenis speculated that the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), formed under Saudi auspices in April 2022 to replace President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi as Yemen's executive authority, was designed to eventually include the Houthis as part of a new elite pact.

2023, however, is not 1970, and the Saudi approach to the conflict in Yemen does not fully engage with its intricacies. Yemen has experienced six major wars since 1962, each fought by a different configuration of domestic and international actors. These conflicts were also fought in a shifting regional and international context, with the first three conflicts taking place during the Cold War era, and two during the so-called 'unipolar' era of global US hegemony. The present war is taking place during a period of transition, where the US remains the most powerful economic, military, and political force on the geopolitical stage, but is increasingly challenged both by rivals like China and Russia, and the behaviour of 'Middle Powers' like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Key elements of the earlier Libyan and Syrian processes – both of which have faltered – are also missing. Both the Astana and Berlin processes were held under UN auspices. In Yemen, Riyadh has sought to first negotiate a bilateral agreement with the Houthis, before ceding it to the UN envoy, Hans Grundberg (*ICG*, 2022a). The Libyan and Syrian processes, moreover, included all of the key regional and international actors involved in their conflicts. By contrast, neither Iran nor the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been directly included in the Yemeni process; nor have other influential regional players like Egypt, Qatar or Turkey, although Oman facilitated the Saudi-Houthi talks. Finally, representatives of key local factions had some input to the Libyan and Syrian dialogues. The PLC and other anti-Houthi groups have been almost entirely excluded from Saudi-Houthi negotiations. Instead, the current process in Yemen more closely resembles past, failed initiatives that have seen the Saudis force local parties into agreements they do not intend to implement, with predictable consequences.

The UN is the default mediator in Yemen, but has limited effective power and has not deviated from a pro forma approach to conflict resolution. Like his predecessors, the current UN envoy, Sweden's Hans Grundberg, has little leverage with any of the Yemeni or regional parties to the conflict. He has thus far followed the previously unsuccessful formula of negotiating a ceasefire, to be followed by peace talks, between the Houthis and successive internationally recognised Yemeni governments. He now faces the prospect of being left to implement a bilateral agreement between the Houthis and Saudis that does not account for the multidimensional nature of Yemen's conflict.

Another barrier to a mediated end to the conflict is Yemen's deepening entanglement in broader regional rivalries. Developments during the drafting of this report underscore the growing importance of broader regional dynamics to the conflict. In October 2023 Israel initiated an intensive campaign of aerial bombardment and a ground invasion of the Gaza strip after militants affiliated with Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that has controlled Gaza for more than 15 years, launched its own attack on Israel, killing more than 1,200 people in less than 24 hours. In response to the escalating conflict the Houthis, who present themselves as a leading player in the Axis of Resistance, a network of anti-Western and -Israeli armed groups backed by Iran, launched missile and drone strikes on southern Israel and began to harass military and commercial vessels in the Red Sea. At the time of writing, Riyadh was continuing negotiations over an end to the war, while the US was weighing deterrent policies to halt Houthi attacks, including military strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen. Analysts were unsure whether the Houthis were acting alone, or as part of a broader Iranian strategy.

Yemen's former President Ali Abdullah Saleh once compared governing Yemen to "dancing on the heads of snakes". Current efforts to mediate an end to the war are more akin to a giant game of snakes and ladders, where the snakes outnumber the ladders by a factor of ten to one.

A Prelude to a Conflict

Yemen's war was preceded by a narrowly averted civil war, and a globally significant – and innovative – international effort at peace. In 2011, a combination of street protests inspired by pro-democracy and anti-regime movements across the region, and a schism within the Saleh regime precipitated by violent repression of these protests, pushed Yemen to the brink of civil war. The local al-Qaeda franchise, the Houthis, and southern separatists each sought to capitalise on the ensuing power vacuum by seizing control of territory while the country, already the Arab world's poorest, spiralled into a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Fearing a complete collapse and an ungoverned space in which al-Qaeda would have free rein, outside powers sought to de-escalate the fighting from the outset. In April 2011, then-United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon assigned a new special representative, the Moroccan-British diplomat Jamal Benomar, to mediate an end to the conflict. In parallel, regional officials from the Gulf Cooperation Council and its member states initiated their own mediation efforts. These efforts were prompted by "Friday of Dignity" attacks by security services on protestors in Sanaa and the subsequent defection of key regime insiders including senior tribal and military leaders in March 2011.

International efforts to broker a deal took much of the year. In April 2011, Saleh was reported to have agreed to a GCC-brokered deal to step down in exchange for amnesty before performing an abrupt about-face. In July 2011, amidst an escalation in fighting, President Saleh was almost killed when a bomb was detonated at the Presidential Mosque in Sanaa. He was flown to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment and, in his absence, fighting intensified. In September 2011 Saleh returned to Yemen, apparently in defiance of Saudi and US officials' wishes. It was only when Saleh returned to Riyadh in November 2011 that a deal was brokered with opposition leaders. Under this version of the GCC Initiative, Saleh agreed to step down, with his deputy Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi taking the reins as the country's interim leader. In parallel to the GCC's diplomatic efforts to broker the power-sharing deal, Benomar, the UN envoy, had negotiated a more detailed "implementation mechanism" to accompany the GCC Agreement among Yemeni elites, with farther-reaching and more transformative aims.

Outside powers had several options available to them during the crisis of 2011. First, regional and international powers largely chose not to take sides in the elite schism and remained unified in their position on Yemen. Saudi Arabia, which had continued to provide financial support both to the Yemeni state and select tribal leaders, reportedly halted both streams of funding in 2011. The US sought to maintain counterterror cooperation, which was mainly routed via security and military institutions under the control of Saleh family members but, like many of its Western counterparts, froze most other funding and arms transfers. Saleh blamed Qatar for the uprising and accused Doha of backing his rivals, both via favourable Al Jazeera coverage and through funding for key military and tribal leaders, and ejected the country's ambassador from the country. Qatar, however, backed the GCC Initiative. Moreover, after the mosque bombing, the threat of sanctions gained new potency. With Saleh need of continued medical treatment and facing the threat of asset freezes and travel bans, outside powers found that sanctions provided them with meaningful leverage over the famously slippery Yemeni leader.

The UN, backed by outside powers, seized the opportunity for transformative change in Yemen. The GCC Initiative and the UN-drafted implementation mechanism sought to achieve several key aims. The first was stabilisation of the political, security and economic situation. Hadi was to stand for election as president in a one-man poll that was broadly seen as a referendum on ending Saleh's rule. He was then tasked with overseeing an interim period of around two years, during which he was to reorganise the military, stabilise the economy and oversee the transition to democracy envisioned in Benomar's implementation mechanism. Second was power sharing between members of Saleh's ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of opposition parliamentary parties led by Islah, a political Islamist party, whose component parts had all supported the protest movement. And third was the transitional process itself, whose centrepiece was the National Dialogue Conference, a broadly inclusive series of talks aimed at producing the foundations for a new constitution.

As regional and international divisions emerged over other regional political transitions, such as those in Egypt and Tunisia, and conflicts, like the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, Yemen's transition remained a site of broad consensus. Building on the Friends of Yemen framework, ambassadors in Sanaa formed a contact group, initially labelled the G10, made up of the UN Security Council member states (China, France, Russia the UK, and the US), the GCC states minus Qatar (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), the EU delegation to Yemen and Benomar, the UN envoy, that met weekly and divided labour on assistance for the transitional process. In 2014, the last year of the transition, around 20 foreign powers played a variety of roles in the UN-overseen process.

The process was also highly inclusive. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) had 565 Yemeni participants from a broad range of backgrounds, with women accounting for almost a third of all delegates. Yet it also included the seeds of its own demise, with proceedings at the four star Movenpick Hotel overlooking Sanaa increasingly divorced from lived realities in Yemen. Factional rivalries between the GPC and JMP and persistent oil infrastructure sabotage, likely sponsored by former President Saleh, caused a mounting fiscal and governance crisis. Saleh appeared to be intent on revenge against the JMP, which had removed him from power, and Hadi, his former vice president, who had proven more independent than Saleh had likely anticipated. Seeking a return to power, Saleh allied with the northern Zaydi Shia Houthi movement, with which he had fought six rounds of war between 2004 and 2010. The conflict was ultimately precipitated by the September 2014 takeover of Sanaa by this alliance, which the Houthis presented as a "revolution" against a corrupt ruling class that sought to increase fuel prices and supported US drone strikes.

Yemen at War

Yemen's war can be divided into five distinct phases. Each has been punctuated by regional and international mediation efforts, albeit with increasingly limited aims and participation. The curtailing of high-level negotiations stands in contrast to the increasingly complex interdependencies between relatively powerful armed groups in Yemen and outside powers.

Each phase of war has, meanwhile, been accompanied by shifts in regional and global politics, and by the nature of the conflict itself, particularly the cross-border war that has seen the Houthis and Saudis exchange missile and drone attacks for airstrikes. This section provides a brief overview of the armed conflict, while later sections expand on the war's regional dimensions, and related international dynamics.

2014–2016 Expansion and Regionalisation

The first phase of war, which lasted from late 2014 to the end of 2016, saw the conflict expand from a domestic power struggle to regionalised war. It was precipitated by the September 2014 takeover of Sanaa by an alliance of the Houthi movement and loyalists of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (Salisbury, 2016). In January 2015, the alliance placed Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi – the transitional president who had replaced Saleh as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) brokered deal to prevent civil war during uprisings and elite infighting in 2011 – under house arrest along with the Yemeni government. They suspended the constitution and attempted takeover of Yemen (ibid).

The attempted takeover exposed deep rooted social, political, and religious divides. The Houthis are a religious, political, and military movement from the country's northern highlands. Although they call themselves Ansar Allah, or partisans of God, they are widely known as the Houthis, for their founder, the radical Zaydi cleric Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi. Al-Houthi, who was killed by government forces in 2004, espoused an ideology that married modern political Islamist thinking, particularly around the rejection of Western influence, with traditional Zaydi doctrine that held that only sayyids, direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, could lead the umma, or Islamic community. Many Yemenis believed that the Houthis sought to reinstate the Imamate, a religious monarchy that was the ruling elite in Yemen before a republican revolution in the 1960s, and with it a sayyid-dominated caste system (Brandt, 2017).

Zaydism is a form of Shia Islam, and although it is distinct from the Twelver Shiism practiced in Iran. al-Houthi's ideology, which borrowed from the Islamic Republic, led many Yemeni and regional observers to claim that the movement was an Iranian proxy (*ICG, 2022*).

For this reason, the Houthi-Saleh alliance faced growing resistance as they entered into areas outside of the Zaydi elites' traditional spheres of control: Shafei areas in Marib and Taiz governorates, and in the formerly independent south. When the Houthi-Saleh alliance launched an offensive to seize the southern port city of Aden in March of 2015, which President Hadi had fled to a month earlier, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of an multi-state military coalition and launched a wave of airstrikes on military bases and Houthi-Saleh positions across the country (*Reuters,* 2015).

The Saudi campaign had three stated aims: ousting the Houthis from Sanaa, forcing a handover of weapons, and restoring Hadi, the country's internationally recognised leader, to power. But there was a broader agenda at play. The Saudis viewed the Houthis as a proxy for Iran, and feared, according to Saudi officials, the formation of a Hezbollah-like entity on the Kingdom's southern border (Hiltermann & Alley, 2017). Many regional and international observers saw the Yemen intervention as a sign of new Saudi assertiveness under King Salman. An additional, connected aim was to destroy Yemen's air force and the stockpiles of missiles Yemen had accumulated, which Riyadh had long seen as a threat to its national security, and which had largely fallen under the control of the Houthi-Saleh alliance.

The intervention was hindered from the start by a lack of cohesion among anti-Houthi forces. Who was fighting who was a matter of some confusion during the war's early days. Hadi, who fled Aden for Riyadh in March 2015, claimed that the conflict was between the "national army" and the Houthis (Salisbury, 2016). The Houthis in turn claimed that their forces were the national army, and that their adversaries were Yemeni and foreign mercenaries, Gulf soldiers, and radical Sunni fighters from al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other jihadist groups. In reality, two broad coalitions of Yemeni forces were pitted against each other. On one side was an alliance of the Houthis' main fighting force, known as the Popular Committees, alongside a large segment of the pre-war military largely made up of Saleh and Houthi loyalists, tribal fighters, and others in their camp.

On the other side was a more disparate collection of military and security forces who had not joined the Houthi-Saleh side, tribal fighters, and local resistance groups who had either formed spontaneously or adapted pre-war social and political networks to organise a defence of their areas (Baron, 2016). From the start, rivalries were clearly evident between military and political allies of President Hadi and groups marginalised from the pre-war political centre. Tensions between President Hadi's allies from Islah and the southern secessionists who played an important role in fending off Houthi advances in Aden and neighbouring areas, were particularly notable (Salisbury, 2018).

In its first year, the war was fought to a stalemate. As the war stagnated, the UN was able to organise meaningful face-to-face peace talks for the first time. After failed attempts in Switzerland and Sweden in 2015, the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the Hadi government agreed to meet in Kuwait (Ghobari, 2016). After the collapse of these talks and a last-ditch US mediation effort, the parties returned to war with one another, and within their own ranks (*ICG*, 2019).

2016–2018: Internal Fragmentation, External Friction

With the collapse of peace talks, the parties once again sought to gain the upper hand, both militarily and economically, but were stymied by internal fragmentation. Over the course of 2017, the two rival alliances turned inwards, reflecting both internal divisions and external meddling. In February 2017, UAE-aligned southern secessionist forces fought rival Hadi loyalist military units for control of Aden airport. Three months later, in May 2017, the pro-secession, UAE-backed governor of Aden, Aydrous al-Zubaidi, announced the formation of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a self-styled government-in-waiting for an independent south. Hadi responded by removing Zubaidi and other officials who had joined the STC from office. The following January, clashes broke out again in Aden, between STC-aligned, UAE-backed military and security forces including the powerful Security Belts, and Hadi loyalists. Only Saudi intervention prevented the fighting from intensifying (Salisbury, 2018).

These skirmishes were evidence of a growing divide between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. While other countries had joined the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, the UAE was the Kingdom's most active partner. It sent special forces, armoured vehicles, and tanks into Aden during battles for the city in mid-2015 and helped organise the push to liberate the city from the Houthis (Knights, 2023). Yet by the end of 2016, the UAE had become frustrated with the Saudis' main Yemeni allies. They perceived President Hadi to be a weak leader who was over reliant on affiliates of Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, which UAE officials reviled for its purported connections to the Muslim Brotherhood (Johnsen, 2022).

In the North, tensions between the Houthis and Saleh became unsustainable. The alliance was always one of convenience between two camps that had spent much of the first decade of the new Millennium fighting one another. Each party appeared to believe they would ultimately be able to outmanoeuvre the other and take power. By early 2017, ever-present friction over governance and military arrangements, present since the takeover of Sanaa in 2014, had reached a high simmer. In April 2017, Houthi forces shot and killed a close Saleh ally, Colonel Khaled al-Radhi, after a dispute on the streets of Sanaa involving Saleh's son, Salah (Al Qalisi, 2017). In August of 2017, the Houthis and Saleh's GPC held duelling rallies on the streets of Sanaa (*Al Jazeera*, 2017). The Houthis suspected Saleh of seeking to break from the alliance by negotiating a new settlement with Saudi Arabia or the UAE. After clashes in November of 2017, Saleh called for his supporters to "turn a new page" with the coalition, and to take up arms against the Houthis. The Houthis killed Saleh and quickly consolidated their control over the country (Hubbard, 2017).

2018: The Hodeida Campaign

Saleh's death was a catalyst for an escalation of the national conflict. In the wake of the internal turmoil, anti-Houthi forces in Shebwa, Marib and al-Jawf governorates, which adjoin the Sanaa governorate, launched offensives to retake territory. The UAE-aligned forces who had taken Mokha in early 2017 meanwhile announced an offensive to take the Red Sea port of Hodeida *(ICG*, 2018). Yemeni forces fighting on the ground were closely supported by UAE special forces and fighter jets, who helped clear the way along the flat coastal terrain with precision-guided artillery and air strikes (ibid). By June 2018, these forces had come within ten kilometres of Hodeida city, and seized the southern half of the city's main airport *(ibid)*.

Until this point, the coalition had enjoyed tepid international support. By 2018 however, mounting criticism over the human cost of coalition airstrikes, including allegations of war crimes, and deepening concern over the humanitarian toll of the war led to the UN declaring Yemen the world's biggest humanitarian crisis (*UN News,* 2018). As international media attention turned to the Hodeida campaign, Western governments came under pressure to prevent a battle for the port city, amid warnings that the loss of a major trade conduit could cause famine in some parts of Yemen (*ICG,* 2018). After Saudi operatives killed the journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a citizen of the Kingdom, at its consulate in Istanbul, criticisms of Saudi Arabia deepened in the West, including among political leaders angered by the Kingdom's initial denial of the killing and increasingly reckless behaviour (Kirkpatrick, 2018).

This confluence of factors ultimately led to UN intervention to prevent a battle for Hodeida. During December 2018 talks in Sweden, UN envoy Martin Griffiths brokered a deal between the Houthis and the Hadi government to demilitarise Hodeida. The deal was largely the result of US pressure, which in turn was driven by anger in Washington related to the Kashoggi murder (*ICG,* 2019).

2019–2020 Deepening Regionalisation

In 2019, internal schisms, and regional and international political shifts once again transformed the balance of power. As the UN struggled to implement the Stockholm Agreement, tensions again rose in Yemen's south. In July 2019, the UAE announced a "drawdown" of its forces in Yemen and an end to combat operations in the country (El Yakoobi, 2019). In August 2019, street fighting in Aden between the two factions expanded into neighbouring governorates. As the fighting ended, the STC were in control of Aden and a missile strike from a UAE fighter jet had killed a number of pro-Hadi forces (*ICG,* 2019a). Hadi's government publicly attacked the UAE, which had already announced its intention to draw down its presence in Yemen (*Al Jazeera,* 2019). Emirati officials were frustrated in equal measure by the Saudis' lack of strategy, the Hadi government's fecklessness and support for Islah, and by international censure and intervention to prevent its Hodeida offensive.

The STC takeover of Aden, the UAE's partial withdrawal, and the implicit split between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi all served to change perceptions of what was possible in the conflict. Combined with the frozen conflict on the Red Sea coast, the impasse between the two rival anti-Houthi groups made planning for a renewed military push all but impossible.

In 2019, regional competition further threatened to engulf Yemen. During the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" against Iran, formed of sanctions and targeted strikes against Iranian and Iranian-backed military operatives, Tehran and the 'Axis of Resistance' forces had initiated their own campaign. This included a series of targeted attacks on ships off the coast of Fujairah in May 2019, a complex drone and missile attack on Saudi oil and gas facilities in August, and missile strikes against US bases in December (Pamuk, 2019). Despite the Houthis claiming responsibility for the August attacks on the Kingdom, Saudi and US investigations indicated that they had originated from Iran-backed militias in Iraq (ibid).

With their local allies in disarray and under threat from Iran, the Saudis sought a diplomatic way out. To prevent further fracture within the civil war, which would effectively end the military campaign against the Houthis, and to limit the risk of future Iran-backed attacks emanating from Yemen, Saudi officials sought détente with the Houthis, and to broker an agreement between the STC and the Hadi government. The intra-Yemeni agreement would provide the southern secessionists with a degree of legitimacy, a role in the government, and would initiate talks with the Houthis (Radman, 2020). In November 2019, Saudi officials brokered a deal between the government and the STC and negotiated a gradual de-escalation of the cross-border war with the Houthis. In November 2019, the International Crisis Group wrote that the Saudis faced a stark choice: bring the two negotiation tracks together, or, conflict would resume and "Saudi Arabia and Iran will both intensify their struggle for influence, and Yemen will dissolve further into a mess of warring mini-states, each with its own international backer" (Alley & Peter, 2019).

2020–2022 Marib Escalation, Temporary Truce

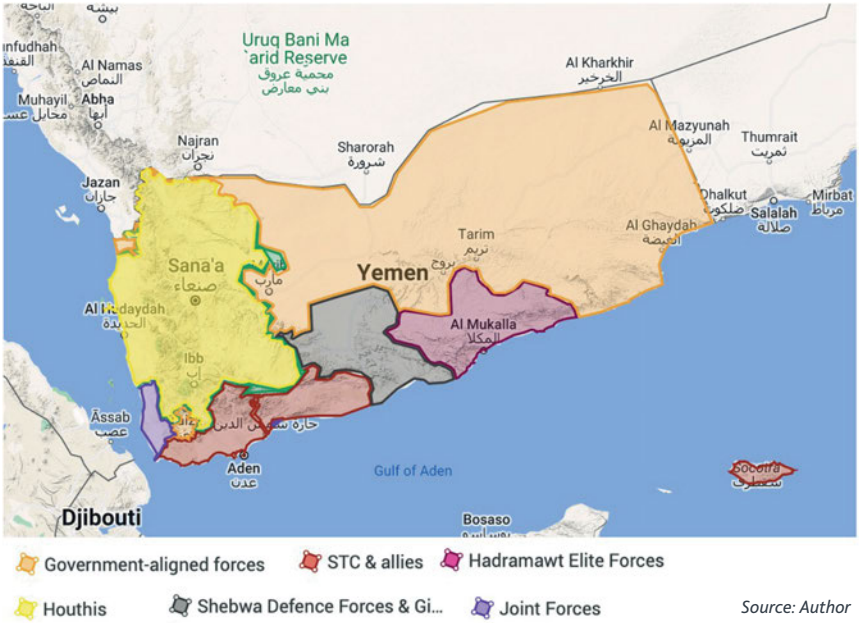
The 2019 de-escalation was short-lived. In January of 2020 the Houthis launched a major new offensive on Marib, an oil-rich province to the east of Sanaa, which represented the last major territorial prize in the country's political north. Over the next year, the Houthis made significant gains, slowly encircling Marib city, consolidating their hold over the neighbouring al-Bayda governorate, and taking territory in nearby Shebwa and Abyan (*ICG*, 2021). With the STC-government pact frozen, and UAE-Saudi tensions rising, the Houthis appeared to have an opportunity to win the war for the north of Yemen by seizing Marib and its oil wealth.

Only UAE intervention prevented a complete collapse in Marib. In January of 2022, UAE-aligned, Salafist led forces reclaimed territory in Shebwa and pushed the Houthis out of key positions in southern Marib, significantly complicating their efforts to seize the city (Almeida & Knights, 2022). The Houthis responded with missile and drone strikes on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which appeared to deter the UAE from continuing its ground offensive (*Al Jazeera*, 2022).

With the war once again effectively at a stalemate, the parties again agreed to a truce. In April 2022 UN envoy Hans Grundberg announced a truce between the Houthis and the government (SCSS, 2022). Shortly after the truce's announcement, Riyadh effectively deposed Hadi in favour of a new presidential council made up of key leaders of anti-Houthi groups and chaired by Rashad al-Alimi, a former interior minister. The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) was formed to provide the Houthis with a united political and military front, therefore solving "two interrelated problems: infighting among anti-Houthi groups (and, by extension, their Saudi and Emirati backers) and the Hadi government's lack of credibility as a negotiating partner for the rebels" (*ICG*, 2022a).

Divisions between the UAE and Saudi backed groups plagued the council, however. In August 2022 fighting broke out between rival UAE and Saudi-aligned factions in Shebwa governorate. The Giants Brigade, the force that had ousted the Houthis from the governorate earlier in the year, played a key role in securing Shebwa for UAE-aligned forces. In subsequent months, tensions also rose between UAE and Saudi-aligned forces and political groups over control of Hadramawt governorate, to Shebwa's east. The nationwide truce has largely held, meanwhile, due to ongoing talks between the Houthis and Saudis.

Map 1: Yemen Territorial Divisions, December 2023



Source: Author

Gaza Coda: Deeper Conflict Regionalisation

As this paper was drafted, a new regional dimension to the conflict emerged. In response to the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel, Tel Aviv launched a major military campaign on the Gaza strip. The Houthis, whose ideology explicitly links their cause to that of Palestine, and is broadly antisemitic, responded by launching a series of drone and missile strikes on southern Israel. Later, the Houthis attacked and interdicted ships they claimed were linked to Israel, and US military vessels, in the Red Sea, resulting in the re-routing of international shipping away from the waterway. They vowed to continue their attacks until Israel stopped the war. In November 2023, the US began to consider deterrent policy options, including military strikes on the Houthis.

Nodes of External Influence

As the war in Yemen has progressed, a growing number of international actors have come to play a role, each pursing its own agenda. Most notably, Iranian influence has grown over the course of the war, while Saudi Arabia has increasingly sought to pull back from the conflict without ceding strategic ground to Tehran.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has long seen Yemen, with which it shares a long border and oversees important Red Sea shipping lanes, as a bothersome but integral part of its national security. It intervened in the war in 2015 because it worried that Iran was trying to create a Hezbollah-like entity which it could use to threaten the Kingdom. Under the new leadership of King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz al-Saud and his son Mohammed, then defence minister and now Crown Prince, Riyadh also sought to assert itself against Iran at a broader regional level.

The Saudi position on the conflict has evolved over time. At its outset, Riyadh sought the Houthis' complete military defeat, surrender, a handover of arms and territory, and the restoration of a friendly regime in Sanaa. Gradually, however, its position has softened. In 2016, Saudi officials offered the Houthis a position in a new transitional government, and since 2019 there has been a growing acceptance in Riyadh that the Houthis will be a significant player in Yemeni politics for the foreseeable future, and that it will be better served by finding a compromise agreement with the group. This reflects Saudi weariness with its fractious internal allies, and a broader shift in focus from regional assertion to a more diplomatic approach that foregrounds the country's ambitious development plan, Vision 2030. The 2023 détente with Iran is the most visible element of this change.

Acknowledging these shifts, anti-Houthi Yemenis have come to describe Riyadh's overall stance on the conflict and Yemen's political future to be increasingly ambiguous. Since 2020, Saudi officials have made a series of concessions to the Houthis that previously were considered red lines. These include allowing a growing number of ships to enter Houthi-controlled Hodeida, permitting and even facilitating international flights to and from Sanaa international airport and, as of 2023, countenancing paying government salaries including for security and military forces, in Houthi-controlled areas.

Since the formation of the PLC, a body the Saudis effectively handpicked, government officials say that coordination between Riyadh and its Yemeni allies has become more limited. Along with its efforts to adopt the role of mediator, these developments have led to speculation that, having lost the war, the Saudis are willing to build ties with the Houthis on the basis that they will be the major power in Yemen for years to come; Saudi officials deny such claims.

Iran

While the Houthis and Tehran deny that the former is a proxy for the latter, ties between the two have become deeper, more self-evident, and more widely acknowledged, over the course of the war. Houthi officials describe their movement as an integral part of the Axis of Resistance, with which it is ideologically aligned (*ICG*, 2022). Iranian officials publicly state that they back the Houthis politically but not materially. Evidently, however, a key dimension of the Houthi war effort has been provided by Tehran (ibid). In the war's early years, Houthi missile strikes on targets inside Yemen's borders largely relied upon stockpiles of ageing SCUDs built up by the Saleh regime and the PDRY before the war (Williams & Shaikh, 2020). But since 2017, the Houthis have used – and prominently displayed – small arms, drones, water-borne explosives and missiles of Iranian provenance. They claim to have indigenous workshops that build missiles capable of traveling 1,300 kilometres, but these missiles are entirely of Iranian design (ibid). The Houthis have also exchanged ambassadors with Iran, providing the group's regime in Sanaa with implicit recognition as a state actor. In-depth analyses of the inner workings of the Houthis' military, intelligence, and security forces further demonstrate the increasing footprint of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' external al-Quds force, and its allies like Hezbollah and Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces (Coombs, al-Garbani & Knights, 2022).

While many regional observers like to draw parallels between the Houthis and Hezbollah, there are some differences between the two. Hezbollah is a group almost entirely of Iran's creation. The Houthis are a Yemeni group that, while inspired in part by Iran and Hezbollah, draw heavily from traditional Zaydi thinking. Iran did not provide significant support to the Houthis until around 2011, and the Houthis' seizure of Sanaa in 2014 was more the result of their alliance with Saleh, than Iranian assistance (Carboni, 2018).

Nonetheless, what was initially a low-risk strategy appears to have worked well for Tehran. The alliance now represents a valuable strategic asset for the Islamic Republic's policy of "forward defence", the gradual expansion of Iran's influence via a Middle East-wide network of allies and surrogates to prevent direct conflict with regional or international rivals like the US within Iran's borders (Vatanka, 2021). With their upgraded military capabilities, the Houthis can threaten the Gulf states, Israel, and the Red Sea. Given Iran's role in their rise and the Houthis' ideological overlap with Iran's foreign policy, the two are likely to become increasingly interdependent in the foreseeable future.

The Houthis' value to Iran and the Axis of Resistance became evident after October 2023. The Houthis have been able to threaten Israel from a relatively defensible position – Yemen is much harder for Israel to attack than southern Lebanon, the base for Hezbollah – and has amplified the challenge of an Israeli or US response to a multi-fronted Axis of Resistance pressure campaign to end the Gaza war.

The UAE

Saudi-UAE relations have also played a fundamental role in the conflict's trajectory. The UAE joined the conflict in 2015 in the hope of deepening ties with Riyadh under the new governance of Mohammed bin Salman. However, divergent strategies and regional interests, and souring relations between the two Gulf states, drove a wedge between the anti-Houthi bloc of forces in Yemen. From the start of the conflict, Riyadh's closest partners in Yemen were tribal, military, and political leaders with close ties to Islah. The UAE reviles Islah for its purported ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and from the outset of the conflict backed anti-Islah groups, including Salafist armed factions, the pro-secession STC, and a series of armed actors with historical ties to Saleh's ruling GPC. Many Yemeni and regional insiders further believe that the UAE sought to negotiate an end to the war with Saleh, whose son Ahmed has spent the war living in Abu Dhabi. Latterly, Western diplomats perceive UAE-backed groups as the biggest potential threat to any peace accord.

The US

The US has continued to play an important role in Yemen, albeit one complicated by its increasingly conflicted relationship with Saudi Arabia. In 2015, US officials claimed that they were provided little notice of Riyadh's plan to enter the conflict, and that they provided support reluctantly, hoping that doing so would build bridges with a Saudi leadership angered by the US role in the Iran nuclear deal. However, reported Saudi violations of international humanitarian law using US jets and missiles and a lack of confidence in Saudi war aims has led to growing tensions between the two countries. In 2016, the Saudis apparently reneged on a promise to "deliver" the Hadi government during talks led by John Kerry after Donald Trump won that year's presidential election. Shortly after, the administration paused the sale of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi officials were also disappointed by Trump. Despite the new President's appetite for arms sales, his administration came under pressure to reassess its relationship with Saudi Arabia after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. American officials pressured Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to halt their campaign and to endorse the Stockholm Agreement of 2018, which was sealed during a phone call to Mohammed bin Salman, by now Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, by then-US Defence Secretary James Mattis. Saudi officials were further angered by what they viewed as a weak response to Houthi-claimed attacks on their oil and gas infrastructure in 2019. Joe Biden then succeeded Trump in 2021, having run on a policy platform of making Saudi Arabia a "pariah" nation for its conduct in Yemen. The Biden administration has pressured Riyadh since 2021 to end its role in the Yemen war, and supported Houthi-Saudi talks.

Until 2023, Yemen had fallen on the US list of priorities in a region that Washington hoped to divest itself from. The primary US interest in Yemen from the early 2000s onwards was its function as a base for al-Qaeda affiliated groups. US interest in Yemen peaked in the early 2010s when al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), formed through a merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of the extremist organization, attempted a series of failed international bomb plots. AQAP initially appeared to have been a winner from the Yemen war, seizing the port city of Mukalla in the early days of the conflict. But the victory proved pyrrhic.

Senior AQAP leaders were killed by US drone strikes, and the UAE wrested control of the city from the group in April 2016. Since then, AQAP has been significantly weakened, and has not demonstrated continued capability to launch international attacks. At the same time, the US has shifted its overall strategic focus from counterterrorism to Great Power competition and has deprioritised the Middle East. Indeed, US efforts to broker a resolution to the conflict are in part designed to tie up loose ends in the region.

This may have changed since 7 October, however. Houthi attacks on Israel and Red Sea shipping have quickly elevated the group to the status of major strategic threat for the US. Regional and international press reports suggests that, since the Gaza war began, it is Saudi officials who have been urging restraint on the US, in the hopes that they will be able to secure a ceasefire agreement with the Houthis before Washington decides it has no choice but to take military action to deter further Houthi attacks, potentially derailing the broader ceasefire negotiation process.

Other Western Powers

Other Western powers have played key roles in the conflict. Most notably, and like the US, the UK is a major arms supplier to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, enjoying substantial military cooperation with the Kingdom and the Emirates. At the outset of the conflict, London provided Riyadh with arms, military advice, and political cover, including at the UN Security Council, where it takes responsibility for managing Security Council resolutions and other procedural items related to Yemen. Fully engaged support for Saudi intervention was dampened, however, by allegations of Saudi and Emirati war crimes using UK-provided arms, which activists argued contravened UK arms export rules. As with the US, Khashoggi's killing appears to have marked a turning point for the UK, with British officials advocating for the Stockholm Agreement (which was negotiated by a British former diplomat, then-envoy Martin Griffiths), and later quietly supporting efforts to initiate Saudi-Houthi talks. The European Union (EU) and its member states have meanwhile played an important role in supporting local and national dialogue in Yemen, with EU member states providing funding for almost all of the country's Track II initiatives.

Oman

Oman has played an integral role in both the UN-led and bilateral Saudi-Houthi processes dating back to 2015. Oman maintained ties with Houthi and GPC officials in Sanaa from the war's early days and was the only GCC state to not, even nominally, join the Saudi-led coalition. Since 2016, senior Houthi officials have been based in Muscat, drafting proposals and facilitating both UN and Saudi meetings with Houthi leaders in Sanaa. In 2015, Oman was the first country to propose a roadmap for ending the war, and in 2016 Muscat facilitated Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to negotiate a settlement in the Obama administration's last days. More recently, Omani officials have played a key role in maintaining UN envoy Grundberg's access to the Houthis in Sanaa, and in facilitating Houthi-Saudi talks from 2014 onwards.

Oman's position on Yemen is nevertheless often viewed as opaque by Yemeni and regional observers. Because Muscat did not join the coalition in 2015 and maintained ties in Sanaa, Saudi officials privately accused the Omani govern of being in league with the rebels. Indeed, Omani officials tend towards sympathy for the Houthi position, and believe that the group will ultimately prevail in the conflict. This view may be borne from a general suspicion of Saudi and Emirati motives. After the 2016 Kerry initiative collapsed and regional media outlets presented Muscat as an ally of the Houthis and Iran, Omani officials were angered by as the perceived double-dealing of their Saudi counterparts and refused for several years thereafter to play a mediating role, until Riyadh was "serious" about talks. Oman has also, reportedly, acted as an important link in smuggling networks supplying the Houthis with arms and other materiel, although Omani officials deny this.

Other State-Led Initiatives and Influence

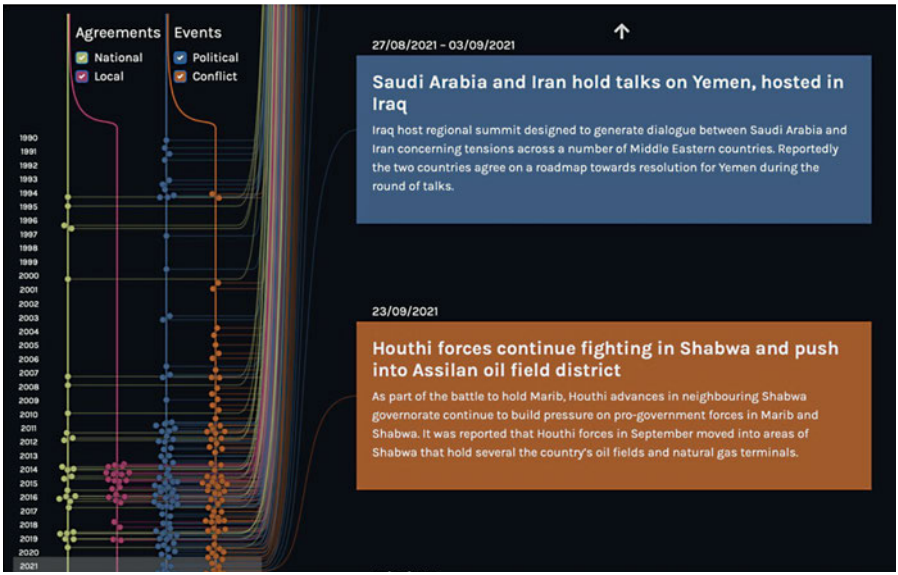
Saudi Arabia does not have a monopoly on talks with the Yemeni parties. Several other regional powers have also, reportedly, engaged closely with key conflict parties, with their relations fluctuating in line with regional politics. Qatar, for example, joined the Saudi-led coalition in 2017 and had members of its armed forces killed along the Saudi border. But the 2017 blockade of Qatar abruptly changed its posture on the war. *Al-Jazeera,* the 24-hour news channel Doha funds, adopted a harshly critical posture on the conflict, and Qatari officials allegedly began to court members of Islah who had fallen afoul of the Saudi authorities. One Islah-affiliated military leader claims that in meetings in Istanbul between 2018 and 2020, he was encouraged by Qatari and Turkish officials to meet with Iranian intermediaries to discuss a pact between Islah and the Houthis.

Since Qatar and Saudi Arabia reconciled in January 2021, Al Jazeera coverage has softened, and Qatar's influence appears to have diminished. Egyptian and Jordanian officials have also allegedly attempted to broker talks between key Yemeni factions at different stages of the conflict, mainly at a military level. Numerous Iraqi officials have meanwhile offered to mediate between the Saudis and the Houthis, citing their relations with Iran, the Houthis, and the Saudis.

Mediation Efforts

Peacemaking efforts, ranging-from the hyperlocal to traditional 'Track 1' negotiations between armed elites, have proliferated in Yemen since 2014. These include from UN-led peace talks, bilateral Saudi-Houthi talks, alongside US and Omani efforts to unstick negotiations and informal, so-called 'Track 2' dialogues designed to support the UN process (Palik & Siri, 2019). Less visibly, local initiatives to de-escalate tensions, re-open roads and organise prisoner releases have been among the most successful efforts in producing tangible results (Stark, 2021). Regional powers have also sought to broker quiet agreements between current rivals in the hope of tilting the conflict towards a resolution that benefits their particular interests. PeaceRep maintains a comprehensive list of Yemeni peace and other agreements, which can be accessed via its interactive PA-X database.

▶ Yemen Timeline



Source: PeaceRep / PA-X Database

Despite the range of initiatives, the number of parties involved in the main Track 1 talks over ending the war and the topics under discussion have narrowed during the conflict. At the time of writing, in November 2023, the Track 1 space was largely occupied by bilateral Houthi-Saudi talks over a long-term ceasefire. The focus of these negotiations was Houthi economic demands, particularly relating to ports and airports under its control, salary payments, and oil export revenues. While Riyadh has repeatedly claimed that the aim of these talks is to provide the foundations for a more inclusive UN-led process, many international and local observers are sceptical. With many Yemeni groups – including the PLC, which represents the Yemeni state – and key armed factions excluded from talks, and the UN unable to shape the specific terms of any agreement, there is a strong possibility that what is being negotiated is a deal to freeze, not end, the conflict. The PLC's structure, meanwhile, poses significant additional barriers to any negotiated process, with council members pursuing often radically different agendas. The STC, for example, demands that southern secession be a part of any future peace talks, and refuses to countenance even an interim deal that allocates 'southern' oil and gas resources to the Houthi-held 'North'.

The curtailing of high-level negotiations is contrary to the increasingly complex interdependencies between relatively powerful armed groups in Yemen and outside powers. Iran's support for the Houthis grew exponentially over the course of the conflict, and the alignment in interests between the two has calcified, while the key coalition partners in the war's early years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the groups they each back on the ground, have become increasingly divided. Egypt, Oman, Turkey, and Qatar have each played a role in fostering elite diaspora politics, and in quiet mediation efforts between key constituencies. World powers including Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States have each sought to distance themselves from the physical conflict while maintaining a degree of influence over its trajectory and outcome, and over formal and other mediation initiatives.

The UN Process

The primary, and most visible, channel for negotiations is the UN-led mediation process, which since the war's outbreak has been overseen by four different UN envoys.

▶ 2014: Prevention

In the days and months before the war, Jamal Benonar, the Moroccan diplomat who had overseen the 2011 negotiations and the transitional period, sought to find a short-term deal to prevent civil conflict. The Houthi takeover of Sanaa was technically ended by the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, a deal between the Houthis, Hadi and the signatories of the GCC Initiative. The deal provided the Houthis with agency in governance decisions in exchange for their assistance in completing the transitional process. It soon became clear, however, that they sought to completely control decision-making in Sanaa. In March 2015, as the Houthis moved on Aden, Benomar again convened talks with senior Yemeni officials who had been involved in the GCC Initiative and sought to develop a new interim governance structure. In Benomar's own account of events, there was a broad consensus that the best path forward was to remove Hadi and start afresh. These talks stalled after the Saudis entered the conflict, and Benomar stepped down in April of 2015; by this stage, his relations with Riyadh had become untenable (Salisbury, 2016).

▶ 2016 and Return to Transition

Shortly after Benomar stepped down, he was replaced by Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the former UN Resident Coordinator for Yemen. Ould Cheikh Ahmed focused on negotiating a temporary ceasefire to allow humanitarian access, and on talks over a return to the transition process. Ould Cheikh Ahmed primarily sought negotiations between Yemen's internationally recognised government and the Houthi-Saleh alliance. These talks were shaped by narrow interpretations of UN Security Council Resolution 2216, passed in April 2015 at Saudi Arabia's behest. The resolution called for an effective Houthi-Saleh surrender and withdrawal from towns and cities, a hand over of weapons, and Hadi's return to Sanaa, followed by a completion of the transition (*ICG*, 2021a).

In 2016, after several failed attempts, Ould Cheikh Ahmed oversaw the most comprehensive set of negotiations since the war began (albeit not in and of themselves part of a comprehensive process). Between April and August of 2016, the Houthi-Saleh alliance, represented by senior officials from Ansar Allah and the GPC, met with senior Hadi government figures to discuss a peace deal to end the conflict. These talks produced a draft agreement that would have included a minority Houthi position in a new unity government, the reintegration of state institutions in Sanaa, and a route to national elections (ibid).

The talks stalled, however, over crucial issues of sequencing that would haunt future mediation efforts, with the government seeking to frontload military concessions and the Houthis' political ones. Negotiations collapsed in August 2016, and, despite efforts by then-US Secretary of State John Kerry, the conflict quickly escalated.

This was likely the last point at which the UN was able to implement an agreement broadly in line with Resolution 2216. It would be several years before conflict dynamics, and both regional and international politics, would allow for meaningful negotiations to resume. The Kuwait talks were possible because the conflict had reached a point of equilibrium in late 2015 and early 2016, while international criticisms of the Saudis' war conduct were mounting, including from the US. With a presidential election approaching in November 2016, the administration of then-President Barack Obama was keen to see the conflict brought to a swift resolution. Yet the conflict was not yet ripe for resolution. The Houthi-Saleh alliance, the Yemeni government, and its backers, including Saudi Arabia, all believed that either the conflict could be resolved militarily, or that the balance of power could be tilted to their advantage.

▸ 2018 Stockholm Agreement

In 2018, a new UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, sought to reinvigorate negotiations by having the parties agree to a new framework for negotiations. His plans were disrupted, however, by the UAE-led assault on Hodeida. In December 2018, Griffiths was able to negotiate a ceasefire and demilitarisation plan for Hodeida after a series of proximity shuttle talks in northern Sweden.

The talks were only possible because of US and UK pressure on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, however, and neither the government nor the Houthis appeared willing to countenance compromise. During the talks, the parties insisted that any agreement could not be seen as setting a precedent for future negotiations. Indeed, hours after the deal was completed, both parties claimed it as a victory for their side, and that they would control the port going forward. This mismatch in expectations was a product of the constructive ambiguity employed during negotiations, particularly with respect to a clause describing security arrangement at the Hodeida port.

The agreement stipulated that "local security forces… under Yemeni law" would control Hodeida, without providing further details. The Houthis took this to mean that their forces, many of them part of pre-2014 security structures, would continue to hold the port, while the government understood – or chose to understand – that its personnel would be handed control of the port (Palik, 2021).

Creative ambiguity helped broker the deal, but also meant that it was largely unimplementable. The veteran military official and peacekeeper, the Netherlands' Patrick Cammaert, appointed to form a monitoring mission and oversee the redeployment of forces, later described the task of implementing the Hodeida Agreement's security provisions as being almost impossible. UN Mission to Support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA) personnel were prevented from entering Yemen, shot at, and largely obstructed from doing their work (ibid). A UN-facilitated mechanism to store income from Hodeida port and use it to pay salaries faced similar issues. By early 2020, the Hodeida Agreement remained largely unimplemented and "the monitoring mission had become dysfunctional" (ibid). The Stockholm Agreement has also become a major point of contention for anti-Houthi Yemenis, who blame the UN, Western powers and experts for halting the military campaign, which they believe was the last opportunity to weaken the Houthis sufficiently to force them into negotiations over a genuine compromise deal over Yemen's future. Mistrust of the UN has permeated subsequent negotiations as a result.

▸ 2019–2021 The Joint Declaration and the Four-Point Plan

After the Sweden talks, Griffiths again refocused his efforts on developing a foundational agreement to bring the parties to the table. As part of this effort, Griffiths became increasingly interested in finding ways to bring the Saudis and Houthis together and broker a common understanding between the two, limiting the role of the government. The Houthi-Saudi talks of late 2019 appeared to be a pathway to such a precursor agreement, but in January 2020 fighting broke out in oil-rich Marib, with the Houthis launching a sustained and clearly pre-planned offensive on the area. The Saudis were only able to prevent a Houthi takeover by re-launching an aerial campaign in Yemen.

In early 2020, citing fears over the spread of COVID-19, Griffiths proposed a streamlined initiative comprised of three key points: a nationwide ceasefire, a series of humanitarian and economic measures, and the resumption of political negotiations. Negotiations largely took place between the Houthis and the Saudis, with the UN envoy and his staff shuttling between Sanaa, Riyadh and Muscat, where key Houthi representatives were based. Riyadh became the main conduit for UN proposals, with Griffiths' team first proposing details to Saudi officials, who then presented them to the Hadi government. While the initiative, which became known as the Joint Declaration was not agreed to, the negotiations set the tone for what would come next. It codified a relatively pro forma UN approach to conflict resolution: establishing a ceasefire linked to confidence-building measures, and the formation of UN-overseen political and military committees to discuss ceasefire management and a future political process. What was different to other processes was the fact that negotiations were to be held primarily between the Houthis and Saudis, rather than the Houthis and their government counterparts.

▸ 2022 Truce and Houthi-Saudi Talks

In April 2022, Yemen's fourth UN envoy, Hans Grundberg, announced a three-month truce between the Houthis and the government. It was, in reality, agreed between the Saudis and the Houthis, in negotiations largely facilitated by Oman. The truce was positioned as a bridge to a longer-term ceasefire agreement and national peace talks, with a series of confidence-building measures establishing the groundwork for later stages of negotiation. The deal included provisions for reopening Sanaa airport to commercial traffic, increasing the volume of fuel entering Hodeida, and reopening roads around Taiz city. While the Saudis and the government implemented their side of the deal, the Houthis stalled on the Taiz roads question – they had besieged the city since 2015 – and, after two truce extensions, introduced a new demand that all state salaries be paid from government oil exports for the ceasefire agreement to go ahead. Negotiations collapsed in October 2022, with the Houthis instituting a de facto blockade on government oil exports by attacking key infrastructure in southern Yemen with drones and missiles. It was at this time that Saudi Arabia took over negotiations, initiating its own bilateral track with Omani assistance.

'Track 2' and Localised Mediation Initiatives

Locally and internationally driven Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue initiatives have proliferated over the course of the conflict. These range from major, multi-year Western donor funded efforts focusing on the contours of a future peace process and constitution, advocating for women's inclusion and fostering local governance in Yemen, to localised initiatives on reopening roads, swapping and freeing prisoners, and returning the bodies of those killed during the war to their families (*ICG*, 2021a).

These localised initiatives have produced meaningful results, but have often been stymied by national politics. Local efforts to reopen roads around Taiz city and in other parts of Yemen, for example, gained traction among the conflict parties before they became a part of the government's negotiating platform from the 2018 talks in Sweden. Local mediators negotiating prisoner swaps have had similar experiences, and there is a perception among many local mediators that they are often crowded out by national bargaining.

The UN has signalled its support for Track 2 and local mediation in public. In private, however, it has struggled to engage productively with unofficial initiatives. Women's groups, for example, were included in the 2018 talks in Sweden, but complained that they were side-lined at key moments and that their input was ignored. Local mediators have similarly complained that their efforts to reopen roads were largely ignored until a last-minute UN decision to include the issue in the 2018 talks, and that this pattern repeated in subsequent years, with UN officials hastily inviting them to help facilitate the truce and truce extension talks of 2022.

The narrowing of the main negotiation track to bilateral Houthi-Saudi talks meanwhile has limited opportunities for either Track 2 or 3, or local initiatives, to influence their outcomes. A return to a UN-led negotiation track may improve this situation, with the UN more amenable to an "inclusive" process, but it is likely that the most important track will remain the Houthi-Saudi channel (ibid).

Current Context: Bilateral Elite Bargaining

In addition to Track 1 and Track 2 dialogues, there have been a series of bilateral negotiations between Yemeni parties, regional and international powers. The most persistent, and potentially consequential, of these have been talks between Saudi and Yemeni officials.

▶ Saudi Bilateral Negotiations

Throughout the conflict, the UN and other outside actors have largely deferred to Riyadh on mediating conflicts among anti-Houthi forces. As tensions mounted between the STC and the Hadi government from 2017 onwards, successive UN envoys chose to avoid the issue. When, in 2019, the STC seized full control of Aden, it was Riyadh that sought to broker a détente between the two rival factions with the government. This took the form of the Riyadh Agreement of November 2019, which effectively created a role for the STC in government. The Saudis struggled to implement the deal, which neither party had wanted to sign, or saw as being in their interest to implement (SCSS, 2020). When Riyadh effectively deposed Hadi, the man it had acclaimed as Yemen's "legitimate" president for the previous seven years, in April of 2022, and replaced him with a handpicked Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), no major external power complained. The council included leaders of key military and political factions including Tareq Saleh, the former president's nephew who now controls territory around the Bab al Mandeb Strait, and Aydrous al-Zubaidi, the STC leader. The Saudis presented the PLC as a "peace government" that would both present a united Yemeni front to the Houthis in negotiations and would be able to claim national legitimacy in the event a deal was struck.

Since 2022 the UN process has also been overshadowed by talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, although these are not their first negotiations. Talks have taken place in several different formats since late 2014. In 2014–2015, after the takeover of Sanaa, a Saudi negotiator held informal meetings with the Houthis to discuss a mutual understanding (Salisbury, 2016). These talks were halted when King Abdullah died, and his brother King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman adopted a more assertive regional posture. During the 2016 Kuwait talks, the 'real' negotiations reportedly took place during the evenings, when Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jaber, held face-to-face negotiations with Houthi and GPC representatives.

The current round of Houthi-Saudi talks is the most prolonged, and most detailed in terms of content, to date. The talks revolve around three broad pillars: an initial six-month ceasefire, during which time Riyadh would underwrite the cost of salaries; a second six-month period, during which economic, military and political committees formed during the first phase would agree on a longer-term ceasefire and interim governance arrangements; and a lengthier transitional period during which the rival parties would discuss the terms for a lasting political settlement (*ICG, 2022a*). The talks initially stalled as the Saudis balked at Houthi demands on salaries, namely that Saudi Arabia would be expected to cover military and security salaries, using government oil and gas export revenues to fund this. Riyadh appears to have eventually conceded to both demands (ibid). The negotiations, however, remain problematic, not least because they do not involve either the Houthis' domestic rivals, or other interested regional parties like the UAE, who would be essential to implementing the agreement.

▸ Other Lines of Bilateral Negotiation

Other lines of bilateral negotiation and communication have been widely rumoured throughout the war. In the early days of the conflict, researchers and Yemen observers believed that there was a direct line of communication between senior Saleh officials in Sanaa and the UAE. These communications halted after a Houthi-Saleh missile attack on a coalition military base in Marib in 2015, but resumed after the 2016 Kuwait talks. The Houthis believe that Saleh and the Emiratis conspired during 2017 to prepare for the former President's break with the Houthis, citing as evidence the fact that his nephew and military avatar, Tareq, joined UAE-backed anti-Houthi forces on the Red Sea coast shortly after their schism. Several years later, Egyptian officials were rumoured to be seeking reconciliation between pro-Saleh military and political figures who had joined the anti-Houthi camp after 2017, and the de facto authorities in Sanaa.

Such efforts extend beyond talks with Saleh loyalists. As discussed elsewhwere, during the blockade of Qatar by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE between 2017 and 2021, Qatari and Turkish officials are reported to have encouraged Islah leaders to find common ground with the Houthis. Finally, throughout the conflict Oman has hosted key Houthi leaders and dissidents from the anti-Houthi camp in Muscat, while allegedly supporting a southern political bloc that opposed the UAE-backed STC. Riyadh, similarly, is said to support political factions from Hadramawt who oppose the STC as part of its efforts to prevent either southern secession or an expansion of UAE influence across the south of Yemen.

Shifting International and Regional Dynamics

Yemen's war has played out amid dramatic shifts in the regional and international context, with developments abroad playing a key role in the conflict's trajectory. Many of these shifts have been closely related to the US's posture in the region, and regional responses to it. In recent years, the conflict has been influenced by key regional powers' decision to diversify their relationships away from the US in response to its purported retrenchment from the Middle East.

2011–2016 Arab Spring, JCPOA

The war started under the shadow of terse Gulf-US relations in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 and their aftermath, and American pursuit of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Accord, better known as the 'Iran Nuclear Deal'. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were angered and frustrated by Washington's response to the Arab Spring. Washington called for Saleh and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, but did not enforce a so-called 'red line' on Syria's use of chemical weapons, creating space, in the Gulf states' view, for political Islamist groups to gain political power and for Iran to expand its regional reach (Al-Thani, 2023). Many regional observers also felt that the US response to Russia's intervention into the Syrian civil war in September of 2015, to stem opposition gains, was insufficient (Kharroub, 2016). The parallel US-led campaign to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, meanwhile, demonstrated American military capabilities in conflicts where it felt its interests were threatened.

The Saudi intervention in Yemen fit a broader pattern of more assertive Gulf responses to regional developments. In 2011, Qatar and the UAE both played a role in the military intervention that led to the ouster and death of Libya's Muammar Ghaddafi before supporting rival political and military factions (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014). In 2013, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the coup that removed Egypt's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohammed Morsi. From 2011 onwards, Qatar and Saudi Arabia armed opposition groups in Syria (Qutb, 2018).

The JCPOA appears to have been a key factor in determining limited American support for the intervention. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, key US partners dependent on the regional American security umbrella, worried that the Obama administration was withdrawing from the region while empowering their main regional rival, Iran. They complained to American officials that they had been left uninformed of initial negotiations, and, along with Israel, lobbied vigorously against them in Washington (*Al Jazeera*, 2015). Lukewarm US support for Saudi Arabia's Yemen intervention in 2015 was a placatory gesture. Riyadh presented its campaign in Yemen as a response to Iranian expansionism. American officials later acknowledged that American support for the Saudi campaign was born of a desire to reassure Saudi officials over the ongoing JCPOA talks; and to build bridges with the new Saudi King, Salman ibn Abdulaziz al-Saud, and his son, defence minister and deputy crown prince Mohammed bin Salman.

US-Gulf tensions continued, however. American officials became increasingly concerned over Saudi conduct in the war, and pressured Riyadh to find a resolution to the conflict throughout 2016. After the talks collapsed and Donald Trump was elected president, Saudi officials rejected an American initiative to end the war presented by John Kerry, leading some Obama administration officials to believe that Riyadh thought it would get a better outcome with their successors.

2017–2020 Trump, Qatar Blockade, Maximum Pressure

Gulf assertiveness peaked in the early years of the Trump administration, which sought to rebuild relations with Abu Dhabi and the UAE. In June 2017, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE announced a blockade of Qatar, accusing their neighbour of supporting terrorist groups and Iranian expansionism (*POMEPS*, 2017). Trump initially appeared to support the move, before calling for dialogue between the Gulf states. In November 2017, the Saudi-backed Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced his resignation during a trip to Riyadh. Regional media outlets later reported that he did so under duress from Saudi officials (McDowall, 2017).

In 2018, the UAE oversaw the launch of the Hodeida offensive, which the administration neither fully supported nor attempted to block, instead giving the campaign a "blinking yellow light" (Nissenbaum & Stanciatti, 2018). At the same time the US pulled out of the JCPOA and initiated a campaign of "maximum pressure" – intensifying sanctions and covert military action – against Iran and its regional allies, leading to an escalating series of tit-for-tat attacks across the region.

Washington, however, had turned against Riyadh and its intervention. After the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, members of Congress were angered by Saudi officials' initial blanket denial of complicity in the killing. American media coverage of Saudi Arabia became increasingly critical, and Yemen focalised frustrations with the US-Saudi relationship. Bipartisan Congressional legislation called for a complete halt to US support for the Saudi-UAE campaign in Yemen. The US halted in-air refuelling for Saudi aircraft and, in December 2018, pressured Riyadh – and by extension Yemen's government – to accept the terms of the Stockholm Agreement. When, in 2019, the Houthis claimed to have launched an attack on Saudi oil and gas infrastructure which likely originated with Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, Riyadh believed that the Trump administration's response was too slow. UAE officials similarly complained that the US provided little support after Iranian attacks on shipping in the Gulf of Oman (*ICG*, 2019).

The UAE-Saudi relationship had also begun to unravel. As discussed elsewhere, while Mohammed bin Salman, who was named Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in June 2017, initially enjoyed close relations with his Emirati counterpart, the Crown Prince and de facto ruler of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed, the two countries were increasingly pursuing divergent agendas across the region. Abu Dhabi had acted relatively early in the Syrian conflict to re-establish ties with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, and in Yemen had directed its support towards anti-Islamist groups, many of them southern secessionists. In 2019, the UAE announced that it was "drawing down" its forces from Yemen, apparently without first warning Saudi counterparts. Emirati officials reportedly told Saudi leaders that the Yemen war was now unwinnable. Then, in August 2019, STC forces seized control of Aden.

2020–Present Diplomatic Spring, Regional Realignment

Since 2020, the balance of power has changed in Yemen. So too have the dynamics of confrontation and cooperation across the Middle East. Several key events have shaped the regional balance of power. First, the COVID-19 pandemic, which underscored the need for regional cooperation. Then the elections in Iran and the US in 2020 and 2021, which resulted in an Iranian hardliner in Tehran, and a more moderate regional posture from America. Third, and relatedly, is a shift from assertion to cooperation in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, and a growing focus from both capitals on the diversification of international relationships, balancing out a perceived overreliance on the US

The most visible impact of this shift has been a push towards regional reconciliation. In 2021 and 2022, the UAE worked to build ties with Iran, announcing in 2022 that it would send an ambassador to Tehran for the first time in six years. From 2019 onwards, Iraqi officials began mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with officials from the two countries meeting in Baghdad in 2021 and 2022. The UAE reopened its embassy in Damascus in November 2018, and Saudi channels with the Syrian government reopened in 2021–2022. In 2020, Bahrain and the UAE joined the US-brokered Abraham Accords and agreed to normalise their relations with Israel. In 2021, the quartet of Arab states who had broken ties with Qatar in 2017 agreed to restore relations. In March 2023, meanwhile, China announced that it had brokered an agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic ties severed in 2017.

These relations are tentative, and ultimately fragile, given that the rivalries and agendas of the past have not changed. The fundamental challenge to Saudi efforts to divest of its current position in Yemen may not, however, be the Houthis and Iran as much as the STC and the UAE. As regional reconciliation has gathered pace, Saudi-Emirati rivalry has come to the fore. Saudi Arabia has clearly positioned itself as a potential alternate to the UAE as a centre for multinational corporations and outside investment. Relations between the two countries have cooled, meanwhile, as they have pursued divergent agendas both in Yemen and Sudan, and as they have competed for diplomatic primacy in Syria and elsewhere.

Multipolar Transition and 'Multi-Alignment'

Another shift has been more subtle but is no less profound. The Gulf Arab states, long seen as key regional Western allies, have increasingly sought in recent years to diversify their political, economic, and military relationships, particularly with China, India, and Russia. Gulf officials attribute the shift to the perceived unreliability of the US as a partner and provider of regional security, and a growing perception that the global balance of power is changing. Saudi and UAE officials state that they are seeking a broader network of relationships at both a regional and global level. UAE officials and analysts attribute this shift to a perceived transition towards a multipolarity – or "multi-alignment" – order in which power is more diffuse and no one state actor can fully impose its will on another.

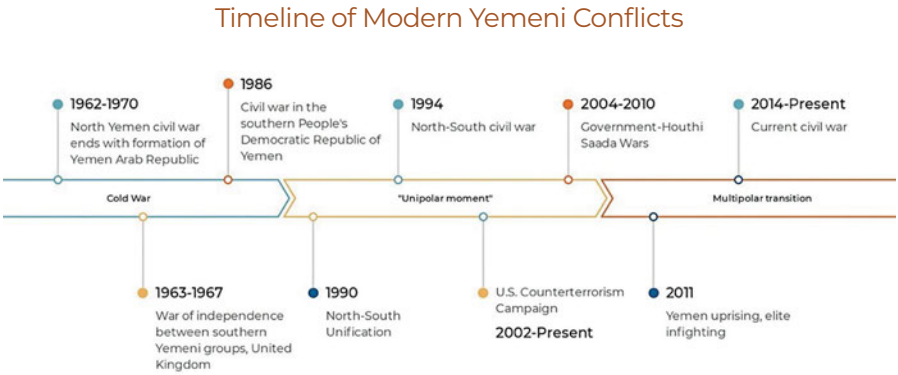
This posture in particular reflects Saudi, Emirati, and broader regional frustrations with perceived US fickleness and doublespeak. Officials from both countries note that the US often argues that they should be more grateful for a regional security umbrella that maintains American hard power and secures energy supplies, despite its increasing unreliability. Both countries were underwhelmed by US responses to the 2019 Aramco attack, the Iranian maritime sabotage in the same year, and the Houthi strikes on their countries, particularly the attack on Abu Dhabi in 2022 which some UAE officials describe as "our 9/11". Many regional officials also express frustration that they were pressured to condemn what they view as a regional conflict – Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine including through votes at the UN Security Council – but that the US vetoed a 2023 UNSC resolution calling for a ceasefire
in Gaza.

In this context, Saudi efforts to reconcile with the Houthis may not just be the result of US pressure to do so. It likely reflects a broader recalibration, acknowledging that it is not able to change the overall balance of power across the region, that the US will not attempt to do so in its favour, and seeking instead to 'de-risk' the neighbourhood by seeking both rapprochement with Iran, and with its regional allies, including the Houthis and the Assad regime in Syria.

Conclusion: Context and Prospects for Peace

Can Yemen's war be ended? A broad consensus is forming in academic and policy circles that conflicts are becoming more complex, and harder to resolve. Numerous factors contribute to the overall complexity of violent conflicts. Among these are the number of local, regional, and international actors involved, the diversity of agendas and ideologies in play, the extent to which the conflict has cross-border or international security implications, the extent of humanitarian crisis, and more recently, the extent to which economic levers and new technologies are deployed, including but not limited to large-scale, sophisticated disinformation campaigns. The war in Yemen, which involves multiple local factions with regional and international backers, each with their own varied agendas and ideological underpinnings, has repeatedly spilled across the country's borders via ground assault, missile and drone strikes and attacks on shipping lanes. As such, it fits the profile of a complex, hard-to-resolve, modern war.

Figure A: Timeline of Modern Yemeni Conflicts



Source: Author

These factors also place hard limits on the efficacy of bilateral dealmaking. Even if the Houthis and Saudi Arabia can agree on ceasefire arrangements before the conflict's tenth anniversary, most expert observers believe that the deal will be short-lived. Either the Houthis will seek to consolidate their control over new territory, sparking renewed fighting – anti-Houthi groups will "spoil" the deal – or UAE-backed secessionists will make a play for southern independence, sparking a new permutation of conflict.

Such concerns are not unwarranted, Given the range of challenges involved in the Yemen war it is unsurprising that the UN has struggled to gain traction as a mediator. But there is no sustainable alternative to a multiparty UN-led process that accounts for the plethora of local, regional, and international parties directly involved, and with an interest in, the conflict. Arguably, as the conflict has progressed and become more variegated, international mediation efforts have become increasingly streamlined, shifting from efforts to return the country to its pre-war trajectory of multiparty dialogue in the hope of generating transformative peace, to a much more limited approach focused largely on producing an elite bargain to better manage, rather than resolve, the conflict. But enthusiasm for internationally brokered and instituted peace settlements is on the wane. Yemen, never more than a limited priority in a region of questionable value for powerful states like US, is unlikely to prove the exception to the rule.

Nevertheless, the current envoy, Grundberg, may soon experience a moment of opportunity. If the Saudis and Houthis do agree to a ceasefire, the agreement should trigger a return to UN-led mediation. While the Houthis may not intend to engage in the process, Grundberg could – and should – initiate a more ambitious and far-reaching negotiation process than Riyadh or the Houthis' de facto authorities have envisioned. Such a process would include international, regional, and multiple Yemeni parties to the conflict, and internal peace advocates who have worked on localised processes. If he is willing and able to do this, the chances of success are slim. But it is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Steps the UN can take include the formation of an international working group including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, particularly Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE; Iran; the permanent members of the UN Security Council; and the European Union.

In parallel, the UN envoy should lay out the rationale and structure for a more inclusive political process that goes beyond the Houthis and the PLC, potentially including the component parts of the leadership council, Yemeni political parties, women, youth and civil society representatives, and even regional leaders.

The structure, sequencing and timing of a political process will also need to respond to the conflict's complexities. At present, the UN's central focus is on organising, managing, and observing a lasting ceasefire, initiating political talks over an interim governance process, and de-escalating the economic conflict that has become a persistent feature of the conflict over the course of almost a decade. Rushing towards unity government – the standard approach to 'post-conflict' governance – could be a mistake, as it may simply exacerbate tensions and lead to zero-sum competition as the previous transition did. It will be important to initiate early discussions over governing arrangements, and to consider what arrangements will be acceptable to the local and regional parties directly and indirectly involved in the conflict.

One potential approach is to build interim governance around governorates first, and national institutions second. The conflict has almost, but not entirely, drawn the country down existing governorate lines, and military and security forces are increasingly drawn from localities, and often correspond to a particular external patron. Providing governorate-level representation in interim governance structures – for example a presidential council, formed of key armed and political factions, and governors – might help assuage Yemeni and regional fears over marginalisation, and foster at least a degree of internal cooperation.

The fundamental long-term challenge, meanwhile, will be avoiding the creation of a system of conflict management rather than conflict resolution. In Libya and Syria, conflict has been de-escalated and partially frozen, but not resolved via political process. While a ceasefire and internal cooperation rather than conflict would be welcome news for Yemen, allowing the country to simmer in a liminal state of 'no war, no peace' would leave its stability vulnerable to shifts in the regional and international space. If the incentives for regional accommodation and dealmaking were to change, Yemen could once again become a platform for rivalries. How to achieve this, however, is a challenge that goes beyond Yemen, and will require regional diplomacy and mediation at a level far beyond current efforts.

Annex A: Simplified Schematics of Modern Yemeni Conflicts

Figure B: Northern Civil War 1962–1970 – Key Domestic and International Players

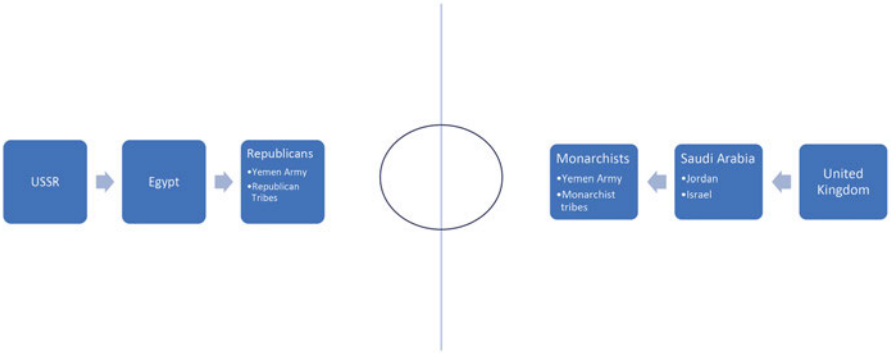


Figure C: Southern War of Independence 1963–1967 – Key Domestic and International Players

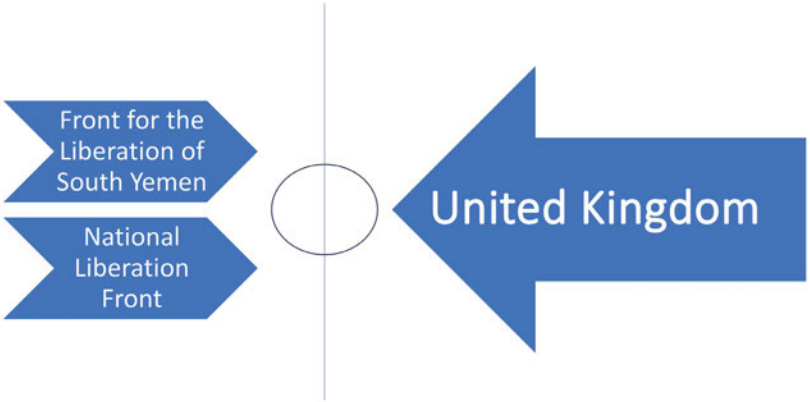


Figure D: South–South Civil War 1986 – Key Domestic and International Players

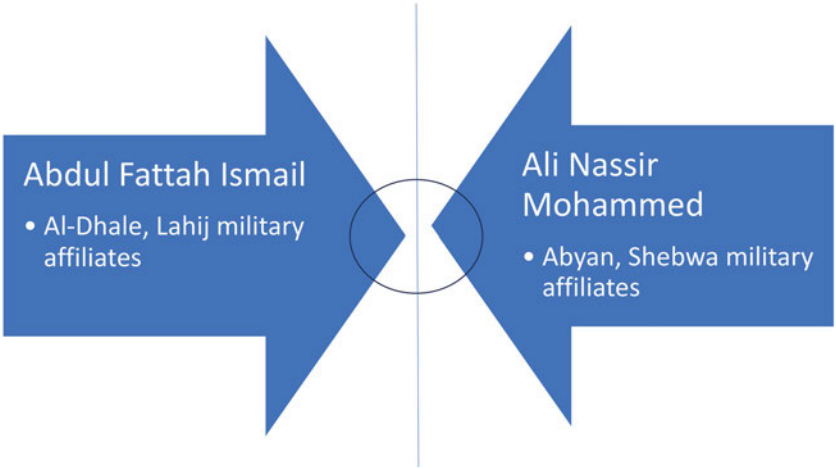


Figure E: North–South Civil War 1994 – Key Domestic and International Players

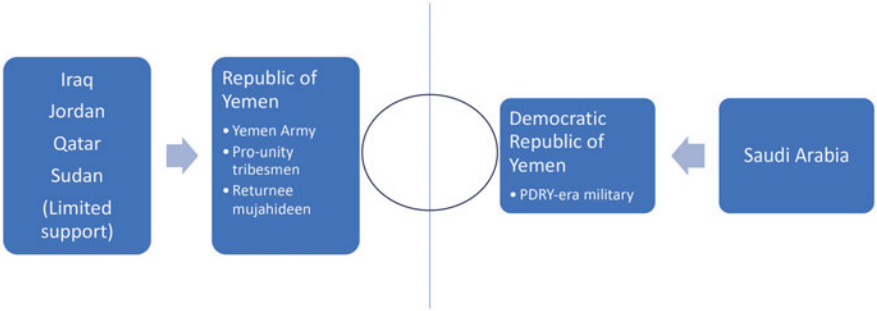


Figure F: 2004–2010 Saada Wars – Key Domestic and International Players

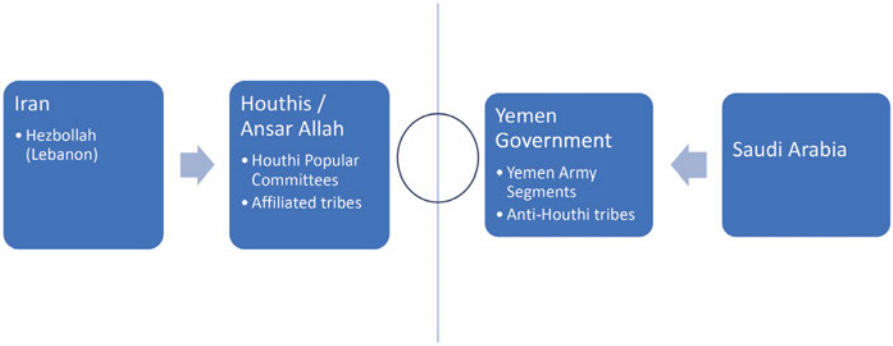
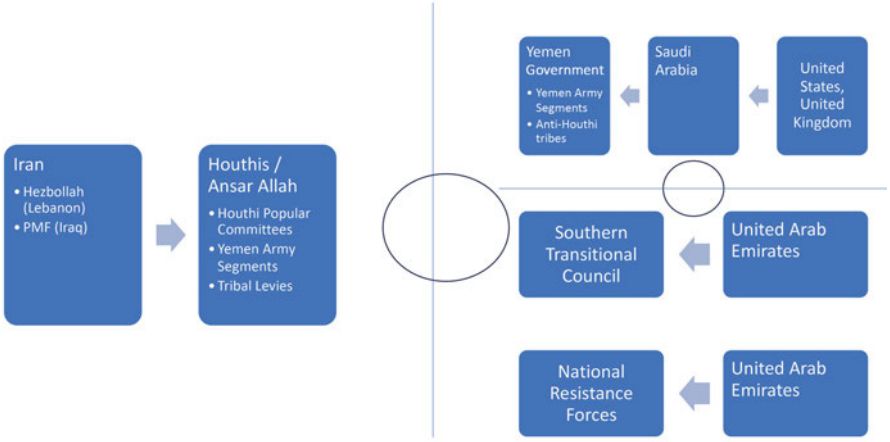


Figure G: Yemen's War 2015–Present – Key Domestic and International Players



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Endnotes

[1] Many mediators have had a role in the conflict they seek to end. The UK presented itself as mediator in Northern Ireland during the peace process of the 1990s when it was a direct conflict party. The US mediated in Bosnia, despite having intervened militarily. China has often mediated regional conflicts despite being involved militarily. Colombia in a sense was both mediator and party in its own peace process: it constructed the mesa de negociaciones, and Norway and Cuba 'facilitated'.

[2] Figures in Annex A provide a simplified schematic of the key internal, regional and international players in each major modern Yemeni conflict.

[3] Many Yemenis date the war's start to the September 2014 takeover of Sanaa by the Houthis and their temporary allies, military, political and tribal allies of former President Saleh, while outsiders often take Saudi Arabia's March 2015 military intervention as the conflict's starting point. In reality, the civil conflict began in the months between these two events, a period during which the Houthi-Saleh alliance placed President Hadi and the unity government under house arrest, suspended the constitution and sought to consolidate their military control over Yemen in its entirety. By the time the Saudis announced the formation of a military coalition to support Hadi-aligned forces and oust the Houthis initiated a wave of airstrikes on 26 March, Houthi-Saleh forces were already engaged in fierce fighting with rival military, tribal and other local forces in the port city of Aden, where President Hadi had fled in February 2015, and neighbouring governorates as well as in oil-rich Marib governorate and numerous other parts of the country.

[4] By the coalition's own estimates, Yemen had a store of about 300 Scud missiles, which both sides of the 1994 war had used against each other, along with shorter range Tochka missiles.

[5] Houthi-Saleh advances into the country's south and east were reversed in 2015, and the alliance was pushed back into the country's northwestern highlands, midlands, and west coast. Tribal and military forces took control of Marib, an oil-rich province to the east of Sanaa. A mix of pro-Hadi military and security forces, southern secessionist and Salafist fighters controlled Aden and neighboring Abyan, while Lahij and al-Dhale governorates, along the old north-south border, were contested by Houthi-Saleh fighters and a similar mix of military and secessionist forces. Taiz city, which sits on the faultline between traditionally Zaydi and Shafei populations in the north, had become heavily contested, with the Houthi-Saleh forces besieging the city centre, which was controlled by local military and security forces, tribal levies and Salafist fighters. While all parties claimed to believe they could prevail militarily, by early 2016 the counteroffensive against the Houthis had slowed. Saudi-backed forces in the north gradually seized control of the eastern part of al-Jawf governorate and the Red Sea port of Midi, along with the town of Nihm, to the northeast of Sanaa. In April 2015, meanwhile, AQAP had seized Mukalla, a port city in southeastern Yemen that is part of Hadramawt governorate. A year later, UAE-backed Hadrami forces ousted AQAP from the city.

[6] After tit-for-tat missile and air strikes that killed scores of Gulf soldiers and senior Houthi-Saleh military and political leaders in October 2016, government-aligned forces launched an offensive towards Nihm in an apparent attempt to press on to Sanaa. A month later, in January 2017, UAE-backed forces in the southwest of the country announced that they had taken control of the strategically important port of Mokha. But thereafter the ground war gain slowed to a near-halt.

[7] Saleh oversaw a six-year military campaign against the Houthis between 2004 and 2010. (Salmoni, Loidolt & Wells, 2010).

[8] The JCPOA sought to curtail Iran's nuclear weapons program in exchange for sanctions relief and reintegration into an international system from which it had become increasingly ostracised. The deal was negotiated by Iran, the EU and the US under President Barack Obama. The JCPOA sought to reduce the risk of regionwide in the Middle East, and in doing so allow the US to redirect some of the resources it had concentrated in the region towards other priority issues, most prominently its position in Asia.

[9] See e.g. Whitfield, 2019; Vatikiotis, Michael, 2022; Salisbury& Beals, 2023.

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