

A Conflict Overlooked: **Yemen** in Crisis



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Conflict Risk Diagnostic 2017

Conflict Background

Yemen has a weak, highly decentralized central government that has struggled to rule the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY).¹ Since the unification of these entities in 1990, Yemen has experienced three civil conflicts. As the poorest country in the Arab world, Yemen faces serious food and water shortages for a population dispersed over mountainous terrain.² The country's weaknesses have been exploited by Saudi Arabia which shares a porous border with Yemen. Further, the instability of Yemen's central government has created a power vacuum filled by foreign states and terrorist groups.³ The central government has never had effective control of all Yemeni territory. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was president of Yemen for 34 years, secured his power through playing factions within the population off one another. The Yemeni conflict is not solely a result of a Sunni-Shia conflict, although sectarianism plays a role.⁴ The 2011 Arab Spring re-energized the Houthi movement, a Zaydi Shia movement, which led to the overthrow of the Saleh government. Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi took office as interim president in a transition led by a coalition of Arab Gulf states and backed by the United States. Hadi has struggled to deal with a variety of problems, including insurgency, the continuing loyalty of many military officers to former president Saleh, as well as corruption, unemployment and food insecurity.⁵

Conflict Risk Diagnostic Indicators

Key: (+) Stabilizing factor; (-) Destabilizing factor; (±) Mixed factor

Severe Risk	
Militarization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government military expenditures have been generally stable between 2002-2015, at an average of 4.8% of GDP. However, no data exists after 2014.⁶ - Total armed forces personnel has decreased, dropping from 137,900 in 2013, to 20,000 in 2014.⁷ - The Houthis force is armed and aided by Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon⁸, including missiles, explosives, small arms, money, and personnel.⁹ - There has been an increased politicization of armed forces with Yemeni forces split in factions between Saleh and Hadi. - Coalition forces, led by Saudi Arabia, are conducting a military campaign. This includes training Yemeni soldiers and conducting airstrikes, aimed at crippling the Houthis and reinstating Hadi's government.¹⁰ - Al-Qaeda is present in the Arabian Peninsula and seizing control of southern coastal parts of Yemen.¹¹ - The United States continues to interfere by launching drone strikes and raids.
History of Armed Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As of 2015, the conflict in Yemen has resulted in 267,173 refugees and 2,532,032 internally displaced persons (IDPs). This marks a five-fold increase in the number of refugees over the past 20 years. The number of IDPs has been steadily increasing since 2007, reaching its peak in 2015.¹² ± There is a steady increase in the number of asylum seekers from 2000-2003 with a decrease in 2004-2005 and a steady increase thereafter, up to 2015. ± Prior to 2011, the conflict can be characterized as an "intermediate armed conflict," apart from the period between 1994-1996 where Houthi rebels and the government were involved in the North Yemen Civil War. In 2011, the number of incidents of one-sided violence reached 142 during the Arab Spring. The number of deaths increased in 2010 reaching 2030 deaths in 2012 as a result of state-based violence in the north. Violence decreased in 2013 (largely due to the National Dialogue Conference discussing a new Constitution). Since, the number of deaths has increased reaching its highest record in 2015 with a total of 6778 deaths. Based on the Conflict Data Project (CDP) "Conflict Intensity Level," the conflict is considered a "war" as of 2014.¹³
Economic Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GDP growth rate decreased from 2010-2015, with the largest decline of 29.835% in 2014.¹⁴ - GDP per capita was trending upward, increasing from \$1310 USD per capita in 2010, to a high of \$1650 in 2014. However, between 2014-2015 GDP per capita dropped to \$1406.¹⁵ - Wide inflationary swings occurred between 2007-2013, with the biggest inflationary increase of 14.14% percent between 2009-2011.¹⁶ ± The currency value has experienced a downward trend. Worth 219.59/USD in 2010, the Yemeni Rial has now stabilized at 214/USD.¹⁷

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yemen has experienced flight of both capital and investment, with a drop of \$706M between 2010-2011, and has been negative every year since 2011.¹⁸ ± There has been a slight upward sloping trend of Total Debt Service from 0.699% of GNI in 2013 to 0.977% of GNI in 2015.¹⁹ - Trade as percentage of GDP has experienced a massive decline from 64.4% in 2011 to 32.7% in 2015.²⁰ - Yemen had a Gini coefficient score of 37.7 in 2013, ranking 154 out of 187 states, indicating high levels of inequality.²¹ - Yemen has been unable to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and access resources due to economic instability.²²
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High Risk	
International Linkages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In August 2016, UN-backed peace talks in Kuwait broke down, with each side condemning the conduct of the other.²³ ± Although Yemen can rely on foreign alliances for security, their weak central control also reduces sovereignty. Iran and Saudi Arabia have extensive influence within Yemen, which has historically been a destabilizing factor. ± Saudi Arabia has closed off significant portions of their border with Yemen to stem illegal activity; the two states are also parties to the Saudi-Yemeni boundary treaty.²⁴ ± Yemen is a member of the United Nations, International Criminal Court, and the League of Arab States, however they have yet to gain membership to the GCC.
Human Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yemen is the Arab world's poorest country, with a poverty rate of more than 50%²⁵, and a low HDI score, ranked 160 out of 188 countries.²⁶ - A Saudi-enforced blockade aimed at targeting arms has pushed the country to the verge of famine with an estimated 7.6 million at the risk of starvation.²⁷ - In contrast to the global trend, Yemeni life expectancy experienced no marked increase in the past 15 years. Life expectancy at birth is 63.8 years, ranking 176th globally.²⁸ - Two-thirds of the population do not have access to safe drinking water or sanitation facilities.²⁹ This has placed the population at risk for communicable diseases like cholera and dysentery. This is exacerbated by a minimally functioning health care system. - Almost half of the country lacks access to adequate health care. Heavy bombardment and airstrikes have hampered citizens' access to health care and increased the pressure on the health facilities that are still functioning. International campaigns by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) have been either been delayed or not possible due to the fighting.³⁰ ± In the early 2000s, Yemen made a commitment to increasing its literacy rate. The state provides universal, compulsory, free education up to the age of 15 and literacy rates have improved by 15% since 2004.³¹ However, enrolment beyond the primary level remains low and gender barriers are still present.³² Few teachers and inadequate infrastructure due to conflict are other noted inhibitors.
Political Instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - After coming to power in 2011, President Hadi and the central government struggled to consolidate authority. The network of corruption and patronage established under Saleh remains entrenched in public institutions, undermining transparency and accountability.³³ Yemen lacks legal safeguards to combat corruption, ranking 170 out of 176 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index of 2016.³⁴ - Efforts to negotiate an end to the political stalemate between Houthi and government forces broke down in 2015 when Houthi leaders rejected a proposed constitution and subsequently announced their formal takeover of the government.³⁵ - Currently, Yemen is in a state of political limbo. The Houthis claim parliament has been dissolved and replaced by a transitional revolutionary council, headed by Mohammed Ali al-Houthi. However, the UN, US, and GCC refuse to recognize the Houthis' rule, instead upholding Hadi as the legitimate head of state.³⁶ Persistent Saudi airstrikes hinder any attempts by the Houthis to further consolidate power and legitimacy.³⁷

Moderate Risk	
Environmental Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Yemen has a mountainous interior that stretches along the west and south. The western range has provided cover for smuggling, illicit crossings to Saudi Arabia, and guerrilla warfare by the Houthis.³⁸ - Yemen is one of the most water stressed countries in the world. Even before the revolution, Yemen's water situation had been described as increasingly dire by experts who worried Yemen would be the "first country to run out of water."³⁹ - Overgrazing, soil erosion, and desertification also contribute to food insecurity, requiring 90% of food to be imported.⁴⁰

Low Risk	
Demographic Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ± While Yemen's population has grown from 23,591,972 to 26,832,215 between 2010-2015, the growth rate has declined from 2.74% to 2.44%.⁴¹ ± There has been an increase in population density from 44.684 people per square kilometre, to 50.82 people per square kilometre from 2010-2015.⁴² ± Yemen's urbanization has increased from 31.7% to 34.6% between 2010-2015⁴³, with a decreasing trend in Urban Growth Rate of 4.13% in 2015.⁴⁴ - Although there has been a downward trend of the percentage of population between ages 0-14 (42.2% to 40.3% from 2010-2015), a youth bulge still exists in Yemen.⁴⁵
Population Heterogeneity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + An estimated 99.1% of Yemenis are Muslim, of those approximately 65% are Sunni and 35% are Shia (predominantly Zaydi). The remaining 0.9% identify as a combination of Jewish, Hindu, and Christian.⁴⁶ + Yemen is relatively ethnically homogeneous, as it is predominantly Arab. However, there are some Afro-Arabs, South Asians, and Europeans.⁴⁷ While small, non-Arab groups such as the Akhdam, live in poverty and face social discrimination.⁴⁸ ± Yemen is a largely tribal society, with upwards of 600 different tribes identified.⁴⁹

Internal Stakeholders	
Government of Yemen (President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi)	Hadi's failed attempt to broker national reconciliation following the Arab Spring was a major factor in the outbreak of conflict. ⁵⁰ Despite early losses to the Houthis, Hadi's government (backed by a Saudi-led military coalition) managed to regain control of southern Yemen by September 2015. ⁵¹ However, Hadi's grip on power is tenuous. Since withdrawing his resignation in 2015, Hadi has operated from Aden in the south and not from the capital of Sana'a (which remains under Houthi control). ⁵²
Houthi Rebels (Abdul-Malik Badreddin al-Houthi)	Formerly a marginalized religious movement, the Houthis now control northern Yemen and have demanded greater political influence in the country. ⁵³ Backed by Iran, the Shia rebels formed an alliance government with former President Saleh in November 2016. This announcement led the Yemeni government to cut off UN-backed peace talks and escalate the conflict. ⁵⁴
Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)	Amid Yemen's civil conflict, AQAP has consolidated their power in southern Yemen. This sophisticated terrorist group has evaded scrutiny from the Saudi-led coalition, which is focused on defeating the Houthi-Saleh alliance in the north. ⁵⁵ Although US airstrikes have eliminated several AQAP leaders, the group captured several key villages in early 2016. ⁵⁶
Saudi Arabia-led Coalition (Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain)	Saudi Arabia continues to spearhead an intervention force in Yemen to reinstate Hadi's government and expel the Houthis. The Saudis' motivations are two-fold: (1) they share a border with Yemen and are concerned by the prospect of a hostile Houthi regime, and (2) they do not wish to cede regional influence to Iran, who support the Shia rebels. ⁵⁷ Of the other Arab Gulf states, only the UAE has played a significant military role in the coalition. ⁵⁸

General People's Congress (Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh)	Since being overthrown in 2011, Saleh and his party have regained popularity in some Yemeni circles. His extensive network has enabled him to maintain relevance and broker a power-sharing deal with the Houthis. ⁵⁹ Saleh hopes to secure greater political influence through this uneasy alliance. ⁶⁰
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External Stakeholders	
Iran	The Shia-dominated Islamic Republic of Iran provides extensive material support to the Houthis. The Saudis believe the Houthis are an Iranian proxy, but independent observers contend the Houthis are not under Iranian control. ⁶¹ Nevertheless, Iranian and Houthi interests align as they both seek to contest Saudi and US influence in the region. ⁶²
United States of America (USA)	The US backs the Saudi-led coalition both directly (providing intelligence and operational assistance) and indirectly (as Saudi Arabia's largest provider of arms). ⁶³ Although the Americans are interested in maintaining regional stability, the Obama administration pressured their Saudi allies to lower the intensity of the conflict. ⁶⁴ Recently however, President Donald Trump reignited concerns about the US role in Yemen when reports surfaced of a botched American raid. ⁶⁵
United Nations (UN) & Other International Organizations	In 2016, the UN attempted to broker peace talks in Kuwait but were ultimately unsuccessful. ⁶⁶ The Security Council passed Resolution 2216 in 2015 demanding Houthi withdrawal and establishing an arms embargo on the rebels. ⁶⁷ Yemen has been in negotiations to join the GCC, a political and economic union of Arab states of the Persian Gulf. However, Yemen's chronic instability has been a major obstacle to membership. ⁶⁸

Scenarios	
Best Case Scenario	A ceasefire followed by a mediated outcome between the Hadi and Houthis/Saleh factions that results in a strong power sharing agreement or federal structure for Yemen. Constitutional reform should address the concerns of the major Yemeni factions and involve consultation with the public to create a stable, durable solution. Former President Saleh recuses himself from Yemeni politics to foster unity. The political solution discourages external actors from unsanctioned intervention within Yemen. The new central government focuses on pressing development issues in the country. The UN Security Council sanctions a humanitarian intervention mission and international organizations and NGOs are able to offer assistance. A new coalition forms, comprising Yemen, the US, and Saudi Arabia to contain or defeat AQAP.
Worst Case Scenario	Houthi and Hadi's forces fail to come to a negotiated agreement. The conflict continues, allowing AQAP to consolidate control in the southwest regions. Saudi Arabia, Saleh, and the US continue to undermine stability through airstrikes and other militarized forms of support against the Houthis. The continued Saudi embargo and water overconsumption exacerbates famine and depletes water sources. A lack of running water and sanitation leads to the rapid spread of an epidemic. The potential for state fracturing increases as the interests of the Houthi and Hadi factions become intractable. The combined effects trigger a refugee crisis, threatening stability of the entire region.
Most Likely Scenario	A power-sharing agreement between the Houthi forces and the Hadi government is made. This includes a temporary ceasefire and a national dialogue to address the outstanding grievances from the forced 1990 unification and 1994 civil war. The agreement addresses military re-structuring which allows Yemen to face AQAP in the Abyan and Shabwah governorates. The US would likely be involved as the fractured Yemeni government is unable to deal with the threat of the AQAP. However, there is a risk that the current US administration may further destabilize southern Yemen by continuing drone strikes, which could increase radicalization in southern Yemen and stall a negotiated outcome. Saudi Arabia, as a regional power, is interested in bringing about the agreement given its geostrategic interests. The Saudis would influence the result to ensure the Houthis do not take over given their alignment with Iran. The ceasefire allows international organizations and NGOs to gain access to territory held by rebel groups and provide aid.

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