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SECURITY COUNCIL

THE SITUATION IN YEMEN

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Introduction

While much of the world's attention is understandably focused on political and security developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine, the UN System and its member states must remain ever vigilant in regards to new or reignited conflict zones. The Red Sea country of Yemen is one of the less discussed but crucial corners of the world in the global fight against international terrorism; the Fund for Peace recently ranked Yemen as the 4th most fragile country in the world.¹ In September 2017, the UN announced that the civilian death toll in Yemen's current civil war passed 5,000 recorded deaths and the current cholera epidemic had already claimed 2,000 lives.² Additionally, the UN previously reported in January 2017 that over 3 million people had been displaced, including thousands of refugees, and over 80% of the Yemeni population, approximately 19 million people, needed humanitarian aid.³

The government of Yemen is currently seeking to shed its image as providing a safe haven and preferred recruiting ground for Al-Qaeda but its government faces serious challenges from both Sunni and Shia extremists. Furthermore, "the upheaval in the Arab world in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the intensification of the Iran-Saudi rivalry have made all parties reluctant to compromise."⁴ Given Yemen's strategic location at the intersection of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and just across from the Horn of Africa as well as immediately south of Saudi Arabia, the delegates to the Security Council must deal with the immediate crisis in Yemen as well as lay the groundwork for a long-term comprehensive political solution.

Background

The Ottoman Turkish Empire and the British occupied much of Yemen until the twentieth century. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, the northern part of Yemen became independent while southern Yemen was governed as

¹ Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index 2017". Found at: <http://fundforpeace.org/fsi/data/>

² *Deutsche Welle*, "UN: Civilian death toll exceeds 5,000" September 5, 2017.

³ *The Guardian*, "Yemen death toll has reached 10,000 UN says", January 16, 2017.

⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Yemen at War" Middle East Briefing No. 45 March 27, 2015, p. 8.

a British protectorate. After the king of North Yemen was assassinated in 1970, that country fell into an 8-year civil war, with considerable Egyptian and Saudi intervention. South Yemen did not gain full independence from the British until 1967. South Yemen would soon become the communist Democratic Popular Republic of Yemen. North and South Yemen would coexist for over twenty years, although not always peacefully. The two sides fought several battles in 1971, 1972, and 1979 but eventually achieved meaningful political reconciliation through negotiations. When the Soviet Union began to withdraw from Eastern Europe and was no longer able to subsidize communist countries around the world, South Yemen's economy essentially collapsed. In 1990, a unified Republic of Yemen was established with Ali Abdallah Saleh, the leader of North Yemen since 1978, becoming the first president of a unified Yemen.

During the 1990s, Yemen experienced considerable political turmoil as a result of both domestic and international events. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, Yemen held one of the non-permanent seats on the Security Council but it opposed the military actions undertaken by Coalition forces in the first Gulf War. This opposition infuriated Saudi Arabia and the two countries maintained tense relations for much of the 1990s. In 1994, tensions between Northern and Southern Yemenite communities erupted into civil war, with Southern Yemen seeking to return to its independent status. Northern Yemeni forces eventually defeated the Southern Yemeni army and the country remained a unified whole under the control of President Saleh.

Yemen and Islamic Resistance Organizations

Yemen has long served as a preferred destination for those opposed to the Saudi monarchy. Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, the Islamic Army of Aden and Abyan, and several Palestinian resistance groups have long sought safe haven in the south of Yemen. Al-Qaeda's presence in Yemen, and the later creation of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been particularly vexing to Saudi Arabia as well as Western countries, including France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In October 2000, al-Qaeda operatives attacked the *USS Cole*, killing 17 US sailors, and in 2002, they attacked a French tanker, the *Limbourg*. These attacks have been augmented by a sustained campaign of kidnapping of Western tourists and professionals working in Yemen as well as recent attacks on Belgian and Spanish tourists. On March 18, 2008, a mortar round fired at a school next to the US embassy in Sana'a killed a Yemeni guard and only served to intensify already existing concerns regarding Islamic resistance and/or terrorist organizations in Yemen.⁵ Six months later, Al-Qaeda carried out the deadliest attack on a US embassy since the Al-Qaeda attacks in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam in August 1998; the September 17, 2008 attack killed 18 people and injured 16, clearly demonstrating that Al-Qaeda sought continued confrontation with the American and Yemeni governments.

After the horrific attacks on September 11, 2001, Western attention to Yemen increased dramatically. In November 2002, the US used an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), a Predator drone, armed with Hellfire missiles to kill suspected Yemeni

⁵ *BBC News*, "'One killed' in Yemeni explosion", March 18, 2008.

terrorists. President Saleh, while an ally of the United States at this point, found himself in a difficult position; he had to work closely with the United States but not so closely that he alienated Islamic leaders within Yemen. According to Robert F. Worth, “When the Pentagon leaked word of Yemeni collaboration in an American missile strike in 2002 that killed the suspected leader of Al Qaeda in Yemen, Mr. Saleh was furious.”⁶ Saleh needed political cover to forestall direct challenges by his opponents while the George W. Bush administration sought to boost Republican candidates just days before the 2002 midterm elections. Yemeni political realities make increased cooperation with Western powers and Saudi Arabia problematic, but the larger security realities for Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa may force the hand of President Saleh.

“Dancing on the Heads of Snakes”⁷

Yemen’s policy shifts and challenges during the 2000s often reflected the changing priorities of the United States in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the 2003 Iraq War (Operation Iraqi Freedom). Yemeni intelligence and security assistance but the unpopularity and resentment of the US-led war in Iraq prompted hundreds of Yemeni men to fight against the US and its “Coalition of the Willing” partners. Saleh faced a renewed challenge from the Zaydi Shia community, soon to be called Houthis as a result of the emergence of former parliamentarian Husayn Badr din al-Houthi; al-Houthi would subsequently be killed in battle in September 2004.

The litany of grievances of the Zaydis, as well as many other Yemeni communities, quickly threatened Saleh’s rule. “A massively corrupt government, rising food prices, and high unemployment pushed people to action,” with Zaydi protestors demonstrating publicly in Sana’a and other cities.⁸ In 2005, Houthi rebels launched a renewed rebellion against Saleh’s rule at approximately the same time that then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice informed President Saleh that the US was reducing foreign aid and military assistance to Yemen because of concerns about corruption and the lack of political reforms in recent decades. After Saleh’s disconcerting meeting with Secretary Rice, he was informed by the World Bank, then led by Paul Wolfowitz, the former US Deputy Secretary of Defense who had leaked information about Yemeni cooperation in the November 2002 drone strike, about a corresponding reduction in development assistance for similar reasons. US reductions in aid appeared to be based on calculations that Al-Qaeda in Yemen no longer posed a serious security threat; within a few years, the emergence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) demonstrated surprising resilience from Al-Qaeda and its allies.

⁶ Robert F. Worth, “Yemen’s Deals with Jihadists Unsettle the US”, *The New York Times*, January 28, 2008.

⁷ From a quote widely attributed to President Saleh that governing Yemen was akin to “dancing on the heads of snakes.”

⁸ Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America’s War in Arabia*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2014, p. 7.

Arab Spring Cleaning

In the spring of 2011, entrenched dictatorships throughout the Middle East and North Africa faced the most sustained and in, several cases successful, challenges to their rule since at least the 1970s. Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali resigned in January 2011 and he would be rapidly followed by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Libyan President Muammar al Qaddafi. Saleh would draw out his withdrawal from power through much of 2011 but would eventually resign in favor of his long-term Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in exchange for immunity from prosecution. Hadi won the presidency in an uncontested election in February 2012 and remains president as of late October 2017.

Former president Saleh officially left power in late 2011 but he never truly exited the Yemeni political stage. Proving that politics do indeed make strange companions, in early 2015 Houthi rebels and Saleh forged an alliance aimed at overthrowing the Hadi governments. Houthi forces then made rapid military gains within months of President Hadi's ascent and Houthi leaders signed a peace agreement with the Hadi government in September 2014.⁹ Sensing further opportunities, and seemingly relying on the notion that negotiations are often easier from a position of relative strength, Houthi forces continued with their military gains and now control Sana'a and many surrounding areas, much of the former South Yemen, while President Hadi controls most of central and eastern, previously North, Yemen. The UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed submitted a peace proposal in October 2016 that President Hadi rejected for being too generous, in his view, to the Houthi rebels.¹⁰

In May 2017, reports surfaced that Saleh and the Houthis might sever their tenuous alliance stemming from Saleh's claim that al Houthi militia leader Abdul Malek Al Houthi ordered his assassination.¹¹ President Hadi recently removed the governor of al-Bayda province for suspected ties to Al-Qaeda, bolstering continuing concerns about Al-Qaeda's influence in Yemen. The Security Council will also wish to draw upon the expertise of the Secretary-General's Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, who last visited Yemen in May 2017 but the Houthi leadership, in a potential ironic twist given President Hadi's aforementioned rejection of Ahmed's October 2016 peace proposal, argued that he is biased and unwelcome in Yemen.

The Humanitarian (Cr)Isis

The Houthi government of Yemen continues to confront sustained challenges to its legitimacy and there are real signs of both increased regional military involvement as well as refracturing of Yemen's territorial integrity. Saudi Arabia's opposition to the Houthi government, widely seen in Riyadh as Iranian proxies, has culminated in an intense bombing campaign, including the use of cluster bombs.¹² Turkey has echoed

⁹ *The Guardian*, "Yemen: peace deal signed but rebels continue advance", September 21, 2014.

¹⁰ *Deutsche Welle*, "Yemen president turns down UN peace deal", October 29, 2016.

¹¹ *Gulf News*, "Saleh preparing to sever ties with Al Houthis, reports say", May 9, 2017.

¹² Paul McLeary, "In Yemen, a Saudi War Fought with US Help", *Foreign Policy*, November 23, 2015.

Saudi criticism of Iranian spot of the Houthis in Yemen, although Turkey's reliance on Iranian natural gas as well as the convergence of Turkish and Iranian policies against Kurdish independence mitigate against an imminent Ankara-Tehran clash.¹³

Fears of continued proxy warfare in Yemen as well as the possibility of regional escalation are both unfortunate and well founded. The rift between Qatar and the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as well as the continuing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia all contribute to persistent concerns about a wider and deeper war.¹⁴ Recent Houthi claims about a successful missile strike on a Saudi oil refinery at Yanbu, some 900 kilometers (approximately 560 miles) away, have not thus far been independently verified but concerns about likely Iranian support for the Houthis are causing many observers to become increasingly concerned about enhanced Houthi missile capacity.¹⁵ A likely element for any peace proposal acceptable to the Hadi government and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies would include the surrendering and/or elimination of this Houthi ballistic missile capacity.¹⁶

On February 20, 2016, Al-Qaeda forces took control of the southern city of Ahwar and launched attacks in Aden aimed at seizing control of the vital port.¹⁷ 3 days earlier, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi announced that Egypt would not hesitate to send its military forces into allied Gulf states that would need assistance¹⁸; while Egyptian soldiers were not formally committed to assisting their Saudi allies in Yemen at the time, President Sisi flew to Riyadh to meet with King Salman on Thursday February 25, 2016. Iran, still seething over the escalation of Saudi bombing and military campaigns in Yemen, including over what Iran claims was a Saudi missile strike that nearly hit the Iranian embassy in Sana'a in early January 2016¹⁹, denounced Egypt's "servile obeisance to the Wahabbists in Riyadh" and vowed to inflict protracted suffering on both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Even with the sustained Saudi-led military campaign against the Houthi-led government, Houthi leaders announced the formation of a new government in late November 2016.²⁰

The Red Sea Weddings

As in many other parts of the Muslim world, the emergence of the Islamic State (IS), alternately referred to as Daesh, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has deepened the complexity and expanded the

¹³ Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Yemen Dilemma", *Foreign Affairs*, April 7, 2015.

¹⁴ *Reuters*, "Iran's Zarif Hopes Yemen War Does Not Lead to Iran, Saudi Conflict", July 17, 2017.

¹⁵ *Worldview*, "Yemen: Houthis Claim an Extension of Their Missile Threat", July 24, 2017. Published by Stratfor and found at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/yemen-houthis-claim-extension-their-missile-threat>

¹⁶ *Gulf News*, "Al Houthis must give up ballistic missiles under future Yemen peace deal", March 16, 2017.

¹⁷ *Reuters*, "Al Qaeda Militants Seize Yemen Town, Kill Militia Leader: Residents", February 20, 2016.

¹⁸ *Reuters*, "Egypt's Sisi Says He Won't Hesitate to Send Troops to Gulf if Asked", February 17, 2016.

¹⁹ Thomas Erdbrink & Kareem Fahim, "Iran Accuses Saudi Arabia of Attacking Embassy in Yemen", *New York Times*, January 7, 2016.

²⁰ Shuaib Almosawa & Rick Gladstone, "Houthis, in Surprise Move, Form a Government in Yemen", *New York Times*, November 28, 2016.

violence in the conflict. Saudi airstrikes in September 2015 and October 2016, as well as American drone strikes in 2013, hit wedding parties along the Red Sea and in other parts of the country, creating enormous resentment, further fueling violent extremism.²¹ In December 2016, an Islamic State (IS) suicide bomber killed at least 48 Yemenis during a gathering of security officers in Aden.²² Also in December 2016, the Security Council, while not specifically citing the conflict in Yemen, condemned both ISIL and Al-Qaeda as “causing the deaths of innocent civilians and other victims, destruction of property, and greatly undermining stability.”²³ Saudi aerial bombing campaigns have also killed scores of Yemeni civilians and serious investigations, within the UN System and by journalists, into the humanitarian situation in Yemen were frequently stalled.²⁴ In July 2017, Saudi authorities reportedly delayed the departure of a UN aid flight from Djibouti to Sana’a until several British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporters exited the plane.²⁵ At the end of September 2017, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) agreed to send human rights experts to Yemen to investigate allegations of attacks and human rights violations.²⁶

Actors From Outside the Region

Concerns about continued confrontations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are legitimate and must be addressed but delegates to the Security Council must also remain cognizant of the fact that these regional powers are not operating in a vacuum. The United States has supported Saudi Arabia against the Houthis in Yemen, although concerns over civilian casualties have publicly surfaced several times. In January 2017, the newly inaugurated Trump administration ordered a raid in Yemen that resulted in significant civilian casualties as well as at least one US Navy SEAL casualty. Less than 2 weeks later, the USS Cole, famously damaged by Al-Qaeda in October 2000, began patrolling the Bab al-Mandab Strait.²⁷ In May 2017, US Navy SEALs, operating with Yemeni government cooperation, launched a second raid in May 2017 aimed at killing Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) fighters.²⁸ Security Council delegates may also wish to keep in mind that China, France, Japan and the United States all maintain important military bases and/or outposts in nearby Djibouti.²⁹

²¹ Shuaib Almosawa & Kareem Fahim, “Airstrikes in Yemen Hit Wedding Party, Killing Dozens”, *New York Times* September 28, 2015.

²² Saeed Al-Batati, “ISIS Suicide Attack Kills 48 in Southern Yemen”, *New York Times*, December 18, 2016.

²³ UN Security Council resolution 2322 (S/RES/2322), December 12, 2016, p. 1.

²⁴ Fatima Bohjani, “Seeking Accountability in Yemen”, *Foreign Affairs*, March 21, 2017.

²⁵ Rick Gladstone, “U.N. Expresses Alarm Over ‘Extreme Dangers’ for Yemeni Civilians”, *New York Times*, July 19, 2017.

²⁶ *BBC*, “Yemen war: UN agrees to send war crimes experts”, September 29, 2017.

²⁷ Dan DeLuce & Paul McLeary, “Yemen is the First Battleground in Trump’s Confrontation with Iran”, *Foreign Policy*, February 3, 2017.

²⁸ Eric Schmitt & Helene Cooper, “Navy SEALs Kill 7 Militants in Yemen Raid But Suffer Injuries”, *New York Times* May 23, 2017.

²⁹ Jane Perlez & Chris Buckley, “China Retools Its Military with a First Overseas Outpost in Djibouti”, *New York Times*, November 26, 2015.

War in the Time of Cholera³⁰

As the war in Yemen deepens, the humanitarian crisis confronting Yemen and the international community concomitantly intensifies. In mid-July 2017, the UN announced that it was suspending its cholera vaccine program in Yemen because of the rapid and rampant spread of the disease as well as the dangers of delivering food, medicine, and humanitarian aid during the current war.³¹ Improving the humanitarian situation in Yemen is both an immediate necessity as well as a prerequisite for long-term disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR). The revelations about the current cholera crisis contain even greater and crueler irony as Yemen has been experiencing severe water shortages for years. Endemic inefficiencies in Yemeni farming methods as well as the intensive cultivation of the narcotic plant qat have created catastrophic water shortages and are potentially fostering significant and sustained civil strife an armed conflict over access to water; in 2013, the Yemeni Ministry of the Interior estimated that land and water-related conflicts cause 4,000 annual deaths in the country.³²

Conclusion

Yemen's ongoing military conflicts and humanitarian crisis demand focused energy and resolve from the UN Security Council and the wider international community. Ending the current armed conflicts are clear priorities for the Security Council but it is essential that resolution of these conflicts underpin longer-term security and stability for Yemen, its neighbors, and the broader Middle East. Delegates to the Security Council may also wish to consider proposals for negotiations as well as long-term reconstruction and development initiatives. The Security Council will need to maintain its focus on Yemen similar to the July 12, 2017 briefing on Yemen and the June 16, 2017 Arria-formula meeting on the Role of Famine in Conflict-Affected Areas.

Guiding Questions:

How effectively are the Security Council, the international community, the government of Yemen, as well as interested regional and civil society actors, reducing tensions and/or ending armed conflict in Yemen? How might these initiatives be made more effective? Do these initiatives need to be enhanced, scaled up and/or supplanted?

How might the UN System as well as relevant actors and partners develop and implement peace plans that will be accepted and enacted, unlike the initiatives in both 2014 and 2016?

Has your country contributed military, police, and/or civilian personnel to the situation in Yemen?

³⁰ With the utmost respect and gratitude to Gabriel García Márquez and his masterpiece *Love in the Time of Cholera*, 1985.

³¹ Nick Cumming-Bruce & Rick Gladstone, "U.N. Suspending Plan for Cholera Vaccination in Yemen", *New York Times*, July 11, 2017.

³² Adam Hefez, "How Yemen Chewed Itself Dry", *Foreign Affairs*, July 23, 2013.

How might the UN System, including the Security Council and its international partners ensure that Yemen holds free, fair, and open elections within the next few years? What actions can the international system take to promote a peaceful transition of power following the elections?

How might the government of Yemen, Yemeni civil society actors, the UN System, and the international community most effectively ensure adequate and proper security for future elections?

What steps can be taken to assist Yemen through the process of post-conflict and post-cholera epidemic reconstruction?

How might the UNHCR, national governments, and civil society partners, including nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), assist in safe, timely and voluntary repatriation of Yemeni refugees as well as refugees currently in Yemen?

UN Security Council Resolutions:

UN Security Council resolution 2342, (S/RES/2342), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, February 23, 2017.

UN Security Council resolution 2266, (S/RES/2266), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, February 24, 2016.

UN Security Council resolution 2216, (S/RES/2216), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, April 14, 2015.

UN Security Council resolution 2204, (S/RES/2204), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, February 24, 2015.

UN Security Council resolution 2201, (S/RES/2201), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, February 15, 2015.

UN Security Council resolution 2140, (S/RES/2140), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, February 26, 2014.

UN Security Council resolution 2051, (S/RES/2051), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, June 12, 2012.

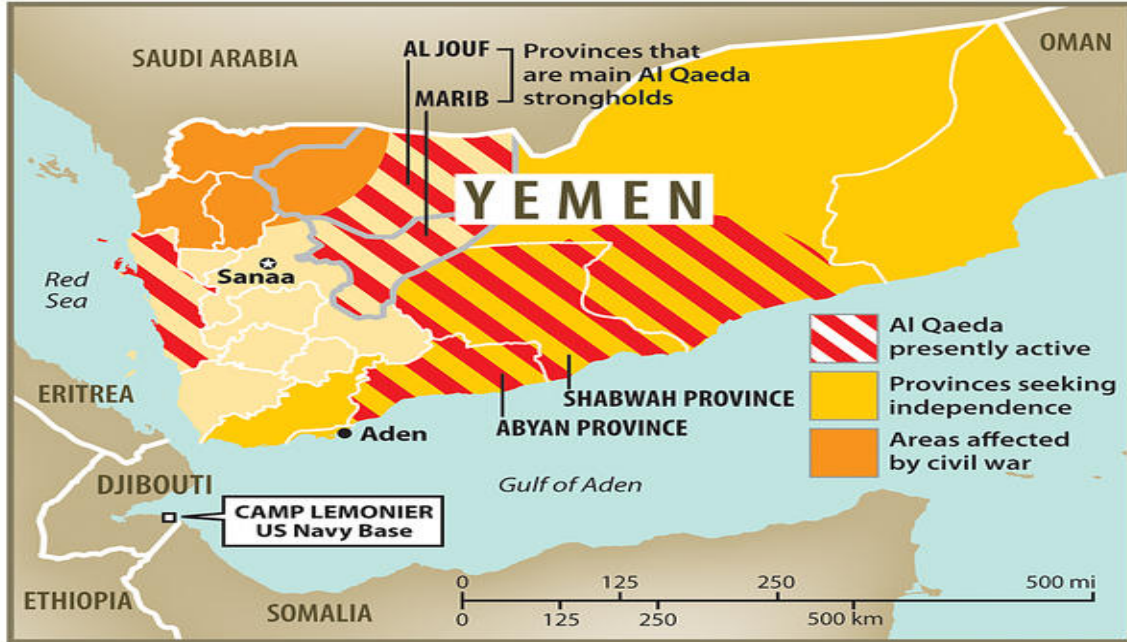
UN Security Council resolution 2014, (S/RES/2014), “The Situation in the Middle East (Yemen)”, October 21, 2011.

UN Security Council Mission Report:

UN Security Council Mission to Yemen, (S/2013/173), March 19, 2013.

UN Human Rights Council Report:

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: The Situation in Yemen", (A/HRC/33/38), August 4, 2016.



SOURCE: Graphic News

RICH CLABAUGH/STAFF

Yemen: Who controls what

