

# YEMEN: A BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE

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**REMOTE CONTROL**

Examining changes in military engagement

This report has been commissioned by **Remote Control**, a project of the Network for Social Change hosted by Oxford Research Group. The project examines changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote control warfare. This form of intervention takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.

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## Executive Summary

- Yemen is embroiled in multiple civil wars, triggered by a long-term decline in oil production, the failure of state-building, strong sub-national identities, and internal competition between rival elite networks that comprised the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.
- Regional actors have intervened in Yemen's local wars to support their preferred allies. The result is a complex conflict environment, revealing the strategic incoherence of the Saudi-led Coalition – which ostensibly aims to reinstate the current, exiled president, Abdurabbo Mansour Hadi – and the limitations of United Nations diplomacy.
- US arms exports to Coalition members account for 25% of US global sales. The US is the dominant arms supplier to Saudi Arabia, while Riyadh is Britain's largest arms export market.
- British and American military planners provide technical support and training to the Saudi air force, intended to improve Saudi targeting procedures and reduce the risk of civilian casualties in Saudi airstrikes.
- US military trainers work closely with the Emirati Special Forces, as part of a long-term programme to build capacity. Since March 2015, Emirati Special Forces have successfully taken Yemen's southern port cities of Aden and Mukalla, in cooperation with their US counterparts.
- The use by the US of unmanned combat aerial vehicles is becoming increasingly aggressive, progressing from hits in remote areas to strikes on al-Qaeda's leadership in Mukalla city. Strikes continue, even as Yemen's legitimate military and security apparatus has collapsed.
- The UN estimates more than 10,000 people have been killed since the start of the Coalition intervention and more than 80% of Yemenis require humanitarian assistance. Any resolution to Yemen's multiple wars will require sustained high-level mediation, and local-level peace-building efforts.
- The current Coalition intervention in Yemen may influence the conduct of future wars. Coalition activities in Yemen can be viewed as a capacity building exercise for increasingly activist Gulf armies, supplied, trained and supported by the West.
- Western governments must confront the problems of arming and supporting regional allies who do not have the capacity or political will to uphold international norms, on international humanitarian law.



## Introduction

Yemen is embroiled in multiple civil wars, triggered by a long-term decline in oil production, the failure of state-building, and internal competition between rival elite networks that comprised the regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Historic subnational identities are reasserting themselves, alongside the emerging phenomenon of sectarianism – in which, crudely speaking, northern Zaydi Shia militias combat Sunni armed groups in the south. In this fertile environment, terrorist groups are also expanding.

The current cycle of violence began in 2014 when the Houthis – an armed group with a Zaydi revivalist agenda (see box 2), apparently backed by Iran – took control of the capital, Sana'a. In reality, Saleh was working behind the scenes, in partnership with the Houthis, to dislodge his successor, President Abdurabbo Mansour Hadi. In March 2015, Hadi fled to Riyadh and called on the Gulf states and the Arab League to provide immediate support 'by all necessary means and measures, including military intervention' to reinstate his government.<sup>1</sup>

The Arab Coalition assembled to reinstall President Hadi comprises five of the six member states of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), but not Oman – along with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan. Saudi Arabia leads the air campaign in the north, and concentrates on building partnerships with tribes in the north and west, where Riyadh's transnational patronage ties are traditionally strong. The UAE leads in Yemen's south and east, working with local militias, boosted by small numbers of special forces on the ground.

The Coalition campaign is now running into its 19th month. As a result of Coalition airstrikes,<sup>2</sup> restrictions on commercial imports and banking,<sup>3</sup> and the profiteering

of armed groups and well-established smuggling networks, the poorest country in the Middle East has endured the destruction of the formal economy, the decimation of its essential infrastructure, and massive commodity price inflation, which has – in turn – precipitated an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The UN estimates more than 10,000 people have been killed, and many thousands more injured since the start of the Coalition intervention; three million people have fled their homes and more than 80% of the 26-million-strong population is in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>4</sup>

This paper sets Yemen's multiple conflicts in the context of the 'remote control' approach to warfare – focusing on the use of special forces, mercenaries and armed drones. It highlights the moral and political risks for Western governments training and arming regional protagonists, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It also discusses the question of where accountability lies, especially in relation to the use of armed drones, which continue despite the effective collapse of Yemen's formal military and security institutions under President Hadi's constitutional control.

It further sets the Coalition campaign in Yemen in the context of a gradual shift towards a more 'realist' approach in US foreign policy, in which America's Gulf allies are expected to contribute towards managing regional security.<sup>5</sup> This comes as a younger generation of aspiring Gulf leaders appear willing to take a more active and assertive role in security and statecraft. In this sense, Coalition activities in Yemen can be viewed as a capacity building exercise for increasingly activist Gulf armies, supplied, trained and supported by the West.

By contrast, any resolution to Yemen's multiple wars will require sustained high-level mediation, and long-term local-level peace-building efforts.

1 See UN Security Council resolution 2216 (2015), second introductory paragraph.

2 Bombing Businesses: Saudi Coalition Airstrikes on Yemen's Civilian Economic Structures – Human Rights Watch – July 10, 2016

3 <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2016/03/looming-banking-crisis-in-yemen-risks-pushing-millions-into-famine>

4 <http://www.unocha.org/yemen/crisis-overview>

5 In a recent interview with The Atlantic magazine, President Obama criticised America's Gulf allies for 'showing an unwillingness to put any skin in the game' and made it clear that he expected them to play a more active role in preserving regional security. 'Free riders aggravate me,' he stated. See The Obama Doctrine – The Atlantic – April 2016

## Box 1: Yemen's policy context

Since 9/11, Western policymakers have primarily framed their goals in Yemen in terms of counter-terrorism, twinned with diplomatic efforts to promote good governance and development. Component elements of the counter-terrorism programme included training elite army units led by Saleh's close relatives, intelligence sharing, and targeted assassinations. Concerns that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) would exploit future political instability encouraged Western governments to prolong their support for Saleh, despite widespread concerns about elite corruption and internal regime stability.

Following 'Arab Spring' street protests during 2011, the West and the GCC backed a controlled transition from Saleh to his deputy, Hadi, who oversaw the formation of a power-sharing government in which the Islamist opposition, Islah, shared cabinet posts with Saleh's former ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC).<sup>6</sup> Hadi initiated the National Dialogue Congress, a popular consultation process designed to inform a new constitution, while embarking on military restructuring. (Saleh, who was protected by an immunity agreement and remained head of the GPC, opted to play for time.)

During 2014, Saleh sabotaged Yemen's fragile political transition by forming an alliance with the Houthis, an armed group from the northern province of Saada, and their political affiliate, Ansar Allah. In September 2014, Ansar Allah seized power in Sana'a with Saleh's support, while Houthi militias and former army units under Saleh's command expanded the territory under their combined control and concentrated on routing their respective rivals. In March 2015, Saleh-Houthi forces hounded Hadi out of the country, triggering Coalition airstrikes and the effective collapse of the legitimate government.

The current crisis represents a historic renegotiation of Yemen's elite political settlement – compromising flexible but resilient networks of informal relationships that cut across and often supersede formal institutions – which takes place in the context of the country's unmanaged transition to a post-oil economy.<sup>7</sup> Multiple external actors have chosen to intervene in this process in order to give qualified support their preferred allies, providing valuable arms, money and training that fuel these parallel horizontal and vertical power struggles. The result is a complex conflict environment, revealing the strategic incoherence of the Coalition, and the limitations of United Nations-led diplomacy.

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6 During Saleh's presidency, Islah belonged to a coalition of opposition parties, including the Nasserites and the Yemeni Socialist Party, known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). In 2012, Islah was awarded its share of cabinet posts as part of a 50/50 power-sharing deal with the JMP.

7 Yemen passed 'peak oil' in 2002, at 457,000 barrels a day. Production had almost halved by 2011, at 241,000 barrels a day, and fell to 47,000 in 2015. See BP Statistical Review of World Energy, June 2016

# 1. Arms transfers and support to the Coalition

## 1.1 Coalition arms imports

Saudi Arabia became the world's second largest arms importer during the period between 2011 and 2015,<sup>8</sup> and moved to third position in global military spending in 2015, behind the US and China, with spending totalling \$87.2 billion.<sup>9</sup> Between the start of Obama's presidency in 2009, and 2015, the US and the UK together have supplied three quarters of Saudi Arabia's arms.<sup>10</sup> The Saudi Royal Air Force – equipped with Eurofighter Typhoons, Panavia Tornado, and Boeing F-15S Eagle strike aircraft, fitted with advanced electronics and weapons systems – is attempting to evolve its operational doctrine from primarily defensive purposes to develop increasingly offensive capabilities.<sup>11</sup>

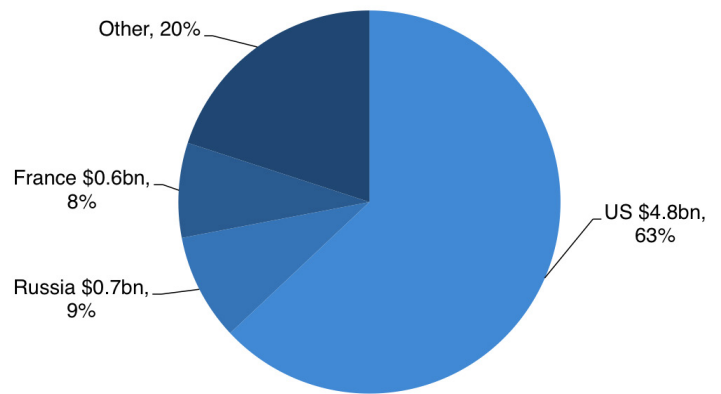
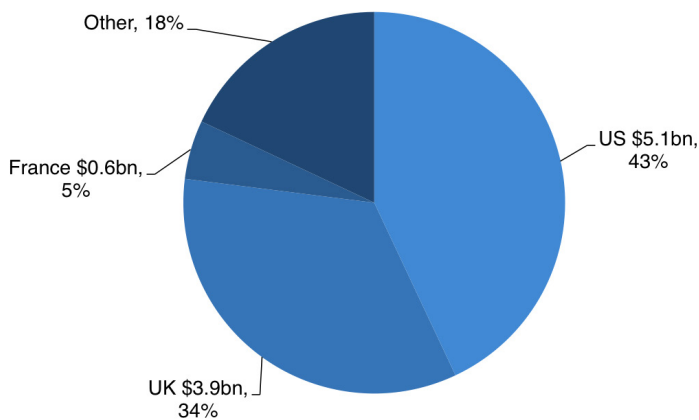
Since the start of the Coalition campaign in Yemen, the US has approved more than \$20bn in arms sales to Riyadh, including surface-to-air missiles, and Paveway laser-guided bombs.<sup>12</sup> In addition, high-level agreements between the US and the Saudi leadership for future deliveries are reported to run to further billions.<sup>13</sup> The UK has also licensed more than £3.3bn (\$4.3bn) in arms sales to the country since the Saudi-led bombing of Yemen began.<sup>14</sup>

Riyadh is the largest single customer for US arms, and the US is Riyadh's largest arms supplier, accounting for 43% of market share.<sup>15</sup> British sales to Saudi Arabia account for 34% of market share, and 45% of UK arms exports.<sup>16</sup> The US is also the dominant arms supplier to Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Egypt, and the second largest supplier to Jordan (after the Netherlands) and Morocco (after France).<sup>17</sup> Taken together, US arms exports to Coalition members account for 25% of US global sales.<sup>18</sup>

**Fig. 1: International arms sales to Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the UAE**

**KSA arms suppliers by market share 2009-2015**

**UAE arms suppliers by market share 2009-2015**



8 <http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2016/at-feb-2016>

9 <http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2016/milex-apr-2016>

10 <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

11 IHS Jane's World Air Forces, 2016 (Issue 43)

12 <http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales>

13 Yemen's guerrilla war tests military ambitions of big-spending Saudis – Reuters - April 19, 2016. America Is Complicit in the Carnage in Yemen – New York Times – August 17, 2016

14 The Guardian view on Yemen: stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia – The Guardian - August 17 2016

15 <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>. Figures based on 2009-2015. US exports to Saudi Arabia constitute only eight per cent of the USA's total global arms sales.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

## 1.2 Targeting support to Saudi Arabia

Parallel to this exponential increase in arms sales to Saudi Arabia comes a need for unprecedented technical support. Despite prior engagement by US military trainers with Saudi Arabia's National Guard, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense (MoD), the Coalition air campaign in Yemen has revealed the extent of additional training and technical support that the Saudi military requires to be effective at this operational scale. In February 2016, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced an additional \$200m in support services to the Saudi MoD.<sup>19</sup>

Given the high reported rate of civilian casualties in Yemen, particularly resulting from Coalition air strikes,<sup>20</sup> British and American officials have come under repeated pressure to provide reassurances that they are satisfied with Saudi targeting procedures, including the provision of reliable intelligence to guide the use of precision bombs. Western sources privately acknowledge that the Saudis lack the requisite institutional infrastructure to support the use of such weapons.<sup>21</sup> Hence, the Wall Street Journal reported that US military planners have been 'using live intelligence feeds from surveillance flights over Yemen to help Saudi Arabia decide what and where to bomb'.<sup>22</sup>

According to the New York Times, US personnel have also advised inexperienced Saudi pilots, fearful of enemy ground fire, how to fly safely at lower altitudes to improve the accuracy of their bombing.<sup>23</sup> Pentagon lawyers have reportedly trained their Saudi counterparts on the legality of Coalition strikes, while US software programmes have reportedly helped the Saudis to model the type of target damage caused by specific

types of munitions.<sup>24</sup> Reuters claimed that 50-60 U.S. military personnel were providing coordination and support to the Saudi-led coalition, while '6 to 10 Americans have worked directly inside the Saudi air operations centre in Riyadh'.<sup>25</sup>

In January 2016, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir confirmed that British military advisers were also present in the control centre, and were aware of the target lists.<sup>26</sup> British military officers have also provided targeting training to the Saudi air force, including specific advice on the use of Storm Shadow, an air-launched cruise missile.<sup>27</sup> However, the UK government insists that British military personnel are not involved in selecting targets, or directing or conducting operations in Yemen; instead, British officials stress that service personnel provide their Saudi counterparts with guidance on best practice techniques and compliance with international humanitarian law.<sup>28</sup>

In February 2016, the Saudis announced a commission of inquiry to investigate civilian deaths, which has yet to report.<sup>29</sup> Despite this, British officials face sustained opposition to ongoing arms sales to Riyadh,<sup>30</sup> and two parliamentary committees are scrutinising the sale of UK-manufactured arms to Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the

19 <http://www.dsca.mil/major-arms-sales/kingdom-saudi-arabia-support-services-1>

20 <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=53480#.V4TKhJMrLwc>

21 Author interviews.

22 U.S. Boosts Aid in Saudi-Led Fight To Defeat Rebel Force in Yemen – Wall Street Journal – March 27, 2015

23 Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen – New York Times - March 13, 2016

24 Yemen's guerrilla war tests military ambitions of big-spending Saudis – Reuters - April 19, 2016

25 Ibid.

26 UK military 'working alongside' Saudi bomb targeters in Yemen war – Daily Telegraph - 15 January 2016. British and US military 'in command room' for Saudi strikes on Yemen - The Guardian - 15 January 2016

27 UK military officers give targeting training to Saudi military - The Guardian - 15 April 2016. See also IHS Jane's World Air Forces, 2016 (Issue 43) for information on routine training.

28 Ibid.

29 Britain urges Saudi Arabia to speed up inquiry into Yemen intervention - The Guardian - April 27 2016.

30 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/04/hrw-letter-british-foreign-secretary-philip-hammond>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/05/26/reply-british-foreign-secretary-philip-hammond>

31 <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/committee-on-arms-export-controls/news->



Campaign Against Arms Trade is bringing a judicial review against the UK government for failing in its legal duty to assess the risk that military technology or equipment might be used in the commission of serious violations of international humanitarian law before approving ongoing transfers or new licences.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3. Training and cooperation with UAE Special Forces

During the last decade, US military trainers have worked closely to support capacity building within the Emirati military, including specialist training to the elite Presidential Guard.<sup>33</sup> Emirati Special Forces deployed alongside US Special Operations Forces in Libya and Afghanistan, while Emirati pilots have participated in air strikes against the Islamic State.<sup>34</sup> However, the deployment of Emirati Special Forces in Yemen in 2015 and 2016 represents the first time they have been tested at scale, in a lead position.

The UAE led a successful amphibious landing to retake the port city of Aden from Saleh-Houthi forces in July 2015.<sup>35</sup> The Emiratis reportedly consulted US special operations troops stationed in Abu Dhabi during the planning stages, and designed their deployment according to US training

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parliament-2015/uk-arms-yemen-launch-15-16/. See also: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmintdev/532/53202.htm>

32 British arms exports to Saudi Arabia to be scrutinised in high court – The Guardian – 30 June 2016. See also Foreign Office retracts statements to MPs on Saudi campaign in Yemen – Guardian - July 21 2016. In June 2016, US Congress voted down a proposed ban on the sale of cluster bombs to Saudi Arabia. See A cluster bomb made in America shattered lives in Yemen's capital – Washington Post – July 9, 2016

33 See IHS Jane's World Armies: 'The UAE land forces appear to be on the verge of a major transformation effort as a result of the growing interest of the country's leaders in developing an expeditionary warfare capability to allow greater participation in peacekeeping, humanitarian and regional stability operations.' Issue 39, 2016

34 In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta' – Washington Post - November 9, 2014

35 Analysis: Emirati armoured brigade spearheads Aden breakout - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 07 August 2015. See also: Yemen counter-terrorism mission shows UAE military ambition – Reuters – June 28 2016.

models,<sup>36</sup> but they executed the operation without US assistance.<sup>37</sup> An Emirati battle group landed all-terrain armoured vehicles, and flew in Apache helicopters, after a specialist team was able to repair the bomb-damaged airport.<sup>38</sup>

In August 2015, Emirati-led forces pushed north from Aden to Al-Anad airbase, which functions as a forward operating base for Coalition assistance to allied Yemeni forces battling for control over Taiz city and Taiz province (see p.11).<sup>39</sup> A month later, Emirati forces established an additional base for Coalition and allied forces in Marib province, some 170km west of Sana'a (see p.11). The Coalition uses both sites as training bases for Yemeni resistance fighters, some of whom have since been integrated into the Yemeni national army.<sup>40</sup>

In spring 2016, the Emiratis shifted their attention to AQAP, which had taken advantage of widespread chaos following the collapse of Hadi's government, to expand along the southern coast (see p.12). In April, the New York Times reported that Emirati fighter jets bombed 'military facilities and government buildings' housing AQAP fighters in the port city of Mukalla, leading to AQAP's withdrawal.<sup>41</sup> However, local mediation efforts also played a significant role in negotiating AQAP's departure, allowing Emirati troops – and US special forces – to establish a ground presence in and around the city.<sup>42</sup>

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36 Author interview.

37 Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen – New York Times - March 13, 2016.

38 Saudi, UAE forces deployed to Yemen - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 22 July 2015. Apaches deployed to Aden - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 12 August 2015.

39 Arab states deploy more ground forces to Yemen - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 10 September 2015. Arab coalition deploys Patriot to Yemen - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 09 October 2015. UAE to rotate troops deployed to Yemen - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 04 November 2015. UAE Patriots credited with two intercepts in Yemen - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 17 November 2015.

40 UAE trains new Yemeni army - IHS Jane's Defence Weekly - 25 November 2015.

41 Yemeni Troops, Backed by United Arab Emirates, Take City From Al Qaeda – New York Times - April 24, 2016

42 Author interviews

US support during the entry to Mukalla included naval deployment in the Gulf of Aden, and 'intelligence support... [to] identify militant targets'.<sup>43</sup> The US has since deployed a team of Special Operations advisors to the city, as part of a broader effort to reestablish counterterrorism work that was disrupted during the Houthi expansion in 2015.<sup>44</sup> Sources in Mukalla report that Emirati Special Forces have detained and interrogated dozens of individuals, including imams and community leaders, presumed to be associated with AQAP; in the view of the authors, possibly to gather intelligence which is shared with the US.<sup>45</sup>

The Emiratis have reportedly deployed former soldiers from Latin America to bolster their capacity in Yemen, including foreign nationals recruited to the UAE security forces as part of a longer-term capacity building programme from the late 2000s onwards.<sup>46</sup>

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43 U.S. Special Operations force extends Yemen mission against al-Qaeda – Washington Post – June 17 2016.

44 Ibid. A second US team is conducting a parallel mission, elsewhere in Yemen, to identify local figures who might cooperate on counter-terrorism.

45 Author interviews. See also: UAE abuses in the south receive little attention – Yemen Peace Project - July 7 2016, and Emirati forces run extrajudicial prisons across the South - Yemen Peace Project - July 15 2016

46 Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight – New York Times - November 25, 2015. See also IHS Jane's World Armies: 'The composition of the armed forces reflects a high dependence on foreign expatriate personnel, with Egyptians, Moroccans, Baluchis and Sudanese personnel currently serving in relatively high numbers.' Issue 39, 2016

## 2. Multiple wars in Yemen

Conflict analysis conducted for this paper suggests that multiple Yemeni sources perceive the Saudis and the Emiratis, while operating under the united banner of the Arab Coalition, to be working through different local networks inside Yemen.<sup>47</sup> Saudi Arabia is allied with an Islamist political party, Islah, which includes a Muslim Brotherhood faction, while the Emiratis – who regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a covert threat to their own national security<sup>48</sup> – are perceived to be allied with Salafi groups, and others.<sup>49</sup>

### Box 2: Religious and political identity in Yemen

**Zaydi Shia:** Unique branch of Shia Islam, prevalent in northern Yemen since the 9th century. The Houthis emerged as part of a Zaydi revivalist movement during the 2000s, and several members of the Houthi family established personal ties to Iranian religious leaders. However, Zaydis are doctrinally distinct from Twelver Shiism, which is found in Iran.

**Sunni Shafai:** One of four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Prevalent in south and east Yemen. Historically, non-politicized.

**Salafi:** Salafism is a Sunni revivalist movement that seeks to return to the purity of early Islam. Many so-called 'quietest' Salafis, who previously rejected democratic politics, have become politically active since the 2011 street protests, including those who supported the creation of a new Salafi party, al-Rashad Union. After the Houthis closed a residential Salafi institute in Dammaj in 2014, many residents returned to their homes elsewhere in Yemen and have since taken up arms against the Houthis, especially in Taiz and Aden.

**General People's Congress (GPC):** Secular-style, northern-dominated former ruling party, which dispensed patronage during Saleh's presidency. Saleh remains head of the party; Hadi is also a senior member, but heads a rival faction.

**Islah:** Socially conservative coalition of political Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, and powerful tribes, including some sheikhs with elite ties to Saleh. Largest 'opposition' party under Saleh.

**Southern separatism:** Legacy of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), which governed the south between 1962 and 1990. Separatists seek to restore an independent state in the south, restoring PDRY borders. Leadership is highly fragmented.

**Centrist parties and independent youth:** Emerged during 2011 protests, including al-Watan and Justice and Building. Currently disenfranchised.

47 Author interviews.

48 See The Social Contract in the GCC – Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme Workshop Summary - 11–12 January 2016

49 Author interviews. See also The UAE's Yemen Pivot Could Make Differences With Riyadh Unbridgeable – World Politics Review - June 28, 2016. See also 'Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State – Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme Research Paper - May 2016





## 2.1 North-west (Saudi-led)

Saleh-Houthi forces control the populous northern highlands, including Sana'a. This area is predominantly Zaydi Shia, and home to the traditional Hashemite aristocracy who governed the north for centuries with support from the tribes. Since the 1980s, Sana'a has formed the powerbase of the northern Republican elite, and the nucleus of Saleh's patronage network. However, elite tensions became increasingly apparent during the 2000s, as rival factions competed for resources, at a time when oil production was falling.

Internal regime divisions were further exposed by the 2011 uprising, which saw Saleh's most powerful general, Ali Mohsin, and a powerful tribal family affiliated with Islah (p.8) – the al-Ahmars – side with the street protestors.<sup>50</sup> Competition between these rival factions intensified during Hadi's presidency, under the framework of the transition agreement, which required Saleh's GPC to share power with Islah (p.4). The transition agreement essentially formalised elite rivalry, while also empowering Hadi as a new beneficiary.

When Hadi – a southerner, by birth – acted on the recommendations of the National Dialogue Congress to devise a new federal constitution, which would devolve power from Sana'a (and deny the Houthis access to the Red Sea), the Salehs and the Houthis formed a pragmatic alliance to seize control. Although Hadi had made some attempts to restructure the military, much of Saleh's loyalty network remained intact, especially within the Republican Guard, commanded by his eldest son Ahmed Ali, and other elite units that had been equipped and trained by the West. After Saleh-Houthi forces seized Sana'a in September 2014, they pursued their rivals to Bayda and Marib (October), Ibb (November), Taiz (February 2015), and Aden (March 2015).

Fearing Iranian backing for the Houthis, Riyadh has tried to arm and finance the Houthis' domestic opponents, including local tribes, as well as the beneficiaries of patronage networks linked to Ali Moshin,

50 'Yemen: Corruption, Capital Flight and Global Drivers of Conflict' - A Chatham House Report - September 2103

the al-Ahmars, and Islah. Since March 2015, the Saudis have provided training to loyalist army units at Sharorah, in the Saudi border province of Najran, and in al-Abr, in the Yemeni border province of Hadramaut; both Sharorah and al-Abr are located on the supply route to the Coalition base in Marib. From these training camps, fighters are sent to the contested areas of Al-Jawf, Marib, and al-Bayda (p.11), while intermediaries attempt to build allegiances within Sana'a.

Coalition air strikes have targeted Saleh's extant security infrastructure in and around Sana'a, including: Republican Guard bases; underground weapon storage depots; an extensive network of covert tunnels, dating back to the 1990s; and the military airbase, including ballistic missiles storage facilities. In May, a Coalition spokesperson announced that Saada city had been designated a military target;<sup>51</sup> however, Saada had already endured multiple cycles of conflict during an erratic civil war (2004-2010) stoked by internal regime rivalries, which generated widespread property destruction.<sup>52</sup> Saleh-Houthi forces have also made limited cross-border forays into Saudi Arabia, and launched ballistic missile strikes against targets inside Saudi Arabia.

## 2.2 Central Yemen (contested areas)

The contested areas of central Yemen correspond roughly to the boundaries of two historic religious traditions, Zaydi and Sunni. However, these are highly localised conflicts between Saleh-Houthi forces and their allies on the one hand, and Islah networks managed by local allies and proxies on the other. In some cases, these conflicts date back to 2011 or before, stoked by internal regime power struggles. Since March 2015, anti-Houthi forces have drawn on finance and logistical support from Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Loyalist army units secure the supply routes, while local tribes do most of the fighting.<sup>53</sup>

51 Targeting Saada: Unlawful Coalition Airstrikes on Saada City in Yemen – Human Rights Watch - June 30, 2015

52 War in Saada From Local Insurrection to National Challenge – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace - Middle East Program Number 110, April 2010

53 Author interviews



## Marib

Marib city and its immediate surroundings are the only areas where Hadi can claim to have effective control, and where the governor – an Islahi – is able to maintain security. Marib city is strategically situated on the main transit route between Sana'a and the country's eastern oil and gas fields. Fighting is concentrated in the western mountains, marking the start of a 130km, 1000m ascent to Sana'a. Marib governorate is socially mixed between Zaydi and Sunni.

## Al-Bayda

Al-Bayda is a marginalised, predominantly Sunni governorate, where the population is highly dependent on remittances. The terrain is mountainous, and in recent years, it has become a stronghold for Sunni extremist networks, including AQAP and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS, or Daesh). Since March 2015, local sheikhs have chosen to align with different factions: some are trained and financed by the Saudis and allied to Hadi, Islah or Ali Mohsin; others, including the Salafis, are perceived to work with the Emiratis. Saleh has long-term patronage networks in Al-Bayda.

## Taiz

Taiz city marks the frontline between Saleh-Houthi forces in the north, and Coalition-backed resistance forces in the south. It is strategically sited on the main transit route between Sana'a, and Aden. Saleh-Houthi forces have been able to maintain their presence on the high ground to the north and east of the city, in part due to perceived rivalry between Saudi-backed and Emirati-backed resistance networks, who do not cooperate as well as they could.<sup>54</sup>

In Taiz, as in al-Bayda, Riyadh has chosen to ally with Islahi militias, including tribal fighters linked to Sheikh Hamud Sa'id al-Mikhlaifi, and Sadiq Ali Sarhan, a brigadier general loyal to Ali Mohsin. Riyadh also works with Youssef al-Sharaji, who commands an army battalion nominally loyal to Hadi, and also has personal ties to Al-Mohsin. The Emiratis are perceived to have allied with a Salafi leader, Abu al-Abbas, formerly resident at Dammaj (see p.8).<sup>55</sup>

54 Author interviews

55 Author interviews

From August 2015 onwards, Saleh-Houthi forces and local allies imposed a near-total blockade of commercial and humanitarian goods entering Taiz. The siege has partially eased since resistance forces succeeded in establishing a supply line from the south, with the support of Coalition forces stationed at al-Anad. Saleh-Houthi forces have since relinquished control of the city centre and resistance forces are gradually driving them further towards the city fringes, but shelling of civilian targets continues. There is no overall control in resistance-held areas inside the city centre.

## 2.3 South and east (Emirati-led)

By deploying special forces in Aden and Mukalla, the Emiratis have been able to shape the facts on the ground – but only to a certain extent. As a result of outreach to powerbrokers in Aden, Lahj, al-Dhala and Mukalla, the Emiratis have also established significant ties with southern separatist groups. The Emiratis are the only members of the Coalition with the capacity to map the grassroots distribution of power and engage with local actors, because they are the only national force to maintain a significant in-country presence, trained according to the US model.

## Aden

Saleh-Houthi forces occupied Aden in March 2015, with support from Saleh loyalists inside the city. Resistance fighters included: local Islahis; southern separatists from Aden; southern separatists from Lahj and al-Dhala; tribal fighters from Abyan and loyal to Hadi; former residents of the Salafi institute in Dammaj (see p.8); and civilian volunteers recruited through the mosques, including those who were drawn into local AQAP networks. The resistance was coordinated by deputy governor Nayef al-Bakri, an Islahi.

When Emirati forces landed in Aden in July 2015, they sought to establish their own alliances as alternatives to Islah. Notably, the Emiratis are perceived to have allied with al-Nahda, a proto-Salafi political organisation in Aden with a separatist agenda based on religious identity.<sup>56</sup> Broadly speaking, both al-Nahda and Islah represent Sunni religious

56 Al-Rabita al-Nahda wal-Taghayyir, the League of Revival and Change, established 2011.

interests, but Islah is pro-unity, due to the historic influence of northern sheikhs within the party, whereas al-Nahda is associated with Sunni self-determination in the south; al-Rashad Union (see p.8) is perceived to have soft ties to Riyadh, and to be pro-unity.

While the Emirati presence initially led to greater cohesion among resistance fighters and helped to drive Saleh-Houthi forces from the city, the Emiratis have since struggled to capitalise on early gains due to intense competition between rival armed groups, including ISIS and AQAP. Hadi's cabinet has now returned to Aden, even as Hadi's presidential office remains in Riyadh; yet the government only controls three city neighbourhoods out of seven, and ministers are confined to a heavily-fortified 'green zone' style complex. The lack of security has prevented the Emiratis from delivering on promises to rebuild schools and hospitals. In addition, Saleh retains an active network inside Aden.

### **Coastal south (Abyan and Shabwa)**

The coastal provinces of Abyan and Shabwa, located between Aden and Mukalla, function as a 'no man's land', where local tribes and rival separatist leaders have reached a de facto non-interference agreement with AQAP, who have some (fluctuating) freedom of movement. Hadi, who was born in Abyan, maintains a limited patronage network in his home governorate. The Houthis are a common enemy for all armed groups operating in these provinces, but neither the Saudis, nor the Emiratis, have established any strong alliances.

### **Mukalla**

Mukalla is a port city and provincial capital, in the eastern desert province of Hadramaut. In April 2015, shortly after Hadi fled to Riyadh, AQAP attacked the central prison in Mukalla, freeing around one hundred of their members, including local leader and media propagandist Khalid Batarfi.<sup>57</sup> AQAP

also looted the local branch of the Central Bank, established checkpoints at the city's entrance, and seized control of the local military base (allegedly with assistance from Saleh's allies), looting its heavy weapons.<sup>58</sup>

From April 2015 onwards, AQAP effectively ran Mukalla's municipal council in partnership with local sheikhs and Salafi groups, after successful mediation efforts prevented expected clashes with the hinterland tribes.<sup>59</sup> The council was able to reclaim some of the money AQAP had looted from the Central Bank, in order to support the delivery of local services. The council also levied its own taxes at the port, which became an important entry point for imported diesel and petrol, subsequently trucked all over the country, including Sana'a.

Paradoxically, during this period, Mukalla was one of the most stable cities in Yemen, with tightly regulated commodity prices and low levels of violence. Despite AQAP's evident presence inside the city, the Coalition did not conduct any airstrikes in Mukalla; although US UCAV strikes did target senior AQAP figures (see p.15). Nevertheless, AQAP operated fairly freely in Mukalla until April 2016, when a successful mediation effort contributed to their negotiated withdrawal, to avoid the destruction of the city ahead of the Emirati takeover.

Since April 2016, the Emiratis have sought to establish pragmatic alliances in Mukalla but their relationships with the Salafis are complicated by individuals' allegiance to AQAP during the previous 12-month period in which AQAP controlled the city, and shared power with the Salafis on the municipal council. A new governing body, largely staffed by separatists aligned with the Emiratis, has replaced the previous council. The governor of Hadramaut, appointed by Hadi and based in Mukalla, liaises with the cabinet in Aden and the president's office in Riyadh, and works closely with Emirati troops stationed in the city.

57 Yemen: Al-Qaeda operative Khalid Batarfi takes selfies inside Mukalla government – International Business Times (IBT) – 4 April 2015. Three militants, three soldiers killed in Yemen – CNN - 18 March 2011

58 Al-Qaida seize control of military headquarters in Hadramout – Al-Jazeera Arabic – 3 April 2015

59 Yemen: The truth behind al-Qaeda's takeover of Mukalla – Al Jazeera English – 16 September 2015

### 3. The use of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV)

#### 3.1 UCAV strikes in Yemen prior to 2015

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2008), US officials established the basic architecture of Yemen's counter-terrorism institutions and began to partner with Saleh on intelligence gathering. Elite units receiving US weapons and training included: the Republican Guard Special Forces, under the command of Saleh's eldest son, Ahmed Ali; the Central Security Forces, led by Saleh's nephew, Yahya; and the National Security Bureau, under the de facto control of Yahya's brother, Ammar. The first – and only – reported UCAV strike during the Bush presidency in Yemen took place in November 2002, killing Abu Ali Al-Harithi, a senior Al-Qaeda member and suspect in the bombing of the USS Cole, which killed 17 US sailors in Aden harbor in 2000.<sup>60</sup>

During Obama's presidency, the use of UCAVs has increased exponentially, to become the most visible and controversial feature of US counter-terrorism policy in Yemen. Since 2011, the number of UCAV strikes has averaged 10-12 a month, or two a week (see fig. 2).<sup>61</sup> The use of UCAVs has also become increasingly aggressive, progressing over time from strikes conducted exclusively in remote or rural areas, to residential areas, to Mukalla city (see p. 14). In addition, those in command of the elite security units that support UCAV strikes,

such as the National Security Bureau, have been able to capture exclusive resources and political capital associated with US counter-terrorism assistance, further driving elite rivalry.<sup>62</sup>

In 2011, the 'Arab Spring' protestors voiced popular anger at Saleh's enduring control over elite military and security positions, which prolonged his rule. Saleh's resignation from the presidency provoked a national debate about governance and security, in the context of planned military restructuring and wider discussions about political legitimacy. However, the number of UCAV strikes increased dramatically during Hadi's first year in power (see fig. 2), leading critics of the transition process to suggest that Hadi's willingness to authorise UCAV strikes had influenced US support for his presidency.

Hadi had, in fact, given permission for US military personnel to establish a presence at al-Anad airbase in early 2012 and to operate more openly than Saleh had formerly allowed.<sup>63</sup> In 2013, the National Dialogue Congress voted to ban the use of UCAVs, or any form of extrajudicial killing. Later that year, the Yemeni parliament also voted to ban the use of UCAVs and asked the government to use the military and security forces to pursue suspected terrorists. Despite this, the US-led UCAV programme continues.

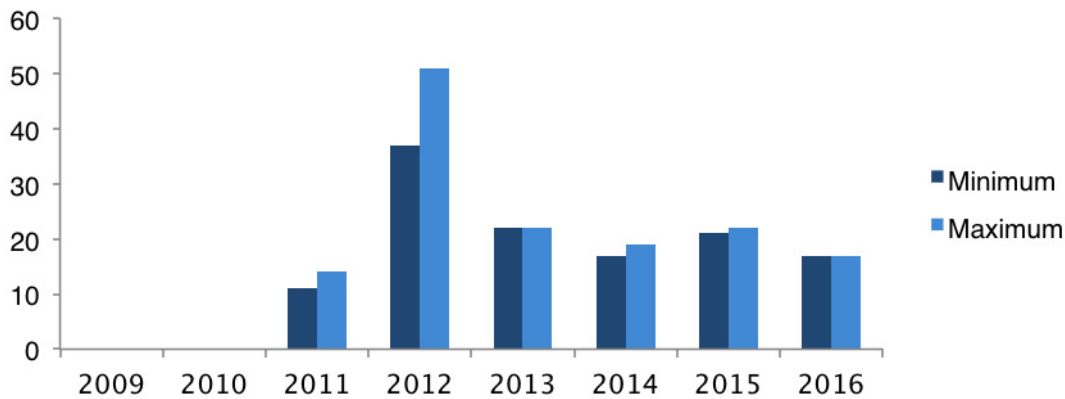
60 CIA 'killed al-Qaeda suspects' in Yemen – BBC Online - 5 November, 2002

61 Research for this paper – based on interviews with residents from Mukalla, Shabwa, Marib, Aljawf and Baydhaa - suggests that the actual number is higher, as the Bureau for Investigative Journalism didn't include a number of UCAV strikes in Hadhramout between April and August 2015, in addition to UCAV strikes in Marib and Al-Jawf in October 2015.

62 The National Security Bureau (NSB) operates in parallel with Yemen's long-standing intelligence agency, the Political Security Organisation (PSO), which reportedly had ties with Islamists, dating back to the 1980s and early 1990s, including with the Yemeni mujahideen who fought the USSR in Afghanistan. Ali Mohsin has historical links to the PSO.

63 Britain's Covert War in Yemen – VICE News - April 7, 2016

**Fig. 2: UCAV strikes during Obama's presidency**



(Source: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism)

### 3.2 UCAV strikes during 2015 and 2016

In January 2015, during a dispute over the proposed new federal constitution, the Houthis kidnapped Hadi's chief of staff, Ahmed bin Mubarak, and placed Hadi himself under house arrest. The cabinet's decision to resign en masse, on January 22, plunged the country into constitutional limbo, leaving Houthi militias and Saleh loyalists in de facto control of the presidential palace, government ministries, and key security and intelligence institutions. UCAV strikes continued, even as the legitimate state apparatus was no longer functioning, and related human intelligence networks became compromised.

On January 26, a UCAV strike occurred in Hareeb, Shabwa province, according to a senior tribal leader.<sup>64</sup> Local tribesmen testified that four missiles hit a vehicle near the main road of Hareeb-Baihan between Shabwa and Marib killing everyone inside instantly.<sup>65</sup> Five days later, on January 31, another UCAV strike hit a vehicle in Al-Saeed district in Shabwa.<sup>66</sup> A third UCAV strike took place on 2 February, in the area of Maswarah between Shabwa and Baydaa, killing four Al-Qaida suspects.<sup>67</sup>

64 Author interview. See also Three killed believed to be Al-Qaida in an airstrike on a car in Shabwa – Almasdaronline – 26 January 2015 <http://www.almasdaronline.com/article/67105>

65 Author interviews

66 Qaida members killed in a drone strike on a vehicle South of Yemen – Russia Today Arabic – 31 January 2015

67 Three Al-Qaida suspects killed in a drone

On 6 February, Ansar Allah dissolved parliament and established a new governing body, the Supreme Revolutionary Committee. A week later, British and American diplomats withdrew from Sana'a and closed their embassies; US special forces also abandoned their position at al-Anad airbase, as Saleh-Houthi forces moved south towards Aden.<sup>68</sup> Two further UCAV strikes took place later in February, on the 20 and the 28, both in Shabwa province.

Hadi escaped from house arrest on 21 February and fled to Aden, where he renounced his resignation and declared Aden to be Yemen's provisional capital, before leaving the country in March. During this period, Hadi's command over military and security structures disintegrated. In Aden, the Special Security Forces (formerly the Central Security Forces, during Yahya Saleh's command) proclaimed loyalty to Saleh; in Sana'a, Ansar Allah held Minister of Defence Mahmoud al-Subaihi under house arrest and appointed Zakaria al-Shami as effective commander in chief of Saleh-Houthi forces.

UCAV strikes started in Mukalla in April, after AQAP established an effective presence inside the city. On 12 April, a UCAV strike killed Ibrahim Al-Rubaish, a Saudi national,

strike between Shabwa and Baidaa – Azal TV News – 2 February 2015" [https://youtu.be/\\_66Xv\\_gNLvk](https://youtu.be/_66Xv_gNLvk)

68 Britain's Covert War in Yemen – VICE News - April 7, 2016

former Guantanamo detainee, and senior AQAP leader.<sup>69</sup> A second strike took place overnight on 21-22 April, killing at least five people, including AQAP's chief spokesman Nasser Al-Ansi.<sup>70</sup> Another strike, on 12 June, killed AQAP's co-founder and leader Nasser Al-Wuhayshi. AQAP subsequently released a statement confirming his death, and announcing Qasim al-Raymi as his successor.

Despite the killing of these three prominent figures, AQAP continued to operate openly inside the city for another 12 months, to expand their presence in the coastal provinces of Abyan and Shabwa, and to move with near-impunity along the coastal road running between Aden and Mukalla. Since April 2015, UCAV strikes – and suspected strikes – have continued in and around Mukalla, hitting vehicles and buildings. Mukalla's population is 300,000 and the city centre – located in a ravine – is densely populated.<sup>71</sup>

Although AQAP has now withdrawn from Mukalla, the group has likely made a tactical decision to preserve its numbers and resources, and it retains the potential to regroup. During 12 months serving on the municipal council, AQAP learned valuable lessons in grassroots governance, and it continues to pay close attention to community relations, especially with local tribes. In the absence of an effective state, the tribes remain the strongest force capable of securing their immediate areas, and AQAP has successfully mobilised tribes against the UCAV strikes. By contrast, the US lacks tribal allies on the ground.

### Box 3. Witness statement

'M.' is a civil servant, who witnessed a UCAV strike in 2015:

"I was driving towards the military base just outside Mukalla with a colleague, because the municipal council had promised to dispense petrol there for civil servants who agreed to return to work. As we approached, we witnessed a military vehicle leaving the base. We heard a loud noise, and my colleague warned me it was the sound of a drone approaching. Suddenly, we heard a huge explosion and then a light from the sky, followed by more explosions. A few seconds later, we saw the military vehicle in front of us burning. We both jumped out of our car and started running, fearing that our own vehicle might become a target, too. The targeted vehicle was now on fire, and I thought that it might have been looted from the base by AQAP operatives and that's why it was hit. A crowd started to gather around the burning vehicle but several people in the crowd told everyone to leave, saying that AQAP would come to pick up the remains of the bodies and it would be safer to evacuate. We could hear a drone hovering in the sky but we couldn't see it, and we were afraid there would be another strike if more AQAP members showed up. I couldn't sleep for the next two nights and I didn't go to work either. My colleague and I were both afraid. I still feel I can hear the sound of that strike."

69 Al-Rubaish fought in Chechnya and Afghanistan before being detained by the US forces in Afghanistan in 2001.

70 <https://www.transterramedia.com/media/60672>  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/07/yemen-al-qaida-droke-strike-charlie-hebdo>

71 U.S. Special Operations force extends Yemen mission against al-Qaeda – Washington Post - June 17 2016



### 3.3 Assessing the effectiveness of UCAV strikes

When Hadi lost effective control over Yemen's military and security apparatus in 2015, Obama said US counter-terrorism operations would continue despite the political vacuum.<sup>72</sup> Prior to that point, UCAV strikes had already generated significant public opposition in Yemen, as a result of high numbers of civilian casualties<sup>73</sup> and perceived violations of Yemeni sovereignty. The fact that UCAV strikes have continued without the formal collaboration of effective state institutions has further aggravated anti-US sentiment –especially in the north, where Saudi Arabia is using US weapons and relying on US training and technical assistance to support the airstrikes.

Critics of UCAV strikes in Yemen have long maintained that the programme is fundamentally ineffective on the grounds that it undermines law and order in the strike areas because local security forces withdraw, and it undermines national law and order by replacing due process measures (such as arrest and trial) that, in themselves, can help to build stronger judicial institutions. By prioritising 'quick wins', UCAV strikes undermine the long-term state-building goals required to develop good governance over time. Furthermore, armed drones and surveillance drones fly over affected communities on a regular basis, spreading fear, anxiety and hostility towards the US. Each of these factors helps to drive recruitment for AQAP.

Since the outset, critics of the UCAV programme have questioned the quality of intelligence that guides the strikes, and highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability. Even US officials involved in the UCAV programme have previously admitted that mistakes have been made, and that strikes are open to manipulation by Yemeni collaborators for their own political ends.<sup>74</sup> Despite this, and despite

the fact that the National Security Bureau – which was established to gather and share intelligence with US military planners – has passed into the control of Saleh-Houthi forces, strikes have continued.

Paradoxically, although the Houthis have an ideological motivation to tackle AQAP, the US appears unwilling to coordinate covert operations with them, and the Saudis are fighting the current war to remove the Houthis and Ansar Allah from power. Meanwhile, the Houthis are allied with the Saleh family, who were formerly trained and funded by the US to fight AQAP. Interviews for this paper suggest that elements of the National Security Bureau remain loyal to Saleh, and continue to operate in areas under Saleh-Houthi control (although it has not been possible to corroborate these claims). In the view of the authors, it is entirely possible that Saleh – in an effort to gain US support for his family's interests in future political talks – is trying, or has tried, to re-activate covert intelligence sharing arrangements with US officials.<sup>75</sup>

Curiously, interviews for this paper have identified a number of UCAV strikes in Yemen's contested areas – mainly close to the frontlines in al-Bayda – apparently targeting tribesmen and anti-Houthi fighters, whose relatives and spokesmen deny they held ties to AQAP.<sup>76</sup> In one incident in October 2014, a UCAV strike hit a group of anti-Houthi fighters in al-Bayda;<sup>77</sup> two other strikes in November 2014, hit local tribesmen and resistance fighters in al-Bayda.<sup>78,79</sup> A further strike in al-Jawf in June 2015, hit a gathering of local resistance fighters, killing 10 people (see p.9).<sup>80</sup>

72 Obama: Counterterrorism Operations In Yemen Not Affected By Political Unrest – TPM News – 25 January 2015 <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/news/obama-yemen-counterterrorism>

73 <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

74 U.S. Doubts Intelligence That Led to

Yemen Strike – Washington Post – December 29, 2011

75 Author interviews

76 Author interviews

77 Ibid. Tribal Source: Houthis seize control of Al-Sabeel mountain after airstrikes believed to be American - Almasdaronline – 26 October 2014 <http://almasdaronline.com/article/63295>

78 Ibid. Death of 16 Ansar Al-Shariah members and their allies in airstrikes in Yemen – BBC Arabic – 2 November 2014 [http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/11/141102\\_yemen\\_16\\_killed](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/11/141102_yemen_16_killed)

79 Ibid. An airstrike on a car in Al-Baidaa – Yemeress – 24 November 2014 <http://www.yemeress.com/yemensaeed/21842>

80 Author interviews

The effect of these strikes was to weaken the resistance alliance and allow Saleh-Houthi forces to advance. The authors of this paper are unable to offer an explanation for this phenomenon that conforms with the official narrative about the current conflict, unless the Americans were supplied with faulty intelligence. However, it is worth noting that there is a widespread belief among many high-level Yemeni sources that Saleh was plotting during 2014 to bring his son, Ahmed, to power under the cover of Houthi expansionism, possibly with external collusion, and this remains his end goal.<sup>81</sup>

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81 Author interviews

## Conclusions

### Prospects for peace in Yemen

President Obama's 'realist' foreign policy shift follows US military failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a global financial crisis. The so-called 'Obama doctrine' involves increased use of armed drones and special forces – along with capacity building for regional allies – in order to minimise the cost of large-scale troop deployments, and army casualties.<sup>82</sup> While this might make sense in domestic electoral terms, the US confronts the problem of defending 'the liberal international order' with regional allies who do not have the capacity or will to uphold international norms, on IHL for example.<sup>83</sup>

To date, Saudi Arabia's conduct during the air campaign in Yemen suggests that the UN Security Council will have limited leverage on IHL as long as three of its five permanent members – the US, the UK and France – account for 82% of arms sales to Riyadh (see p.5); these arms sales, in turn, sit within a broader nexus of commercial contracts and investments.<sup>84</sup> In addition, Saudi Arabia acts as an important fulcrum state, underwriting political settlements across the region, and Yemen is just a tiny piece in the foreign policy mosaic, as viewed from New York and Washington. Short-term losses in Yemen are balanced against expected long-term gains from Obama's Iran deal, and in the meantime, Washington is making efforts to keep the Saudis on side.

The Saudis were moved to intervene in Yemen to counter the influence of the Iranians, who they perceived to be backing the Houthis and, latterly, Saleh (who

reportedly started his own talks with Tehran in 2014).<sup>85</sup> However, after 18 months of airstrikes, Saleh-Houthi forces retain control of Sana'a, and the longer the status quo continues, the greater the chance that Iranian 'soft power' will expand. The Houthis have already evolved beyond their original identity as a local armed group driven by provincial grievances embedded within a wider Zaydi revivalist movement; they are changing the established political narratives and prevailing political culture in north Yemen.

Increasingly, the Houthis appear to be appropriating the tropes of the Iranian revolutionary movement.<sup>86</sup> For example, Houthi media channels – such as Al-Masirah (The Journey) – emulate the presentational style of Iranian-backed TV channels, such as Hezbollah's Al-Manar (The Beacon). The Houthis' reliance on sectarian narratives to justify armed aggression – in which they slander their Sunni opponents as 'al-Qaeda' – contributes to escalating social fragmentation and alienates the population in the predominantly Sunni south, ensuring that a federal solution becomes less feasible. They also recruit on an ideological basis, leading to the routine indoctrination of child soldiers.<sup>87</sup>

Herein lies the double bind, regarding Yemen's future. It seems likely that the Houthis and forces loyal to Saleh's family will have to be included in a future peace deal as their monopoly on the use of force in areas under their control is too strong for them to be discounted. If the Houthis cannot be incorporated into a national power-sharing government on terms that they find acceptable, there is a danger that they will replicate Hezbollah's model in Lebanon, as a military structure that sits alongside the state and has enough power to control the decisions that the state makes, without formally holding power and being

82 The Obama Doctrine – The Atlantic – April 2016

83 The Obama Doctrine – The Atlantic – April 2016: 'Part of his mission as president, Obama explained, is to spur other countries to take action for themselves, rather than wait for the U.S. to lead. The defense of the liberal international order against jihadist terror, Russian adventurism, and Chinese bullying depends in part, he believes, on the willingness of other nations to share the burden with the U.S.'

84 <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

85 Author interviews.

86 The Houthi slogan 'God Is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam' partially resembles the popular slogan of revolutionary Iran ('Death to America').

87 Yemen: Houthis Send Children Into Battle – Human Rights Watch – May 12 2015  
Saudi Arabia launches austerity drive to cut public spending – The Guardian – 14 March 2016

held accountable. Furthermore, a unity government in which the Salehs and/or the Houthis play a significant part will almost certainly be rejected by the south, raising the prospect of continued war leading to de facto secession.

Given the mounting cost of the air campaign, along with wider pressures on the state budget, the Saudis are privately keen to sue for peace.<sup>88</sup> Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are trying to put a positive spin on their achievements to date, in order to sell a future peace deal to their own populations, who largely support the war. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have their own dialogue with key Yemeni players, and may indeed be pursuing divergent outcomes,<sup>89</sup> but they are dependent on the UN to oversee a binding political deal. To date, UN diplomats have proved unequal to the task of negotiating a successful ceasefire, let alone mediating an end to Yemen's multiple wars. UN sanctions have failed to achieve their intended impact, and successive Security Council resolutions fail to reflect the effective drivers of these parallel local conflicts.

Meanwhile, humanitarian needs are escalating, anti-US sentiment flourishes,<sup>90</sup> AQAP and ISIS compete for recruits and resources, and the US-led UCAV programme continues. Youth activists and civil society groups who took to the streets in 2011 – initially, as a non-partisan movement for good governance – have been disenfranchised by the fighting. Even before the start of the current conflict, the legitimate government was dogged by rumours of corruption, which contributed to its lack of popular support. Fighting is likely to continue for months, if not years, yet before a new political settlement is feasible, while the tasks of reconciliation and reconstruction already appear formidable.

## Lasting implications for regional security

In the long run, the implications of the current Coalition intervention may extend far beyond Yemen's borders to influence the conduct of future wars. The Emiratis' successful operations in Aden and Mukalla have proven their special force capability, generating national pride at the professionalism of their armed forces, and earning the respect of their US counterpart.<sup>91</sup> Lessons learned from the Yemen campaign will likely be incorporated into future Emirati missions – no doubt, once again, working alongside US special forces, and, as in Yemen, possibly taking the lead in combat environments where the US is unwilling or unable to deploy boots on the ground (at least at first).

While the Saudis do not yet possess an effective special forces capability, they are likely to press US officials for support and training to build capacity in this area in years to come.<sup>92</sup> Even if this request is granted by Obama's successor, it will take the best part of a decade, or more, for Riyadh to build effective operational capacity, as the Emirati example shows. At the same time, as their conduct of the air campaign has revealed, the Saudis still need to develop mature institutional structures to support the deployment of their regular air force, and armed forces. Much depends on the outcome of current uncertainty surrounding the succession to the throne, in which the defense minister, Mohammed bin Salman, is tipped to become a future king.

Neither the Emirati leadership, nor the Saudi royal family, are willing to tolerate effective civil society organisations, or domestic political structures, that allow for scrutiny of the armed forces. Western civil society organisations campaigning on IHL violations in Yemen have discovered they have limited leverage, and the Saudis have demonstrated little interest in engaging with their concerns, insisting that their investigation techniques are inadequate. Both the Saudis and the Emiratis have extensive links with Western lobbyists and public relations agencies that attempt to influence British and American law-making and media coverage.<sup>93</sup>

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88 Saudi Arabia launches austerity drive to cut public spending – The Guardian – 14 March 2016

89 Author interviews

90 In Yemeni capital, signs of hatred toward Americans are everywhere – Washington Post – 2 July 2016

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91 Author interviews

92 Author interviews

93 Yemen: Houthis Send Children Into Battle – Human Rights Watch - May 12 2015

Similarly, the UN has also failed to convince many Yemenis that it is capable of acting as a neutral, even-handed broker, or in its efforts to hold the Coalition to account. The Saudis reportedly threatened to rescind UN funding if the Coalition was not removed from an annual child rights blacklist for killing children in Yemen,<sup>94</sup> while the Emiratis' reported use of foreign fighters in Yemen raises concerns that falls within the remit of the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries.<sup>95</sup> The stakes are high: no less than the credibility of the UN, and the integrity of the rules-based system of international relations.

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94 Saudi Arabian allies pressured UN chief to issue blacklist reversal, sources say – The Guardian – 8 June 2016

95 <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Mercenaries/WGMercenaries/Pages/WGMercenariesIndex.aspx>



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