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Yemen at war

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Summary

Following the Houthi capture of Sana'a in September 2014, President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi resigned in January 2015 and was placed under house arrest. After escaping to Aden in February, he rescinded his resignation and declared the Houthi takeover a coup d'état. When the Houthis advanced on Aden, Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia, where he called upon the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) to intervene.

On March 26, a Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes on Yemen targeting the Houthis and, importantly, allied elements in the army still loyal to previous President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is held largely responsible for the striking success of the Houthi rebellion.

With the war raging on for over a year, the conflict has been labelled by Amnesty International as the "Forgotten War". What attention the conflict has attracted in the UK is largely due to the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the sale and use of arms from the UK to Saudi Arabia.

There have been allegations that UK-supplied armaments have been used to commit violations of international humanitarian law and that UK personnel are close to the Saudi-led coalition's targeting decisions. The UK Government says that it has faith in the UK's export licensing regime to prevent that from happening, and that UK advisers are not part of the coalition forces but do sometimes advise on how to comply with international humanitarian law.

Since the Saudi-led intervention started on 26 March 2015, the Saudis and their allies have managed to push back the Houthis from Aden. However Aden remains far from secure with a number of key officials having been assassinated and the influence of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS/Daesh is growing. Heavy fighting is ongoing around Taiz in the South and Marib, where Taiz until recently was effectively under siege, exacerbating the humanitarian situation there.

There have also been signs of dissent within the Saudi Royal Family and in the country concerning the conduct and cost of the war. The Saudi economy has been greatly affected by the drop in the oil price.

The Saudis and their allies see the conflict as having been instigated and fuelled by Iran, and there is evidence for this. But many analysts see the conflict as being more about domestic Yemeni forces.

For Iran, the conflict is seen as a low cost way of bogging down their Saudi rivals in Yemen. The prospects for peace in the near future seem slim as neither side deems its situation to be weak enough to pursue a settlement, though there has been some progress on pursuing talks.

This paper explores the developments in Yemen since the Saudi-led intervention began, and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Yemen. It discusses how AQAP and ISIS have benefited from the chaos. It also looks at the UK role in easing the humanitarian situation in Yemen at the same time as providing arms and assistance to the Saudis. Finally it looks at the chances of a peaceful solution to the conflict, the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry and some likely outcomes in Yemen and the region.

1. Background

1.1 History of Saudi-Yemeni Relations

Treaty of Taif

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Yemen were first established through the [Treaty of Taif](#) in 1934 following a brief war between them shortly after the establishment of the Saudi state. The treaty demarcated part of the border between the two countries particularly in the Western areas next to the Red Sea and in Yemeni eyes allowed for unrestricted Yemeni entry into Saudi Arabia.

Yemeni Civil War 1962-1970

Following a rebellion and the ousting of the Zaydi Imam, Ahmed bin Yahya of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom in 1962, civil war broke out between Royalist and Republican forces in Northern Yemen which led to intervention by various states. Saudi Arabia, with the backing of Jordan and Britain supported the Mutawakkilite Royalists, while Egypt in turn supported the Republican forces and committed 70,000 troops in what became known as Egypt's 'Vietnam'. Saudi Arabia supplied military and financial assistance to the Royalists but unlike Egypt did not commit any troops.

Following its defeat at the hands of Israel in the Six Day War in 1967, Egypt withdrew its forces but the Republicans eventually went on to win the civil war. In 1970 Saudi Arabia recognised the Yemen Arab Republic.

1970 to present day

Following the withdrawal of British forces in November 1967 from Aden, South Yemen became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1970. It was essentially a Marxist state. In the wars that followed between North and South Yemen, Saudi Arabia supported the North, given its strong anti-communist stance during the Cold War. Throughout the period, both countries expressed a desire for Yemeni unification and in 1988 discussions commenced between the two countries to achieve this goal with unification declared on 22 May 1990 and Ali Abdullah Saleh declared the President of the newly unified state.

With Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, Yemen's relations with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf deteriorated as a result of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's stance following the invasion. Yemen and Saleh had strong relations with Iraq, as Yemen employed Iraqi military advisors and with Egypt, Jordan and Iraq had formed the Arab Cooperation Council in 1989. Given Yemen's dependence on the Gulf economies, Yemen's stance was to oppose the invasion and occupation of Kuwait, while at the same time opposing any Western-led military intervention. Yemen was also a member of the UN Security Council at this time and registered the only vote against the UN Security Council resolution authorising the use of force to remove Iraq from Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia responded by expelling hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers.¹

That left Yemen in a very weak position; it lost its financial help from Saudi Arabia and remittances from Yemenis in Saudi Arabia. On top of this Yemen had to find work for hundreds of thousands of Yemenis returning home. Trade with Iraq also suffered because of sanctions.

After the first Gulf War, Saudi Arabia backed southern forces against Ali Abdullah Saleh in a brief war in 1994, but Saleh prevailed. Following the outbreak of the Houthi rebellion in 2004, the Saudis supported Saleh in his attempts to quell their rebellion. He subsequently launched six wars against them, as well as combatting Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

According to one analyst, Saudi Arabian policy towards Yemen is 'containment and maintenance':² Saudi Arabia ensures that Yemen cannot challenge Saudi Arabia militarily, while Saudi aid prevents the Yemeni economy from collapsing, averting unwanted migration into Saudi Arabia.

In April 2013, the Saudi Kingdom announced a crackdown on illegal labourers resulting in the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers, at the same time as beginning work on a fence across the Saudi-Yemeni border to prevent the cross border migration of economic migrants, smugglers and militant Islamists.

1.2 The fragile 2011 settlement

The Arab uprisings dethroned several authoritarian rulers and Yemen was not immune to the upheaval. President Ali Abdullah Saleh had been in power since 1978, an experience that he famously likened to "dancing on the heads of snakes."

Not only were there many different tribal interests to placate (often with the distribution of resources – patronage is particularly important in a traditional society such as Yemen's), central government in Sana'a also had to hold together the two halves of one country that used to be two, with left-leaning separatists as well as a serious al-Qaeda linked rebellion in the south.

While Yemen does not have a history of serious sectarian conflict, there is a sectarian divide. Houthi rebels belonging to the Zaidi Shia sect of Islam posed a serious threat to the mainly Sunni government in Sana'a. The Houthis have mounted many attacks against the Yemeni authorities, allegedly with the support of Iran. The Saudi armed forces have launched cross-border attacks on Houthi strongholds in northern Yemen.

As the position of Saleh became increasingly precarious, Saudi Arabia was one of the leaders in brokering a deal for a transition. The deal,

¹ For more on the two countries' relations, see Brian Whitaker, 'Yemen and Saudi Arabia: a historical review of relations', *Al-Bab*, 25 March 2015

² Peter Salisbury, *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Chatham House, February 2015

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backed by the UN, involved a transfer of power to Saleh's deputy, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which finally took place in November 2011 after months of deadly clashes between protesters and the security forces.

The transfer of power to Hadi appeared to be having some success in establishing stability, but the Yemeni armed forces remained sharply divided after the defection in March 2011 of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar from the government to the uprising. The manoeuvrings of tribal forces were behind many clashes between different parts of the official armed forces. Throughout 2012 and 2013 Hadi continued to struggle with the various challenges to central authority including the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

More broadly, the 2011 'revolution' did not lead to a thorough change in the leadership of the country. Huge economic and social problems continue to afflict the population and Hadi is seen by many Yemenis as ineffective.

2. Collapse of the Sana'a government

In September 2014, Houthi armed forces took control of the capital Sana'a, culminating a simmering and often violent dispute over the drafting of a new constitution, particularly over its crucial decentralisation clauses.

Houthi forces forced the government to sign a Peace and National Partnership Agreement, foreseeing the formulation of a new government in one month, with the present President acting as caretaker. The caretaker President would appoint a new Prime Minister within three days. New political advisers from the Houthi movement and the Southern movement would be appointed. Most of Yemen's political parties signed the agreement, and it was welcomed by the United Nations.

However, although the terms of the agreement were in themselves reasonable, the fact that it had been signed under duress after the rout of the official Yemeni armed forces showed how far the 2011 settlement had come off the rails and how weak the government was.

In January 2015, the Houthis kidnapped a presidential adviser who was thought to be pushing a federal arrangement that the Houthis did not support. The President signed an agreement with the Houthis on 20 January, in which he agreed to implement to the provisions of the September agreement more quickly. The Houthis forces then moved to take control of the presidential palace. President Hadi and his Prime Minister resigned rather than continue to try to operate at gunpoint, and were placed under house arrest. On February 21 President Hadi escaped and fled to Aden, the former capital of South Yemen, where he rescinded his resignation and called on the Houthis to quit Sana'a. Prime Minister Khaled Bahah and his cabinet were then released from house arrest on 16 March 2015.

On 20 March Sana'a was rocked by two suicide bomb attacks targeting Zaidi mosques and killing 137 people. Responsibility was claimed by ISIS, the first time they had claimed responsibility for attacks in Yemen. By 22 March Houthi sympathisers (reportedly Saleh loyalist units) were in control of the city of Taiz and its airport. Houthi forces then used Taiz as a staging post for the advance on Aden, forcing President Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia.

2.1 The Houthi movement

Yemen's Zaidi Shiite community forms a minority of about 35% of the population, largely in the northern governorate of Sa'ada. However, despite being considered Shiites, they are quite distinct from the majority of Shia, who are known as Twelvers. Rather than recognising twelve Imams succeeding the Prophet Mohammed, they only believe in five, with the fifth being Zaid ibn Ali.

Ansar Allah ('Supporters of Allah') is the name commonly used for Al-Shabab al-Muminin (The Believing Youth), the movement founded by the Houthi family in the late 1990s, originally as a religious force to protect Zaidi interests.

The group's strongly anti-US ideology soon brought them into conflict with the Saleh government, which was keen to retain its allegiance to the US and fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula with US help. Hostilities with the government broke out in 2004. When the original operational leader of Ansar Allah, Hussein al-Houthi, was killed by Yemeni security forces in 2004, his position was taken by his brother, Abd al-Malik al-Houthi. Their father, Badr al-Din al-Houthi, was the group's spiritual leader until his death but Abd al-Malik is, at the age of 32 years, the overall leader.

The group wants equal rights for Yemen's Zaidis, arguing that the Yemeni government's alliance with Saudi Arabia has led to increasingly intransigent Sunni Wahhabi or Salafi religion taking hold in the country, leading to greater discrimination against the Zaidis. (This is a complaint echoed in the more secular south, where southern Yemenis complain that they are oppressed by the fundamentalist Sunnis from the north.)

The 2011 protest movement against the Saleh government gave the opportunity for the Houthis to firm up their control of the Sa'ada governorate and to expand their influence beyond. Throughout 2012 and 2013, there were continuing clashes between Ansar Allah and pro-government Sunni tribal forces, forces aligned with Islah, the Islamist party, and Salafi groups. Much of the fighting took place in the governorates to the south of Sa'ada, such as Hajjah and Amran.

2.2 How have the Houthis had such success?

The Houthis' success in Sunni-majority territory surprised many observers. Yemen's government and armed forces have long been weak and fragmented, and have had too many forces lined up against them to put up a strong resistance to the Houthis.

One anti-Houthi activist in the southern city of Taiz said of the conflict: "It's one of Saleh's dances," referring to the famous quote from the former president that governing Yemen was like "dancing on the heads of snakes."

Saleh has allegedly been involved in a range of activities to undermine the rule of his successor, using his position as president of the General People's Congress party to thwart reforming legislation, and arranging demonstrations against the government and attacks on vital infrastructure, according to a report on Yemen prepared for the UN Security Council.³

This is the most important reason for the Houthis' success: they have linked up with former president Saleh. Because of the support of Saleh,

³ [Letter dated 20 February 2015 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 \(2014\) addressed to the President of the Security Council](#)

elements of the regular armed forces, particularly of the disbanded Republican Guard, have joined in too. The Republican Guard used to be led by Ahmed Ali Saleh, the former president's son and once his prospective successor. The Houthis have managed to gather dozens of tanks and plenty of heavy weaponry from these defectors and deserters.⁴

Saleh's support has also brought with it some of the Sunni tribes loyal to the Saleh family. This was crucial in taking such areas as Amran, where the conservative Sunni tribes had previously fought against the Houthis.

The Houthis' advance was also bolstered by popular anger following the ending of fuel subsidies. Sana'a has a considerable Zaidi population and Zaidis had been at the forefront of demonstrations in the capital against the government, particularly over the issue of fuel subsidies, and against the US. The mobilisation of Zaidis in the capital exacerbated divisions, increasing the tendency for Zaidi strongholds in Sana'a and easing the takeover by Houthi forces.

There are some reports of Iranian help for the Houthi rebellion, but not much concrete evidence.

This combination left Hadi unable to respond, as the Houthis swept south and took the capital.

The Houthis have had some success in attracting young radicals, not necessarily Zaidis, tired of the patronage and power plays between established groups and disenchanted with the outcome of the 2011 protests. Abd al-Malik al-Houthi has promised that fuel subsidies will be restored.

⁴ Florence Gaub, '[Whatever happened to Yemen's army?](#)', European Union Institute for Security Studies issue brief, April 2015

3. A proxy war?

3.1 Iran

The Houthi movement is based on the Zaidi community, which practices a version of Shiite Islam, and its leadership has shown support for the anti-Israel stance of revolutionary Shiite Iran. The former Houthi leader, Hussein al-Houthi (now dead), praised on occasion both Ayatollah Khomeini, then Supreme Leader of Iran, and Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Iranian-backed Lebanese militia Hizballah.

Many Sunnis in the region assume that the Houthis are backed by Iran. However, there has never been a lot of evidence for concrete support for the rebellion from Iran, despite claims from the Yemeni, US, and Saudi governments that the Houthis have had weapons and other support from Hizballah and/or the Qods Force, the overseas branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. Nevertheless, the Houthi movement looks to Iran to support its anti-Western stance. The leader of the Houthi movement said in an interview in Iran that he expects help from Iran:

Ansar Allah expects the Islamic Republic of Iran and other countries to support them and the Yemeni people...The revolution in Yemen...is inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran...but the intellectual and historical roots of revolution in Yemen stem from the fact that Yemenis are Zaidis and have more political experience than the Islamic Republic. From Ali's son, Imam Zaid up to now, Zaidis have witnessed many revolutions against unjust rulers.⁵

However, Zaidi leaders are keen to point out that they do not share the same religious beliefs, and particularly the jurisprudence, as the Twelver Shiites of Iran, with Zaidis considered to be theologically closer to Sunni Islam than other Shiites.⁶

Following the Houthi capture of Sana'a, relations with Iran were strengthened. Finding a depleted treasury in Sana'a, the Houthis stretched out their hand to Iran. A senior delegation led by Salih al-Samed, 'adviser to the president of the republic and head of the Ansar Allah political council', made a lengthy visit to Tehran where he obtained a promise of a year's worth of oil supplies from Iran.

In February 2015 the Yemeni civil aviation authority signed an agreement with its Iranian counterpart to inaugurate four daily flights from Sana'a to Tehran, which is a frequent connection given the normally relatively small contacts between the two capitals.⁷

On the other hand, in early March 2016 the Houthi rebels held talks with the Saudis in Riyadh, after which the Houthi leadership called for an end to Iranian interference in Yemen, a symbolic distancing from

⁵ Mehdi Khalaji, '[Yemen's Zaidis: A Window for Iranian Influence](#)' Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2 February 2015

⁶ '[Who are the Houthis, the group that just toppled Yemen's government?](#)', *Washington Post*, 22 January 2015

⁷ Suzanne Dahlgren, '[Four Weddings and a Funeral in Yemen](#)', Middle East Research and Information Project, 20 March 2015

Saudi Arabia's Iranian rivals, although that may have been mainly for public consumption.⁸

3.2 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has taken a strong line against the Houthi rebellion, lending military support to the government's fight against them. The Houthis complain of incursions by Sunni Saudi Arabian forces into their area in support of Yemeni government troops. In November 2010, a group of Houthi rebels entered Saudi territory and killed two Saudi border guards, provoking retaliation, including air strikes. The conflict claimed many lives in 2009 and 2010 and there were as many as 250,000 displaced persons. The fighting died down in early 2011.

The Saudis continue to blame the Iranians for the unrest in Yemen and there is still a considerable Saudi force along its southern border, near the Houthis' strongholds. When the Houthis took over the capital in September, Saudi Arabia suspended its aid to Yemen. Yemen is heavily dependent on foreign aid to feed its population.

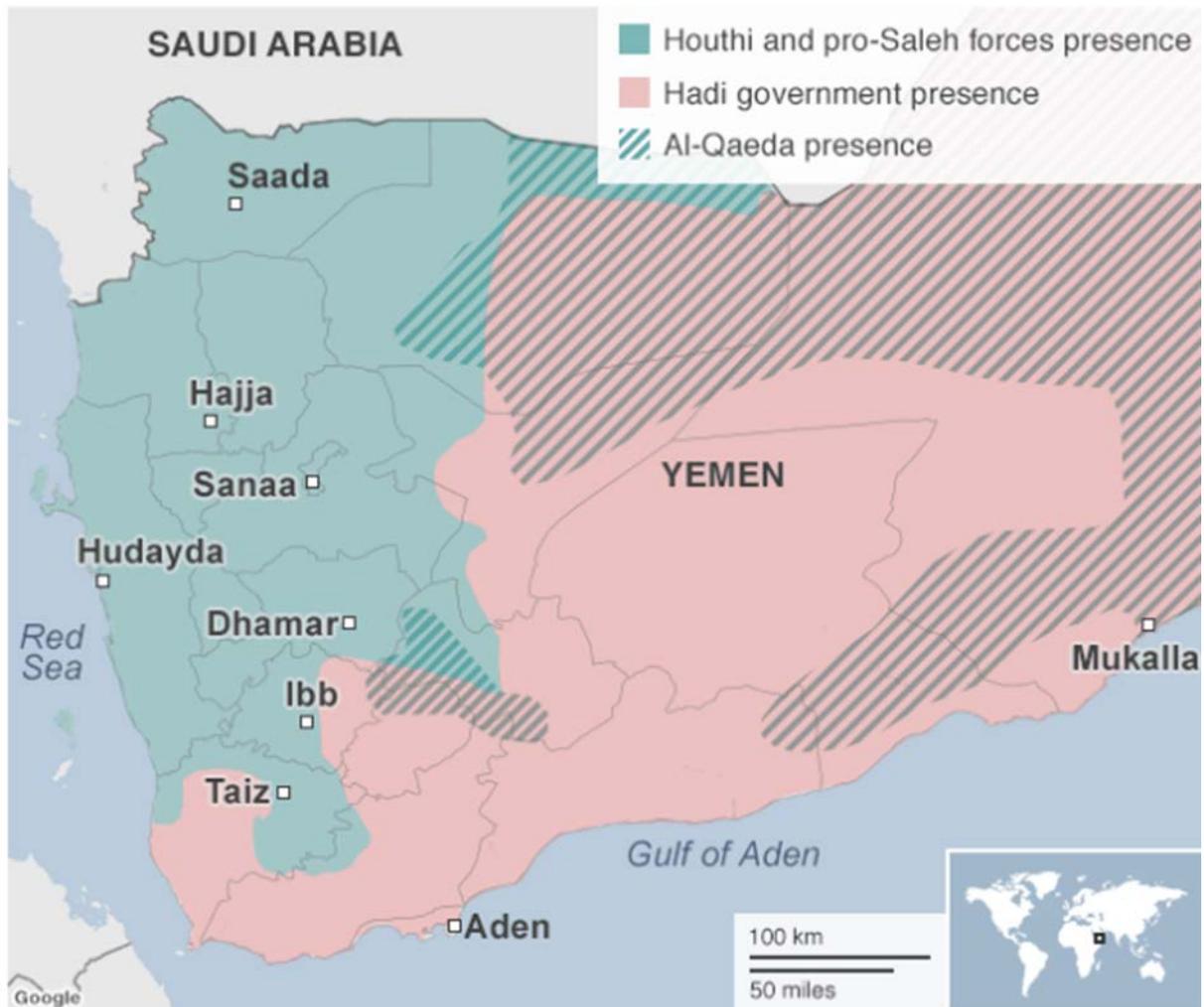
One of the reasons for the declining influence of Islah, the Islamist party, may be its role as the equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen. It has been Saudi policy to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood and the Saudis have not been supporting Islah in Yemen.

The Saudi monarchy is alarmed by the situation in Yemen because of the long shared border and the potential for spill-over from Yemen. Riyadh is building a border fence along the Yemeni border, as well as along its northern, Iraqi border. But the Saudis are also worried about rebel Shia movements in general because of its fragile legitimacy among its own Shia minority, estimated at 15% or more of the population. The Shia community is concentrated in the Eastern Province of Qatif, the location of most of Saudi Arabia's oil reserves, and the Saudi government tends to see Iranian influence behind Saudi Shia protests.

⁸ ['Saudi Arabia, Houthi Rebels Hold Direct Talks on Yemen War'](#), *Wall Street Journal*, 9 May 2016

4. Saudi-led intervention

Control over Yemen as at December 2015



Source: Stratfor (9 December)

4.1 Chronology

2015

March 26 Saudi Arabia and its allies, following a request from President Hadi to the GCC, launch air attacks against the Houthis and their allies, targeting various air bases, military planes and anti-aircraft defence systems under the name of *Operation Decisive Storm*. The Saudi-led coalition declare Yemen restricted airspace. The US declares it will provide intelligence and logistical support to the operation.

March 30 Al-Mazraq refugee camp is hit, resulting in the death of 40 people, the majority civilians. Saudi-led forces impose a naval blockade

of Yemeni ports to prevent arm supplies from reaching the Houthis and their allies.

April 2 AQAP takes advantage of the fighting and captures al-Mukallah in Hadramawt province and its prison, releasing 300 prisoners including a senior al-Qaida leader, Khaled al-Batarfi.

April 9 Iran deploys two naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden, including a destroyer, with the stated aim of protecting Iranian shipping from piracy.

April 16 AQAP captures the Riyan airport and a military base outside al-Mukallah, seizing weapons and the Dhabah oil terminal. Jamal Benomar, UN special envoy to Yemen, resigns.

April 21 Saudi-led coalition announces the end of *Operation Decisive Storm* and the beginning of *Operation Renewal of Hope*, aimed at easing the humanitarian crisis and seeking a political solution in Yemen while maintaining the military pressure on the Houthis and their allies.

April 24 It is reported that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh calls on the Houthis to withdraw from territory captured and for UN mediated peace talks to be resumed, involving all parties.

April 25 Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed of Mauritania is appointed UN special envoy to Yemen.

April 28 Saudi Arabia bombs the runway at Sana'a Airport, claiming that it is to prevent the landing of Iranian plane which was warned to turn back. The bombing of runway results in the blocking of aid flights.

May 3 Human Rights Watch accuses Saudi Arabia of using cluster bombs in Yemen. Reports emerge of an Arab coalition force landing in Aden. Saudi Arabia denies both allegations.

May 7 Saudi Arabia proposes five-day ceasefire to allow for the delivery of humanitarian supplies, as the UN says that at least 1,400 people have been killed. The ceasefire was due to start on 12 May.

8 May: Coalition declares Sa'ada a "military zone," ahead of heavy airstrikes; mass displacement reported to neighbouring areas

12 May: Five-day humanitarian pause begins. Frequent violations are reported

25 May: Houthi forces and allies are pushed out of Al Dhale'e governorate in the south

16 June: Al-Qaeda confirms that its leader in Yemen, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, has been killed in a US drone strike, and names military chief Qassem al-Rimi as the regional affiliate's new leader.

18-20 June: Islamic State claims responsibility for five bombs detonated at mosques in Sana'a at the start of Ramadan

15 July: Most of Aden comes under control of Government and other anti-Houthi forces

15 August: Major clashes erupt in Taiz, as anti-Houthi fighters seize several buildings. Fighting – backed by air strikes – escalates, and the city comes under siege. Reports increase of summary executions and indiscriminate shelling

18 August: Air strikes hit Al-Hudaydah port, severely damaging critical infrastructure

4 September: Houthi forces launch a missile that hits a Coalition base in Marib, killing at least 45 soldiers. Air strikes escalate in Sana'a and other locations

28 September: Apparent air strikes hit a wedding party in Taiz governorate, killing over 130 people

6 October: Islamic State claims responsibility for a series of explosions in Aden targeting Coalition and Government of Yemen officials at the Qasr Hotel. The Houthis reaffirm acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and commitment to 7 Muscat principles

17 November: President Hadi returns to Aden from exile in Saudi Arabia

6 December: Car bombing in Aden claimed by ISIS kills Aden's recently appointed governor

15 December: UN announces a ceasefire as peace talks start in Switzerland

20 December: Peace talks end without progress

2016

7 January: Iran accuses Saudi Arabia of targeting its embassy following a coalition airstrike. It later transpired that the missile strike is in the vicinity of the embassy and the building itself is undamaged

4 February: Senior AQAP commander Jalal Bala'idi killed in apparent US drone strike

25 February: European Parliament calls for an EU-wide arms embargo against Saudi Arabia

8 March: A Houthi delegation travels to Saudi Arabia to discuss a prisoner exchange and peace

12 March: Siege of Taiz reportedly broken by anti-Houthi forces

17 March: Saudi Arabia declares that it is to scale back on Yemen airstrikes as death toll mounts

23 March: UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed announces that the parties to the conflict have agreed to the cessation of hostilities on April 10 prior to the resumption of peace talks in Kuwait on April 18

3 April: Khaled Baheh sacked as Vice President and Prime Minister in government reshuffle

25 April: The Saudi-led coalition carries out airstrikes against al-Qaeda in Mukalla and pro-Hadi troops enter the city but ISIS bomb attacks continue, killing scores

10 May: The warring parties are reported to have reached a deal on a prisoner swap, which could be a big breakthrough in the peace negotiations, which have achieved little until now

4.2 Members of the Saudi-led coalition

The membership of the Saudi-led coalition includes all the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) with the exception of Oman which is seen as a possible mediator.⁹ Saudi Arabia has provided the bulk of the forces, contributing a hundred jets and deploying 150,000 troops, according to Gulf media sources.

The other Arab countries outside the Gulf Cooperation Council in the coalition include Egypt, Jordan, Sudan and Morocco. Pakistan, a traditional ally of Saudi Arabia, declined to join the coalition after its parliament voted against, due to its own military commitments against Islamist rebels in Pakistan. The Egyptian navy has played a significant role, patrolling the straits leading from the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea and shelling Houthi positions.

Turkey initially expressed support to the Saudi-led coalition, but has not committed any forces and has since called for a cessation of hostilities.

On 4 May 2015 Senegal pledged to send 2,100 troops to aid the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.

On 10 May 2015 Malaysia joined the coalition.

4.3 Goals of the coalition

According to Adel al-Jubeir – the former Saudi Ambassador to the US and now foreign minister – the Saudis' aim is to "Do whatever it takes in order to protect the legitimate government of Yemen from falling."¹⁰

However, there are broader objectives at work. Saudi Arabia also wants to prevent what it sees as an extension of Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula and to firm up its dominance of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.¹¹

Tactically, the Saudi air strikes aim to target regular military units loyal to former President Saleh and their heavy equipment in order to break the alliance between them and Houthis.¹²

Before the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, there was evidence that what was always believed to be a fragile alliance between the Houthis and Saleh, born from mutual frustration at the outcome of the 2011 transition, may have been on the verge of collapse. In March 2015, it was reported that the Houthis clashed with Republican Guard special-forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh over control of a military camp north of Sana'a.¹³

⁹ ['Factbox: Saudi-led coalition against Yemen's Houthis'](#), *Reuters*, 10 April 2015

¹⁰ ['Saudi Arabia launches air strikes in Yemen'](#), *BBC News Online*, 26 March 2015

¹¹ Bilal Y. Saab, ['Houthi and the Blowback'](#), *Foreign Affairs*, 29 March 2015

¹² Patrick Cockburn, ['Yemen crisis: This exotic war will soon become Europe's problem'](#), *Independent*, 26 April 2015

¹³ International Crisis Group, ['Yemen is Peace Possible'](#), 9 February 2016 p.8

However the intervention strengthened the alliance. The army, Saleh and his family, and prominent members of the GPC were heavily targeted by the Saudi-led coalition in the early days of the conflict, in the hope that this would split the alliance. The opposite seems to have transpired, with significant sections of the army loyal to Saleh increasing their cooperation with the Houthis.

The role of Saleh in the current conflict has been disputed, with some saying that he is the driving force behind the war. Houthi supporters deny this and say his influence is limited while Saleh supporters claim that the Houthis are running the war. After the fall of the Hadi government in February 2015, the Houthis moved to strengthen their relationship with the army in order to gain its loyalty, a move which concerns Saleh loyalists.¹⁴

4.4 Progress of the military action

After about 2,415 sorties and the release of more than 1,000 air-to-surface weapons, *Operation Decisive Storm* was ended on 22 April 2015 and replaced by *Operation Restoring Hope*.

The full military phase of *Operation Decisive Storm* surprised some observers by showing that the Saudi-led forces were capable of conducting a sustained and intensive air campaign without major support from the US or other Western forces.

Initially the hit rate for sorties was high because the targets were military installations that were easy to identify and far from civilian areas. As the campaign went on and there were fewer easy targets, more civilian damage occurred.

Saudi Arabia has attempted to prevent Iran from getting help to the Houthis by blockading sea and air ports (and even destroying civilian runways, such as that at Sana'a international airport). This has had some success in frustrating Iranian efforts to coordinate with the rebels, but it has also made it more difficult for aid agencies to reach those in need.¹⁵

It has also been claimed that the Saudis and the UAE have diverted the bulk of their air power from the fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria to be used in Yemen against the Houthis.¹⁶

The war has become something of a stalemate, though the coalition has made some significant breakthroughs, particularly when the anti-Houthi alliance in the south, with the assistance of UAE and Saudi special forces, managed to drive the Houthis from Aden in July 2015.

In March 2016, the Houthi siege of Taiz seemed to have been broken and there have been advances in Marib province, though the

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.6

¹⁵ [Mixed success for Saudi military operation in Yemen](#), *BBC News Online*, 12 May 2015

¹⁶ [As U.S. Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away](#), *New York Times*, 7 November 2015

mountainous terrain and Houthi resistance prevents an easy advance on Sana'a.¹⁷

The Houthis remain firmly in control of their northern heartland and Sana'a, despite a number of ISIS-inspired suicide bombings in the city, while fighting continues in the south around Taiz. The Saudis in turn claim that the operation in Yemen has been a qualified success and that operations around Sana'a have been brought to a halt at the request of the UN, to allow peace talks to succeed. One Saudi prince and former special forces officer has argued:

You cannot say there is no progress...The enemy is on the back foot. They are surrounded in every single city...and they are blockaded from the sea.¹⁸

The Saudi-led coalition has recently shifted its attention away from fighting the Houthi-Saleh forces in Taiz to concentrate on engaging the growing threat from AQAP, in order to consolidate the south. Forces from the UAE are providing assistance to local Yemeni forces engaging the Houthis in the form of military planning, training and equipment. One military analyst said that coalition forces cannot advance on Taiz until AQAP and ISIS have been taken on in the south, because if they do advance, then AQAP will be free to attack Aden facilitating a possible Houthi return.¹⁹

At the time of writing, the coalition and Yemeni government troops have launched an offensive against AQAP in the South of the country. It was claimed by the Saudi-led coalition that 800 AQAP fighters had been killed in the fight for the port city of Al-Mukalla, though local sources dispute that figure claiming that many AQAP fighters had already left.²⁰ In April 2016 pro-government forces re-took Mukalla, although ISIS-ordered bomb attacks continued in the city.

There have also been reports that the coalition has employed mercenaries from Latin America, particularly Colombia, supplied in a programme once run by *Blackwater*. The use of mercenaries by Gulf countries is appealing to them since while these countries are increasingly military assertive in the region, they do not have the forces with experience of sustaining long campaigns and have populations that are reluctant to volunteer for military service.²¹

The Houthis in turn have launched a number of cross-border attacks on Saudi territory killing or capturing hundreds of Saudi troops targeting Najran, with one analyst claiming that the Houthi – Saleh threat to Southern Saudi Arabia is “off the charts”.²²

¹⁷ [‘Yemeni pro-government forces stall in push toward capital’](#), *AP* 22 September 2015

¹⁸ [‘Yemen’s guerrilla war tests military ambitions of big-spending Saudis’](#), *Reuters*, 19 April 2016

¹⁹ [‘How Yemen’s war mutated into a free-for-all’](#), *Middle East Eye*, 5 April 2016

²⁰ [‘Al Qaeda fighters leave Mukalla’](#), *Al-Jazeera*, 25 Apr 2016

²¹ [‘Emirates secretly sends Colombian mercenaries to fight in Yemen’](#), *New York Times*, November 25 2015

²² [‘Yemeni rebels pose a rising threat in Southern Saudi Arabia’](#), *Washington Post*, 23 February 2016)

The Saudis have acknowledged losing 300 troops in the Yemen conflict, but the real figure could be ten times higher according to a number of sources.²³

4.5 AQAP and ISIS in Yemen

Despite the setbacks of losing Nasir al al-Wuhayshi and a number of top commanders in US drone strikes in the conflict, AQAP has prospered, as many predicted, with the International Crisis Group labelling them, along with ISIS, as arguably the 'principal beneficiaries of the war'²⁴

In recent months AQAP has made significant progress in the South of Yemen, capturing five cities and two provincial capitals.²⁵ Writing about the progress of AQAP in Yemen and the threat this poses to the United States, Katherine Zimmerman of the American Enterprise Institute argues that AQAP is happy for US attention to be focussed on ISIS for now:

AQAP leadership has most likely decided not to operationalize attacks against the U.S. at this time so that American policymakers' attention remains fixated on the threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)...The absence of an AQAP attack does not mean that the group cannot conduct attacks, nor that it has abandoned the idea of attacking the U.S. It means only that al Qaeda's leaders are smart enough to take advantage of American distraction to prepare themselves for future struggles.²⁶

Having captured the port of Al-Mukalla early in the conflict, AQAP has consolidated its control in important areas of the Hadramout province which amounts to 36% of the total area of Yemen²⁷. Part of the reason for its success in Mukalla has been its ability to govern in coordination with a local tribal council forming a militia to provide security to protect banks, government buildings and schools.²⁸ Likewise it has adopted a strategy adapted from other Islamist groups in concentrating on providing basic social services in the absence of the state to legitimise its rule.

Before the port's recent liberation, AQAP used the revenues raised from the control of the strategic oil harbour of Mukalla to fund its fighters, According to a Reuters investigation,²⁹ AQAP has access to an estimated \$100 million war chest from the funds raised from Mukalla and looted banks. Yemeni government officials and local traders have estimated that AQAP had extorted \$1.4 million from the national oil company and raised \$2 million daily from taxes on goods and fuel entering the port.

²³ ['What exactly is the UAE doing fighting a war in Yemen?'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 16 March 2016)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p17

²⁵ Katherine Zimmerman, '[AQAP Expanding behind Yemen's Frontlines](#)', *AEI Critical Threats*, 17 February 2016

²⁶ Katherine Zimmerman, '[AQAP: A Resurgent Threat](#)', Combating Terrorism Centre, 11 September 2015

²⁷ Ahmed Alwly, '[Despite Arab, US attacks, AQAP still holding out in Yemen](#)', *Al Monitor*, 13 May 2016

²⁸ '[The truth behind al-Qaeda's takeover of Mukalla](#)', *Al Jazeera*, 16 September 2015.

²⁹ '[How Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen has made al Qaeda stronger – and richer](#)', *Reuters*, 8 April 2016

AQAP seeks to become a quasi-state in Yemen and sought permission from the Yemeni government to export crude oil and take 25% of the profits. The Yemeni government refused, fearful of legitimising an internationally recognised terrorist organisation.

Reports have emerged of AQAP fighters fighting alongside the Arab coalition forces in Taiz.³⁰ A number of leading AQAP figures have also defected to ISIS, such as Jalal Baleedi, killed in a drone strike, and there are reports of strong rivalry between AQAP and ISIS, though this has not materialised into armed conflict and has been restricted to verbal barbs.³¹ Those who have defected were apparently frustrated at AQAP's lack of aggression in the current conflict.³²

ISIS has also shown itself to be successful in bypassing the security measures imposed by the government and coalition forces in both Aden and Sana'a, which is controlled by the Houthis, in order to launch attacks. Matthew G. Olsen, the former director of the National Counterterrorism Center in Washington, has warned of the possibility of ISIS and AQAP fighters joining forces to mount terrorist attacks further afield.

Aden

In Aden, ISIS and AQAP, both opposed to the Houthis, have exploited the security vacuum. There have been assassinations in the city of top officials and of government related individuals after the Houthi/Saleh forces were expelled. On December 6 2015 Maj. Gen. Jaafar Mohammed Saad, governor of the city of Aden, was killed in a car bomb attack. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by ISIS. Other attacks in Aden which ISIS have claimed saw former Prime Minister Khaled Bahah's residence and a number of Saudi-led coalition military targets attacked, resulting in the deaths of 15 people including four UAE soldiers in October 2015. In the same month, IS attacked the University of Aden, firing shots in the air to demand the segregation of men and women at the University.³³ ISIS was also accused by the Yemeni government of orchestrating an attack on an elderly care home in Aden resulting in the death of 16 people including four foreign nuns acting as nurses.³⁴

³⁰ ['Yemen conflict: Al-Qaeda joins coalition battle for Taiz'](#), *BBC news online*, 22 February 2016

³¹ 'Ashraf al Falahi, [Islamic State extends its tentacles into Yemen](#), *Al Monitor*, 30 November 2015

³² ['Islamic State Gains Strength in Yemen, Challenging Al Qaeda'](#), *New York Times*, 15 December 2015

³³ 'Ahmed al Alwly, [Assassinations, chaos cripple Yemen's Aden](#)', *Al Monitor*, 18 January 2016

³⁴ [Yemen blames IS for 'treacherous' attack on Aden elderly home'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 6 March 2016

5. Legality of intervention

The legality of the Saudi-led intervention has been questioned. On 25 March President Hadi, having already requested support from the GCC and Arab League, wrote a letter to the UN Security Council asking for the support of other countries:

Willing countries that wish to help Yemen to provide immediate support for the legitimate authority by all means and measures to protect Yemen and deter the Houthi aggression...All our efforts for peaceful settlement have encountered absolute rejection by the Houthis who continue their aggression to subdue the rest of the regions out of their control.³⁵

Debate on the legality of military intervention has focused on the legitimacy of President Hadi's request for external assistance to save his government, but there are no clear-cut answers. Ashley Deeks,³⁶ of the University of Virginia Law School and former Assistant Legal Adviser for Political-Military affairs at the US State Department, questions President Hadi's invocation of [Article 51 of the UN Charter](#) in support of the legality of external intervention. Article 51 states:

Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations...

According to Ashley Deeks, Article 51 would only apply to Yemen if it was facing an external armed attack, which is not the case unless it could be proven that the Houthis and their allies were acting under direct instruction from Iran, and there is only weak evidence for this.

Ashley Deeks also argues that if the Saudi-led action is being taken under Article 51, the participants should have written to the Security Council, informing them of the situation and the legal rationale for taking the military action, as is normal practice. Such letters give the Security Council and other states the chance to respond to the development.

Other states have intervened militarily, with consent, in states to support leaders who have lost control of part of their countries. The most recent example being Iraq's request for US support to combat ISIS in Northern Iraq. The Iraqi government has a better claim to legitimacy, however, and had not lost control of so much of its territory. Crucially, in Iraq there was a strong international element to the threat, since ISIS was based largely in Syria.³⁷ The Houthis are based within Yemen.

Ashley Deeks reiterated her insistence that Article 51 does not apply:

Article 51 is relevant when a state is using force either in another state's territory or in response to an attack from outside.

³⁵ ['Yemen's President Hadi asks UN to back intervention'](#), *BBC News Online*, 25 March 2015

³⁶ Ashley Deeks, ['International Legal Justification for the Yemen Intervention: Blink and Miss It'](#), *Lawfare Blog*, 30 March 2015

³⁷ For more on this argument for the legality of the Iraqi action, see ['Airstrikes on Isis targets in Syria and Iraq are legal under international law'](#), *LSE*, September 2014

That is not the case here. This is the government of Yemen in a conflict with a significant rebel group inside the country – there are no Article 51 issues.³⁸

Apart from the question as to whether the threat to Yemen is external, there is also doubt about Hadi's legitimacy. A request for outside help under Article 51 would have to come from a legitimate leader to be acceptable under international law. In the 2012 election Hadi was the only candidate; full democratic elections were to follow. His term as President expired in 2014. Instead of fresh elections being held, his term as President was extended for a year. He then resigned and fled the capital, before rescinding his resignation. However, he did not re-establish control over Yemeni territory and its armed forces, nor did he return to the capital.

On the other hand, [UN Security Council Resolution 2216](#), passed on 14 April, reaffirmed the Security Council's support for the Hadi's legitimacy, perhaps answering that particular challenge to the intervention's legality.

Resolution 2216 also recognised that:

The continuing deterioration of the security situation and escalation of violence in Yemen poses an increasing and serious threat to neighbouring States and reaffirming its determination that the situation in Yemen constitutes a threat to international peace and security.

This affirmation supported the Saudi implication that the Houthi rebellion is a threat to Saudi security, with the implication that the Saudi intervention could be justified as a Saudi self-defence measure. However, some legal experts argue that the Houthi threat to Saudi Arabia is not immediate enough to justify intervention in another state.³⁹

The resolution also demands that the Houthis withdraw their forces from all areas that they have seized including Sana'a. It also imposes an arms embargo on the Houthis and sanctions on the son of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh and Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi.

Following the passing of the UN Security Council resolution, a number of leading experts on Yemen from the UK and US signed an open letter on April 16 declaring the intervention illegal:

This military campaign is illegal under international law: None of these states has a case for self-defense. The targets of the campaign include schools, homes, refugee camps, water systems, grain stores and food industries. This has the potential for appalling harm to ordinary Yemenis as almost no food or medicine can enter.⁴⁰

³⁸ ['Is The Saudi War On Yemen Legal? – Analysis'](#), *Eurasiareview*, 4 April 2015

³⁹ ['Is The Saudi War On Yemen Legal? – Analysis'](#), *Eurasiareview*, 4 April 2015

⁴⁰ ['Open Letter from Yemen Scholars Protesting War'](#), Middle East Research and Information Project, 16 April 2015

6. Humanitarian situation



Source: OCHA (as of Apr 2016)

As of February 2016, more than 6,000 people had been killed as a result of the conflict. On 3 March 2016, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien informed the Security Council that more than 2,000 children had been killed or injured in the conflict.⁴¹ Of 14.4 million food insecure people in Yemen, it is estimated that just over half are in need of immediate food assistance.

In 2015, the UN Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen requested \$1.6 billion, which was 56% funded. The three largest donors to the plan in 2015 as of May 2016, were Saudi Arabia, which donated \$254.4 million (28.4%), the US, which donated \$160 million (17.9%), and the United Kingdom, which donated \$122.8 million (13.7%).

In 2016, the funding required for the Humanitarian Response Plan increased to \$1.8bn, of which \$1.3 billion is immediately needed for life saving activities. As of May 2016, the 2016 plan has been 17% funded (\$299.3 million) of which the UK as the second largest contributor has provided \$55.8 million.⁴² John Ging, Director of Operations in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has stated that the plan remains as a result, "Shockingly underfunded."⁴³

The Yemeni ministry of planning and cooperation has also estimated that real GDP per capita in Yemen declined by 35% in 2015 to an estimated \$320, the lowest in the Arab world. According to estimates made by UN humanitarian partners, half of those affected by the conflict have seen their livelihoods destroyed as a result of the crisis. This

⁴¹ 'Yemen: UN humanitarian chief urges civilian protection, access to all parts of country', UN press release, 3 March 2016.

⁴² UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan 2016 \(HRP\)](#)

⁴³ [Yemeni people must be at centre of reinvigorated crisis response – senior UN relief official](#), UN Press Release, 17 May 2016

has resulted in the traditional safety nets provided by family and friends in the form of remittances and other assistance, falling away.⁴⁴

The UN also warned in April 2015 that Yemen's water, sanitation and telecommunications systems were on the brink of collapse, adding that humanitarian operations would cease within days unless fuel supplies were restored. The situation has deteriorated due to the difficulties and delays of accessing Yemen by sea and air as a result of the coalition blockade. Giving evidence to the International Development Committee, *Save the Children* drew attention to a 'de facto blockade':

The de facto air and naval blockade imposed by the coalition has been the single largest contributor to the current humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen.⁴⁵

19.3 million Yemenis (9.8 million as a result of the conflict) are in need of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) assistance equating to three-quarters of the population not being able to meet their basic WASH needs. Of this number, 13 million lacked access to clean water.⁴⁶

Julien Harneis, the head of UNICEF in Yemen, told the International Development Committee that DFID had been an essential partner in Yemen:

First, I should say that the support of DFID has been absolutely essential to maintaining a very large nutrition programme in Yemen and other services, WASH and health. Without that, we would not have been able to provide the significant scale of assistance that we are providing today.

However, he stressed that maintaining a functioning health system on the ground was crucial:

There are about 80% of health centres that are still functioning and opening, but how many health staff actually go in? Even if you could go in, what services will you get? Most health centres sell their medicines. You will get free nutrition assistance, principally thanks to DFID. You will get vaccination but, beyond that, the assistance to the population is very limited [...] It is the long-term destruction of the health system that will affect us for 10 to 20 years.⁴⁷

6.1 Impact on children

The conflict has resulted in 21.1 million people requiring urgent humanitarian assistance, of whom 9.9 million are children, according to figures released in March 2016. Over 2.7 million Yemenis have been internally displaced as a result of the conflict. There are also 320,000 children under the age of 5 at risk of severe acute malnutrition and 1 million under-fives at risk of moderate acute malnutrition.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, [Yemen Humanitarian Response plan](#), January 2016, p9

⁴⁵ House of Commons International Development Committee, [Crisis in Yemen](#), Fourth Report of 2015–16, HC 532, 4 May 2016

⁴⁶ OCHA [Yemen 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview, p.8](#)

⁴⁷ International development Committee [oral evidence session](#) 27 January 2016

⁴⁸ UNICEF [Yemen: Humanitarian Situation report](#), April 2016

Julien Harneis estimated that 10,000 children under 5 will die from illnesses that they would not have otherwise contracted, such as measles and diarrhoea, as an indirect result of the conflict.⁴⁹

A report published by UNICEF on the impact of the war on children found that, since March 2015, on average six children have been maimed or killed every day resulting in a seven-fold increase for comparable figures for the whole of 2014.⁵⁰

UNICEF has also declared that in accordance with the Humanitarian Response Plan, the Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) appeal in Yemen for 2016 will require \$180 million, of which \$32.7 million had been received as of April 2016, leaving an 82% funding gap. Furthermore, \$59.7 million dollars have been rolled over as pledged from the 2015 appeal.⁵¹

UN Children and armed conflict report

The UN produces an annual report on children in conflict that includes a list of conflict parties abusing the rights of children.⁵² The 2015 annual report, published 20 April 2016, included the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in that list and said that the coalition had been responsible for 60% of the child casualties in the conflict in 2015.

The fact of children's suffering in Yemen and the inclusion of the Saudi-led UN report had attracted attention in Parliament and elsewhere. In a debate on arms sales to Saudi Arabia Margaret Ferrier mentioned the report:

A recent UN Security Council report on children and armed conflict documents a verified sixfold increase in the number of children killed and maimed in 2015 compared with the previous year, 60% of which are attributable to the Saudi-led coalition.⁵³

After strong protests from the Saudi Ambassador to the United Nations, the UN Secretary General decided to remove the Saudi-led coalition from temporarily while a review was conducted.⁵⁴ The Saudis insisted that they had no problem with the review and said that the removal was "unconditional and irreversible."⁵⁵

On 9 June, the UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon revealed that he had been threatened with the loss of humanitarian funding for UN programmes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, South Sudan, Syria and other places if the Saudi-led coalition was not removed from the list. In an unusually frank interview, Ban Ki Moon acknowledged the "fierce reaction" to the decision:

⁴⁹ International development Committee [oral evidence session](#) 27 January 2016

⁵⁰ [UNICEF *Children on the Brink: The Impact of Violence and Conflict on Yemen and Its Children*](#), 29 March 2016 p3

⁵¹ UNICEF [Yemen crisis situation report](#), April 2016, p6

⁵² [Children and armed conflict](#), Report of the Secretary-General, United Nations, 20 April 2016. [This link appears to be to the original version of the report, with the Saudi-led coalition still included]

⁵³ [HC Deb 6 June 2016, c119WH](#)

⁵⁴ ['Yemen: Ban removes Saudi-led coalition from report on conflict-affected children, pending joint review'](#), UN press release, 6 June 2016

⁵⁵ ['UN takes Saudi coalition off Yemen list of child violators'](#), *Washington Post*, 6 June 2016

At the same time, I also had to consider the very real prospect that millions of other children would suffer grievously if, as was suggested to me, countries would de-fund many UN programmes. Children already at risk in Palestine, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and so many other places would fall further into despair.⁵⁶

He and said that this was one of the most “painful and difficult decisions” he had ever had to make, and that it is “unacceptable” for Member States to exert undue pressure on the UN. He also said that the content of the report would not change while the investigations into the complaints were carried out.

Human rights groups had reacted to the decision with dismay. Amnesty International said that the decision had put the UN’s credibility “on the line after it shamefully caved in to pressure.”⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch said that the UN should immediately return the Saudi-led coalition to the “list of shame”. They said that: “Allowing governments that commit abuses against children to bully their way off the list makes a mockery of the UN’s children protection efforts.”⁵⁸

Education

As a result of hostilities since March 2015 3,585 schools have been closed and more than 1.8 million school aged children have been forced out of school, which, when added to those already not in school, meant that 3.4 million or 47% of Yemeni school aged children are out of school.⁵⁹ Though a large number of schools reopened in November 2015, 1,600 remained closed as a result of the conflict, impacting around 560,000 children.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ [‘Content of report on conflict-affected children ‘will not change,’ asserts Ban’](#), UN press release, 9 June 2010

⁵⁷ [‘UN: Shameful pandering to Saudi Arabia over children killed in Yemen conflict’](#), Amnesty International press release,

⁵⁸ [‘UN: Return Saudi-led Coalition to ‘List of Shame’](#)”, Human Rights Watch press release, 8 June 2016

⁵⁹ House of Commons International Development Committee, [Crisis in Yemen](#), Fourth Report of 2015–16, HC 532, 4 May 2016

⁶⁰ UNICEF [Yemen crisis situation report](#), April 2016, p4

7. Alleged war Crimes and UK-supplied armaments

Both parties to the conflict have been accused of human rights violations and violating international humanitarian law (IHL). The Houthis and their allies as well as local ground forces opposed to them have been accused of possible war crimes for using imprecise artillery in heavily populated civilian areas and of launching attacks from or near homes, schools and hospitals.

The UN claims, however, that most civilian casualties in Yemen have been caused by the Saudi-led coalition air strikes, causing twice as many civilian casualties as all the other combatants in Yemen.⁶¹ A UN panel of experts also documented 119 coalition sorties relating to violations of IHL.⁶²

Amnesty International has been able to document more than 30 air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition across six governorates in Yemen which resulted in 366 civilian deaths of which more than a half were women and children.⁶³

According to Amnesty International, the attacks appeared, “to have deliberately targeted” civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, markets and mosques amounting to possible war crimes.

Amnesty has also documented the use by the coalition of cluster munitions manufactured by the US and Brazil.

7.1 UK-supplied armaments

In December 2015 Amnesty and Saferworld commissioned a study by international lawyers that concluded that the sale of weapons to be used in the Yemen conflict by Saudi Arabia would breach the UK’s obligations under international humanitarian law and the [Arms Trade Treaty](#) and EU law:

...any authorisation by the UK of the transfer of weapons and related items to Saudi Arabia... in circumstances where such weapons are capable of being used in the conflict in Yemen, including to support its blockade of Yemeni territory, and in circumstances where their end-use is not restricted, would constitute a breach by the UK of its obligations under domestic, European and international law.⁶⁴

Amnesty International and the other organisations behind the drive against the sales made some recommendations for the government:

- Immediately suspend arms transfers and military support to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners which could be used

⁶¹ [‘Yemen war: Saudi coalition ‘causing most civilian casualties’](#), *BBC News Online*, 18 March 2016

⁶² [Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 \(2014\) \(S/2016/73\)](#), 26 January 2016

⁶³ [Yemen: The Forgotten War](#), Amnesty International, 25 March 2015

⁶⁴ [‘UK Government breaking the law supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, say leading lawyers’](#), Amnesty International press release, 17 December 2016

to commit or facilitate further serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Yemen.

- Carry out a thorough and independent investigation into UK arms transfers and reported war crimes in Yemen.
- Make every possible diplomatic effort to help bring the conflict to an end.
- Continue to push for an end to the de facto blockade so that vital humanitarian and commercial supplies enter Yemen and reach those most in need.
- Fully implement the provisions of the Arms Trade Treaty, and encourage all other arms exporters to do the same.⁶⁵

The question was raised in the House of Commons on 5 January 2016, and the government referred to the UK's rigorous licensing regime:

Caroline Lucas: [...] Has his Department assessed the legal opinion published last month by Matrix Chambers which concluded that the Government have misdirected themselves in law and in fact in continuing to grant authorisations for the transfer of weapons to Saudi Arabia that are capable of being used in the conflict in Yemen?

Tobias Ellwood: We have one of the most vigorous export licensing schemes in the world. Indeed, it was set up by the previous Government. If there are any genuine examples of the misuse of weapons systems that have been sold to any country, the process is in place to ensure that they are examined. If such examples are brought forward, we will certainly look at them.⁶⁶

Cluster bombs

On May 22 2016, Amnesty International announced that its field researchers in Yemen had discovered that UK-manufactured BL-755 cluster bombs had been used in a village near the Yemeni – Saudi border. The UK is also among over a hundred countries to have banned cluster munitions and the discovery of the bombs is the first confirmed use of UK-made cluster munitions since the [2008 cluster munitions convention](#) entered into force. The weapon was sold in large quantities to Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the 1980s and 1990s and is known to be part of their ordinance stockpiles. The bombs are also designed to be compatible with the UK-supplied Tornado fighter-bomber jet.

Amnesty International wrote to the Prime Minister in May 2016, requesting an inquiry to determine if UK military personnel have played any part in the use of these cluster munitions. Oliver Sprague, Amnesty International UK's Arms Control Programme Director, also said that the UK should be pressing for their destruction:

Cluster bombs are one of the nastiest weapons in the history of warfare, rightly banned by more than 100 countries, so it's truly shocking that a British cluster munition has been dropped on a civilian area in Yemen.

⁶⁵ [UK Government breaking the law supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, say leading lawyers](#), Amnesty International press release, 17 December 2016

⁶⁶ [HC Deb 5 January 2016, c102](#)

Given that this type of cluster bomb is very likely to have been used in combination with Tornado war planes which the UK has also sold to Saudi Arabia, there's even a possibility that British support personnel might have been involved in the cluster bombing of Yemen. This would be an absolute scandal if confirmed.

The UK should have been tracking down all the now-banned cluster bombs it's sold to Saudi Arabia over the years and pressing for them to be safely disposed of. Instead, shamefully, it's now come to light that a UK cluster bomb has been used in Yemen, spraying its deadly bomblets all over a village and jeopardising the lives of men, women and children.⁶⁷

Amnesty have also documented the use of US and Brazilian manufactured cluster munitions. Though not a signatory to the Cluster Munitions Convention, US law prohibits the sale of cluster bombs to be used in civilian areas.⁶⁸

The Saudis have denied that cluster munitions have been used in civilian areas, arguing that they have been used only once, against a Houthi military stronghold in Sa'ada.

7.2 Involvement of UK personnel

One of the concerns is that the UK is not only supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia but UK personnel are also involved in training in their use, and in advising the Saudi military in order, the government says, to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law.

On 8 January, a UK Ministry of Defence spokesperson made a statement on the role of UK personnel in the Yemen conflict:

UK military personnel are not directly involved in Saudi-led Coalition operations, we are offering Saudi Arabia advice and training on best practice targeting techniques to help ensure continued compliance with International Humanitarian Law. We support Saudi forces through longstanding, pre-existing arrangements and will consider any new requests.⁶⁹

On 12 January the Foreign Secretary gave more detail about these military personnel:

I cannot tell him whether it is six people, but we do have a military presence in Saudi Arabia, and we are working with the Saudi Arabians to ensure the following of correct procedures to avoid breaches of international humanitarian law—to ensure that target sets are correctly identified and processes correctly followed and that only legitimate military targets are struck. It is important that we ensure Saudi Arabia has that capability.

We also use the personnel who are present as a quick check—it can only be a quick first check—when we receive reports, as we have recently, of breaches of international humanitarian law that

⁶⁷ [,Saudi Arabia-led coalition has used UK-manufactured cluster bombs in Yemen - new evidence](#), Amnesty International UK Press Release, 23 May 2016

⁶⁸ [Human rights groups say Saudi Arabia misused U.S.-made cluster bombs](#), Los Angeles Times, 23 May 2016

⁶⁹ [Defence in the Media blog](#), MoD News Team, 8 January 2016

would, for example, involve the deliberate striking of civilian targets. So far, in every case, our people on the ground have reported that there is no evidence of deliberate breaches of international humanitarian law.⁷⁰

On 14 January the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said that US and UK officials were in the Saudi command centre: “We asked a number of allied countries to come and be part of the control centre. I know they are aware of the target lists.”⁷¹

He said that the foreign officials were not choosing targets: “We pick the targets, they don’t. I don’t know technically exactly what part of the process they are in, but I do know they are aware of the target lists.”⁷²

On 19 January the government repeated its position that UK personnel are “not directly involved” in the Yemen conflict, and explained how they assess compliance with international humanitarian law:

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, whether he has received any reports of any potential breaches of international humanitarian law from UK personnel working with the Saudi military.

Philip Hammond: We are aware of reports on alleged violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in Yemen by the Saudi Arabians and take these very seriously. The UK is not a partner to the Coalition and British military personnel are not directly involved in Coalition operations. The Ministry of Defence closely follows alleged IHL violations, using available information, which in turn informs our overall assessment of IHL compliance in Yemen. We consider a range of information from government sources, foreign governments, the media and international non-governmental organisations. We are also offering advice and training to Saudi Arabia to demonstrate investigations best practice and to help ensure continued compliance with IHL.⁷³

Following up earlier assurances from the government that it had no evidence of “deliberate breaches”, Hilary Benn asked about reports from UK personnel about potential inadvertent breaches of international humanitarian law by Saudi personnel.

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to the Answer of 19 January 2016 to Question 22031, whether he has received any reports from UK personnel working with the Saudi military of (a) negligent and (b) inadvertent potential breaks of international humanitarian law.

Mr Philip Hammond: The UK is not a member of the Saudi-led Coalition. British personnel are not involved in carrying out strikes, directing or conducting operations in Yemen or selecting targets. They are also not involved in the Saudi targeting decision-making process. British liaison officers have provided information as part of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) monitoring of incidents of alleged International Humanitarian Law (IHL) violations. Looking at

⁷⁰ [HC Deb 12 Jan 2016, c697](#)

⁷¹ ‘UK military ‘working alongside’ Saudi bomb targeters in Yemen war’, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 January 2016

⁷² ‘British and US military ‘in command room’ for Saudi strikes on Yemen’, *Guardian*, 15 January 2016

⁷³ [HC Written question – 22031, 19 January 2016](#)

the information available to us, we have assessed that there has not been a breach of IHL by the coalition, but continue to monitor the situation closely, seeking further information where appropriate.⁷⁴

7.3 Investigations

The International Development Committee wrote to the Secretary of State for International Development on 2 February 2016 to ask why the government had blocked attempts by the Dutch government to form an independent fact finding mission to investigate violations of international humanitarian law, in favour of allowing the Saudis and the internationally recognised government of Yemen to undertake their own investigation. The Committee argued that the government should drop opposition to an independent investigation:

It is a longstanding principle of the rule of law that inquiries should be independent of those being investigated. Furthermore, given the severity of the allegations (that the Saudi-led coalition has targeted civilians in Yemen) it is nearly unthinkable that any investigation led by coalition actors would come to the conclusion that the allegations were accurate [...]

The Government should withdraw its opposition to calls for an independent international inquiry into alleged abuses of international humanitarian law in Yemen, and should do all it can to ensure the creation of such an inquiry. If the Government is not satisfied with existing proposals such as those put forward in the resolution tabled by the Netherlands at the UN Human Rights Council in September 2015, it should formulate its own proposals and seek international agreement on them.⁷⁵

On March 9 the Foreign Secretary responded to the letter, denying that the Government opposes an independent investigation:

Regarding your first recommendation, the Government is not opposing calls for an independent investigation but, first and foremost, we want to see the Saudis investigate allegations of breaches of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) which are attributed to them; and for their investigations to be thorough and conclusive. The Saudi authorities announced more details of how they will investigate such incidents on 31 January, including a new investigation team outside of Coalition Command to review all existing procedures, and suggest improvements. We believe we should give time for this new team to do its job before considering the issue of an independent investigation.

It is untrue that the UK was "not satisfied" with the proposals in the Human Rights Council resolution tabled by the Netherlands and sought to water them down. The two sides which tabled different resolutions at the September/October 2015 Human Rights Council reached an agreement on a single text, which was then adopted by consensus. The UK supports this outcome as it is designed to help the legitimate Government of Yemen (GoY) improve its own capacity to protect the human rights of its people.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ [HC Written question – 24769, 2 February 2016](#)

⁷⁵ [Letter from the Chair of the International Development Committee to the Secretary of State, 2 February 2016](#)

⁷⁶ [Letter from the Secretary of State Justine Greening to the Chair of the International Development Committee, 9 March 2016](#)

On March 21 David Mepham, the UK director of *Human Rights Watch* (HRW) described the claims by the Foreign Secretary that he has 'seen no evidence' of violations by the Saudi-led coalition as 'preposterous' and claims about Saudi Arabia's conduct of the war as 'self-serving and disingenuous'.

HRW claim that the Saudi committee to assess the role of the kingdom in the conflict will not look at "specific" airstrikes and is "toothless" and that the Saudi, Yemeni and UK governments have no interest in seriously investigating who is responsible for civilian deaths.⁷⁷

The Saudis have rejected claims of war crimes by human rights organisations and the UN, claiming that investigations were carried out remotely and are guided by locals linked to the Houthis. The UN responded that the methodology that they use is used worldwide and avoids manipulation by the warring sides.⁷⁸

7.4 Child soldiers

Increasing numbers of child soldiers are being used by armed groups in Yemen; there are estimates that up to 30% of fighters in Yemen are children, largely patrolling checkpoints and inspecting vehicles. This is despite the official age for joining the army in Yemen being 18 and declarations made by the Yemeni army and Abdul Malek al-Houthi that recruiting child soldiers would stop.⁷⁹

Armed groups are offering money and regular food to young recruits, and as Yemen's economy collapses and food insecurity increases, these are compelling inducements.

Families are often complicit in sending their sons away to fight, as they have no other means of support. Some fathers now refuse to allow their sons to return home from fighting, because the families have become dependent on the salary.⁸⁰

Commentators point out the long-term damage done to individuals and to Yemeni society by the use of child soldiers.

⁷⁷ David Mepham '[Dispatches: Britain's Dishonesty Over Yemen](#)', Human Rights Watch 21 March 2016

⁷⁸ '[Yemen's guerrilla war tests military ambitions of big-spending Saudis](#)', *Reuters*, 19 April 2016

⁷⁹ '[Yemen crisis: Meet the child soldiers who have forsaken books for Kalashnikovs](#)', *Independent*, 19 April 2015

⁸⁰ '[In Yemen, children — possibly thousands of them — join fight](#)', *Washington Post*, 11 May 2015

8. International reaction to the Saudi-led operation in Yemen

At the start of the campaign David Cameron expressed support for the Saudi-led operation, following discussions with King Salman of Saudi Arabia. Downing Street issued a statement reiterating the Government's position that the Hadi government is legitimate and warning of the potential for ISIS and AQAP to threaten both the UK and Saudi Arabia.⁸¹

The US has supported the Saudi-led operation. US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed solidarity with the Saudis and warned in April 2015 that the US would not tolerate Iranian interference in Yemen:

There have been – there are, obviously – flights coming from Iran. Every single week there are flights from Iran and we've traced it and know this. Iran needs to recognise that United States is not going to stand by while the region is destabilised or while people engage in overt warfare across lines, international boundaries in other countries.⁸²

The line from the EU was perhaps more equivocal, as Federica Mogherini, the EU High representative for Foreign Affairs and Security matters, argued that military action would not help:

I'm convinced that military action is not a solution... Only a broad political consensus through negotiations can provide a sustainable solution, restore peace, and preserve the unity and territorial integrity of Yemen. Otherwise, the ability of extremist and terrorist groups to take advantage of the situation is likely to increase dramatically.⁸³

Iran strongly condemned the Saudi-led operation, with Iran's foreign minister Mohammed Javad Sarif requesting an immediate end to the bombing and proposing a four-point peace plan including an immediate ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, promoting intra-Yemeni dialogue and the establishment of a broad-based government.⁸⁴

Ayatollah Ali Khameni, Iran's Supreme Leader has also used strong language in condemning the intervention, declaring it to be 'genocide' and tweeting that the succession and transition from the deceased King Abdullah to King Salman and his son the defence minister Prince Muhammed bin Salman has brought in inexperienced leaders and has seen 'composure replaced by barbarism'.⁸⁵

⁸¹ ['PM call with King Salman of Saudi Arabia, 27 March 2015'](#), Prime Minister's Office press release, 27 March 2015

⁸² ['John Kerry warns Iran that US 'will not stand by' as Tehran backs Yemen rebels'](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 9 April 2015

⁸³ ['Statement of the High Representative and Vice President Federica Mogherini on the situation in Yemen'](#), EU External Action Service press release, 26 April 2015

⁸⁴ ['Iran says it will use influence to broker peace in Yemen'](#), *Reuters*, 15 April 2015

⁸⁵ ['Arabia infelix'](#), *Economist*, 18 April 2015

9. Outlook for Yemen and the region

9.1 Iranian response and the outlook for the coalition

Saudi economic difficulties

The war in Yemen signalled a change in direction in Saudi foreign policy from a traditionally cautious approach to a more aggressive one, following the accession of King Salman and the appointment of his son Prince Mohammed bin Salman to a number of key posts including the defence ministry. The Saudis, fearful of what they perceive as growing Iranian expansion and influence in the Arab world, set out to confront it, particularly after the Lausanne Iranian nuclear deal. The Houthis have been referred to as “Hezbollah South”⁸⁶ and the prospect of a movement sympathetic to Iran being the dominant power in its southern neighbour was unlikely to go unchallenged by the Saudis and its allies in the GCC.

The war at its launch seemed to be very popular in Saudi Arabia, with an outburst of patriotic feeling within the kingdom.⁸⁷ Now there seems to be growing criticism.⁸⁸

Divisions have apparently emerged within the Saudi royal family regarding the direction of Saudi foreign policy and the inexperience of Mohammed bin Salman. In September 2015, a Saudi prince published a couple of letters calling for the ousting of King Salman. The prince also claimed that a number of Saudi royals and senior tribal leaders support the move. Among the reasons cited for the removal of King Salman were his deteriorating health, the concentration of power in his son’s hands, a faltering economy with a growing deficit and the planning and execution of the Yemen war.⁸⁹

The war in Yemen is also costing the coalition an estimated \$200 million a day, with the kingdom bearing the brunt of the costs.⁹⁰ The Saudi economy in recent years has been affected by declining oil prices and competition from shale and fracking, leading to lower export and fiscal revenues and a 20% fiscal deficit has been estimated for 2015.⁹¹

Saudi Arabia also imports all of its weapons, and increased its spending on infrastructure and social welfare in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’, all of which are eating away at their reserves. It has been estimated in one report that Saudi reserves peaked in August 2014 at \$737 billion and by

⁸⁶ Brian Whitaker, [‘Yemen and Saudi Arabia Royal Reshuffle’](#), *Al-Bab*, 29 April 2015

⁸⁷ [‘Saudi Airstrikes Raise Doubts Abroad, Spark Patriotic Fervor At Home’](#), *NPR*, 20 April 2015

⁸⁸ Jane Kinninmont, [‘Saudi Foreign Policy Is in a State of Flux’](#), Chatham House, 17 February 2016

⁸⁹ [Senior Saudi Royal calls for coup to replace King Salman](#), *The Independent*, 28 September 2015

⁹⁰ [The Saudi Town on the Frontline of Yemen’s War](#), *Bloomberg*, 21 December 2015

⁹¹ [‘IMF Staff Completes 2015 Article IV Mission to Saudi Arabia’](#), IMF Press Release No. 15/249, 1 June 2015

May 2015 had dropped to \$672 billion with its reserves falling by \$12 billion a month. By the end of March 2016, foreign reserves were down to \$593 billion.

With the lack of diversification in the Saudi economy, the country is vulnerable to a sustained fall in oil prices.⁹² On 26 April, Saudi Arabia announced its 2030 economic vision, aimed at diversifying the Saudi economy away from dependence on oil.

The economic situation might affect the Kingdom domestically, as well as in its ability to pursue the Yemen conflict, as argued in the *Daily Telegraph*:

On the current course their reserves may be down to \$200bn by the end of 2018. The markets will react long before this, seeing the writing on the wall. Capital flight will accelerate.

The government can slash investment spending for a while - as it did in the mid-1980s - but in the end it must face draconian austerity. It cannot afford to prop up Egypt and maintain an exorbitant political patronage machine across the Sunni world.

Social spending is the glue that holds together a medieval Wahhabi regime at a time of fermenting unrest among the Shia minority of the Eastern Province, pin-prick terrorist attacks from ISIS, and blowback from the invasion of Yemen.⁹³

Prospects for the coalition

The alliance that Saudi Arabia has sought to create to combat the Houthis is not as solid as the Saudis would have liked. Major Sunni powers such as Pakistan and Turkey, while supportive initially, have not committed forces and have pressed for a diplomatic solution. Egypt, while committing its naval forces to protect the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait that leads into the Red Sea and making a limited contribution to the air campaign, has refused to commit land forces in significant numbers.

The new Saudi king may also be softening the Saudi policy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, which would cause a cooling of relations with Egypt.⁹⁴ The role of the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Islah, is also a source of disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the Saudis willing to back Islah in the fight against the Houthis. The UAE has outlawed the Muslim brotherhood and branded them a terrorist organisation and is more willing to support southern secessionists and Salafists in Yemen.⁹⁵

Though the Saudis and their allies have claimed that the Houthis are nothing more than Iranian proxies, many observers dispute this, particularly as the Iranians advised the Houthis against advancing in the south of the country after the fall of Sana'a. Many observers accept,

⁹² ['Saudi Arabia may go broke before the US oil industry buckles,'](#) *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2016

⁹³ ['Saudi Arabia may go broke before the US oil industry buckles,'](#) *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2016

⁹⁴ ['Saudi Arabia shift closer to change in policy toward Muslim Brotherhood,'](#) *Middle East Eye*, 13 February 2015

⁹⁵ Peter Salisbury, ['Yemen: Stemming the Rise of a Chaos State'](#), Chatham House, 25 May 2016, p.30

though, that it is likely that the Iranians and Hizbollah provide some degree of military support and training in addition to political and moral support.

One Iranian official has argued that Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen presents a low cost opportunity for Iran to benefit in Yemen at Saudi Arabia's expense:

The reality is that Iran's influence in Yemen is minimal, and the Saudis know this. Yemen is far from our shores. We didn't need to send arms to Yemen before the war, and now it is practically impossible to do so. But from a strategic perspective, the conflict in Yemen has no cost for us and even has some benefits.⁹⁶

However, since the execution of the Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, the Iranians have threatened to send military advisers to assist the Houthis with the possibility of Russian cooperation.⁹⁷ The offer was met with a firm response from a senior Houthi official requesting that Iran keep out of the conflict at a time when the Houthis were engaged in negotiations with the Saudis to attempt to end the conflict.⁹⁸

On 4 April the US navy reported intercepting a weapons shipment, apparently heading for Yemen from Iran, consisting of assault rifles, rocket propelled grenades and heavy machine guns. This was the third time in two months that this has occurred.⁹⁹

Yemen, however, is currently awash with the types of weapons seized.¹⁰⁰

9.2 A possible political settlement in Yemen?

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that there was progress towards a solution through UN-sponsored talks before the Saudi-led operation.¹⁰¹ It was only the launch of the Saudi-led bombing that derailed the talks. According to Jamal Benomar, the former UN envoy to Yemen, a deal was close:

When this campaign started, one thing that was significant but went unnoticed is that the Yemenis were close to a deal that would institute power-sharing with all sides, including the Houthis.

The report states that most Yemeni factions agree that progress was being made in these talks, but disagree on the assertion that an agreement was close.

It then suggests that the Houthis had agreed to withdraw their forces from the cities. In exchange, the Houthis accepted a reduced role for President Hadi, who was to be a member of an executive body that would temporarily run the country.

⁹⁶ International Crisis Group: *Yemen is Peace Possible*, p11-12

⁹⁷ '[Iran could send military advisers to Yemen: official suggests](#)', *Reuters*, 8 March 2016

⁹⁸ '[Houthis request Iran to stay out of Yemen crisis](#)', *Al-Arabiya*, 9 March 2016

⁹⁹ '[Navy: Iranian Weapons Confiscated at Sea – and it's the third time in two months](#)' *Washington Post*, 4 April 2016

¹⁰⁰ '[No, Yemen's Houthis actually aren't Iranian puppets](#)', *Washington Post*, 16 May 2016

¹⁰¹ '[Former U.N. Envoy Says Yemen Political Deal was Close Before Saudi Airstrikes Began](#)', *Wall Street Journal*, 26 April 2015

The proposed deal included a provision that 30% of cabinet posts and parliamentary seats would be occupied by women. Likewise, the Houthis would be guaranteed a 30% representation in government. Some diplomats interviewed for the report, however, claimed that the Saudis objected because they did not want an agreed settlement:

Saudi Arabia did not want a democracy – this is what these diplomats tell me. They don't want a democracy in their backyard.....They want to control the politics there and impose their terms on this country. The last thing they need is anywhere in the region a democracy, and you can see since the so-called Arab Spring of the last four or five years, what have the Saudis done?

[...]

So preservation of monarchy and their rule is of course utmost, uppermost in the minds of the Saudi rulership.¹⁰²

Following international pressure on the Saudis to start looking for a political solution, it was announced on April 21 that *Operation Decisive Storm* had ended to be replaced with *Operation Renewal of Hope* with the aim of finding a political solution to the crisis in Yemen while continuing military operations against the Houthis.

In October 2015 the Houthis reaffirmed their acceptance of the terms of UN Security Council resolution 2216 and the [7 Muscat Principles](#), including the withdrawal of Houthi forces and forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh from cities, the restoration of the Hadi presidency, the holding of early Parliamentary and Presidential elections and the creation of a Houthi political party.¹⁰³

In December 2015 a ceasefire was announced which was not adhered to and UN sponsored peace talks ended in Switzerland with an agreement to resume in early 2016. In the December talks there were substantive discussions on confidence-building measures, improving humanitarian access and agreeing on a permanent ceasefire.¹⁰⁴

On 8 March 2016, Houthi officials were invited to Saudi Arabia to discuss a prisoner exchange and to begin negotiations to end the conflict. It was then announced on March 23 by the UN Special Envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, that the parties to the conflict had agreed to the cessation of hostilities on 10 April prior to the resumption of peace talks in Kuwait on 18 April.

The prospects for peace are widely viewed as poor. What started as a conflict between the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the Saudi-backed Yemeni government now involves numerous parties with divergent goals, with no party strong enough to win the war and none with

¹⁰² [‘Why Saudis Derailed Imminent Yemen Deal with Airstrikes’](#), *The Real News*, 28 April 2015

¹⁰³ [‘Houthis reaffirm acceptance of Security Council resolution aimed at ending violence in Yemen’](#), UN Press release, 7 October 2015

¹⁰⁴ International Crisis Group: [Yemen is Peace Possible](#), 9 February 2016, p27

enough power to be able to provide the structure and impetus necessary to reach a diplomatic solution.¹⁰⁵

The sacking of Khaled Baheh as Vice President and Prime Minister, was widely seen as a further blow to the prospect of peace, as he was seen as a conciliatory voice. His replacements, Major General Ali Moshen al Ahmar and Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr are viewed as hardliners, strongly opposed to the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.¹⁰⁶

In the light of the political stalemate, the International Crisis Group recommended in its most recent report that it was best to concentrate on alleviating the humanitarian crisis,¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Hisham Al-Omeisy, '[Yemen's ceasefire could be the first step towards peace – with international help](#)', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2016

¹⁰⁶ '[Yemen Conflict: Former Vice-President Baheh denounces sacking](#)', *BBC News Online*, 5 April 2016

¹⁰⁷ International Crisis Group: [Yemen is Peace Possible](#) pp28-29

10. Conclusion

Saudi-led forces have achieved air superiority in Yemen and have degraded the artillery and missile capabilities of the Houthis and the Saleh loyalists. That has not resulted in Saudi Arabia being able to secure its border from attacks. After an uncertain start, the Saudis with their allies managed to force the Houthis out of Aden in July 2015, though Sana'a remains firmly in Houthi hands. President Hadi has since returned to Aden with his government in exile, though the city remains far from secure and the conflict has become something of a stalemate.

In the meantime, the humanitarian situation in Yemen is critical and, with the collapse of central authority in the country, AQAP has been provided with fertile ground to expand and exploit in Yemen.¹⁰⁸ AQAP also benefitted from the fact that Saudi airstrikes were concentrated initially on the Houthi/Saleh alliance while leaving AQAP untouched, giving it the opportunity to advance in the Hadramawt province. One report has suggested that Saudi Arabia might be aiming to annex or informally control part of Yemeni province of Hadramawt, which would give Saudi Arabia direct access to the Arabian Sea, avoiding the Strait of Hormuz, which is vulnerable to Iranian pressure.¹⁰⁹

With his reputation at stake, there is also pressure on King Salman's son, and new Defence Minister, Mohamed bin Salman to achieve victory in Yemen:

In most other countries, a military leader or defence minister who does not achieve a clear outcome would be a political casualty. If that does not happen in Saudi Arabia, then King Salman may find himself under pressure from senior princes seeking more fundamental change.¹¹⁰

Yemen also represents what the International Crisis Group has called a lose-lose situation for Western powers allied to Saudi Arabia: refuse support and Riyadh would interpret this as abandonment to face Iran on its own. Support Saudi Arabia and that risks increasing Iranian/Saudi tensions and prolonging the war, increasing the threat of AQAP and ISIS.¹¹¹

The Council for Arab British Understanding held a seminar on Yemen on April 1 2015. Abubakr al-Shamahi, a British-Yemeni journalist, envisioned three possible scenarios for the future of Yemen:¹¹²

The first scenario requires the GCC to commit to the development of Yemen by supplying aid and proposing a clear plan, to give Yemenis hope that such a project could succeed.

¹⁰⁸ ['How does al-Qaeda attract Yemenis?', BBC News Online, 4 May 2015](#)

¹⁰⁹ Robin Wright, ['Yemen then and now; the sad chronicle of a failed state'](#), *New Yorker*, 1 May 2015

¹¹⁰ Simon Henderson, ['Saudi Arabia's 'Inexperienced Youngster'](#), Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 21 April 2015

¹¹¹ International Crisis Group op.cit p25

¹¹² [Crisis in Yemen: Any way out?](#) Caabu briefing with Abubakr Al-Shamahi and Baraa Shiban, 1 April 2015

In the second scenario, a Southern Yemeni state is re-established. The secessionist movement in the South enjoys popular legitimacy, although it is also bitterly divided and would be ill-equipped to take on AQAP.

The final scenario, the most “pessimistic and realistic,” is the collapse of Yemen, as it becomes victim to a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Abubakr al-Shamahi also noted that, while Yemen has experienced many conflicts in the past, the longer lasting ones were the ones where foreign powers were involved, the case in the present situation.

There is a further danger in ignoring the conflict in Yemen given the possible global economic ramifications: 4% of the world’s oil supply and 8% of global trade is transported through the Bab al-Mandeb, as Peter Salisbury writes for Chatham House:

It is nonetheless baffling that Yemen has been ignored as it has been by the international media – and stranger still that Western policy on the war has been so phlegmatic. It is almost as if someone had distributed a map of the country that placed Yemen on an island in the middle of an ocean rather than occupying the large chunk of geo-strategically important real estate it does

[...] Yemen is not an island. And if the ceasefire fails, the war there will only remain a forgotten one for so long.¹¹³

Adam Baron of the European Council on Foreign Relations argues that Yemenis will be the victims of such a protracted war:

The truth, however, is that no one is winning this war. And while all parties involved in Yemen seem far from reaching their goals, there is one clear loser: the Yemeni people.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Peter Salisbury, [‘In Volatile Middle East, West Must Not Forget Yemen’](#), Chatham House, 31 March 2016

¹¹⁴ Adam Baron, [‘Everyone Is Losing Yemen’s War’](#), *Foreign Policy*, 28 April 2015

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