

## Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Attacks, and U.S. Policy

Yemen is a conflict-afflicted nation along the strategic Bab al Mandab Strait, one of the world's most active shipping lanes. Since 2015, a civil war has pitted the Iran-backed Houthi movement against Yemen's internationally recognized government, its backers, and other anti-Houthi forces. Foreign intervention complicates the conflict, which has contributed to what United Nations agencies have described as "one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world." An uneasy truce has frozen conflict lines since 2022 (**Figure 1**). The Iran-backed Houthis launched numerous attacks on international shipping from October 2023 to December 2024, before pausing these attacks for months then resuming them in July 2025. The Houthis continue to launch strikes against targets in Israel ostensibly to compel Israel to end its war with Hamas. From March to May 2025, U.S. forces expanded strikes against the Houthis to compel an end to Houthi maritime attacks. The Houthis agreed to end attacks on U.S. vessels in exchange for a halt to U.S. strikes under an Oman-mediated truce. Yemen's underlying conflict remains unresolved, and the Houthis pose enduring threats to shipping and to U.S. partners.

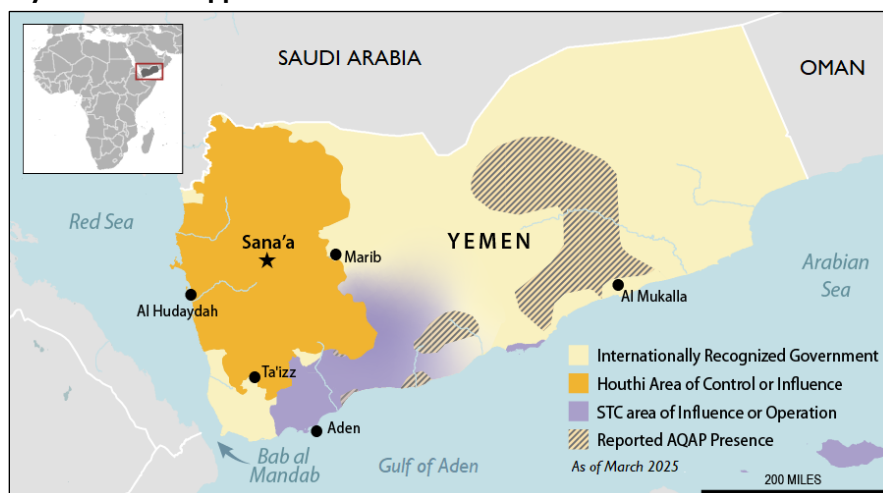
### Overview and Key Stakeholders

Long-running Yemeni disputes over governance and energy resources have deepened since 2015 amid foreign influence and intervention. The Republic of Yemen was formed by a 1990 merger of the Sana'a-led Yemen Arab Republic (a former Ottoman province, then Zaydi Shia-ruled kingdom) and the Aden-led People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (a former British colony and protectorate, then independent Marxist regime). North-south tensions and conflict have recurred since the 1960s, and a southern independence movement remains active. Tribal networks and local actors are the most influential parties in many areas of the country.

Arab Spring-era protests and unrest led the president of the **Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG)** to resign in 2012. A UN-mediated transition and national dialogue sought to broker new governing arrangements. The **Houthi movement** (alt. *Ansar Allah* or Partisans of God), a north Yemen-based Zaydi Shia network, opposed UN-backed outcomes and resumed an insurgency. In 2014, the Houthis seized the capital, Sana'a, and later advanced on Aden. ROYG leaders fled and requested international intervention. In March 2015, a coalition led by **Saudi Arabia** began a military campaign against the Houthis, whose attacks across Yemen's borders grew in complexity and scope with deepening support over time from **Iran**. The **United States** has provided logistical, intelligence, and advisory support to the coalition, but ended aerial refueling and some arms sales to Saudi Arabia in response to civilian casualties and congressional action.

In 2019, tensions between anti-Houthi forces in the ROYG (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the separatist **Southern Transitional Council (STC)**, backed by the **United Arab Emirates** led to open warfare. A 2020 power-sharing agreement formed a coalition government. Since 2022, an eight-person Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) has led Yemen's internationally recognized government. That year, the ROYG and Houthis signed a truce, halting most fighting and establishing humanitarian measures. Lines of control, in some areas mirroring Yemen's pre-unification borders, have been static (**Figure 1**). The Sunni Islamist **Islah Party** and National Resistance leader **Tariq Saleh** oppose the Houthis and hold PLC seats. **Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)** and the **Islamic State** remain active.

**Figure 1. Yemen: Key Actors and Approximate Areas of Influence**



**Sources:** CRS using ESRI and U.S. Department of State map data. Areas of Influence based on ACAPS data and UN and media reports.

**Notes:** STC = Southern Transitional Council. AQAP = Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. All areas approximate and subject to change. Shading includes lightly populated and uninhabited areas.

## Conflict Status and U.S. Diplomacy

Since 2015, conflict has caused widespread humanitarian suffering and significant infrastructure damage in Yemen, long the Arab world's poorest country. In 2021, the UN estimated that 377,000 people had died as a result of the conflict (including combatants) and that nearly 60% of deaths were from non-military causes, such as lack of food, water, or health care. Foreign observers have denounced human rights violations attributed to all parties. Since the truce expired in 2022, fighting has not returned to "pre-truce levels." Houthi cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia and Saudi-led coalition airstrikes ceased, though the Houthis threaten to strike countries that could support U.S. operations. In 2021, President Donald Trump designated the Houthis a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity (SDGT) and Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). President Joe Biden reversed these steps before redesignating the Houthis as an SDGT in 2024. President Trump redesignated the Houthis as an FTO in March 2025.

Through 2024, U.S. diplomats said they sought to transform the truce into a durable ceasefire, enable a political solution, and support UN mediation. Ambassador Steven Fagin has served as U.S. Ambassador to Yemen since June 2022, and is serving as Chargé d' Affaires ad interim in Iraq.

In July 2025, the Administration called for an end to the UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA), saying its mandate to support implementation of a December 2018 ceasefire agreement that halted fighting over Yemen's Red Sea ports "have long been superseded by circumstances." On July 9, 2025, UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said security conditions in Yemen are "fragile and unpredictable," and he warned that "for some – on both sides of the conflict – the appetite for a military escalation remains."

## Houthi Attacks and U.S. Responses

Following the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attacks on Israel, and Israel's military operations in Gaza, the Houthis began targeting Israeli territory as well as commercial ships transiting the Bab al Mandab Strait. The Houthis claimed to have targeted Israel-linked vessels, but they have targeted vessels from many countries, diverting more than half of the pre-conflict maritime traffic from the Red Sea and driving up global shipping costs and insurance premiums. The Houthis halted attacks following the January 2025 Israel-Hamas ceasefire, but resumed attacks on land-based targets in Israel in March. In July 2025, the Houthis resumed maritime attacks, sinking two vessels and capturing some crew members. UN Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024) demands the Houthis cease attacks, and, in July 2025, the Council voted to extend related reporting provisions until January 2026.

Through 2024, U.S. forces intercepted Houthi-launched projectiles, prevented some attempted Houthi seizures of vessels, led coalition patrol operations, and struck Houthi targets in Yemen. U.S. forces took responsibility for Red Sea presence and information sharing missions under Operation Prosperity Guardian in February 2025. On March 15, 2025, U.S. forces began a military campaign the Administration intended to compel the Houthis to end their attacks and eliminate their capability to threaten maritime transit. The Houthis resisted, attacked U.S. Navy ships, and

shot down U.S. unmanned aircraft. The U.S.-Houthi truce has held since May 2025. In June, U.S. CENTCOM stated that "Only through a whole of government approach, of which military operations are a key component, will a sustained return of freedom of navigation be guaranteed."

Foreign support and accumulated expertise may allow the Houthis to pose enduring maritime security risks. U.S. sanctions actions target the group's global support networks. U.S. officials have described Iran's efforts to supply the Houthis with weaponry, targeting information, and military advice. In July, U.S. officials announced that Yemeni forces had seized 750 tons of munitions and hardware intended for Houthi use. In 2024, a U.S. official said, "Iran does not control the Houthis" but without Iran's assistance, "the Houthis would struggle to effectively track and strike vessels navigating shipping lanes."

## Humanitarian Situation

The UN reports that 19.5 million Yemenis (more than half the population) need humanitarian assistance and protection. In May 2025, UN agencies and humanitarian organizations warned that without changes to a trend of "drastic cuts" to funding, needs in Yemen "will worsen ... and will likely cause an increase in morbidity and mortality in the coming months." As of July 22, 2025, the annual UN humanitarian funding appeal for Yemen sought \$2.47 billion to provide life-saving assistance to 10.5 million people and was 13.1% funded. Limits on movement and bureaucracy constrain humanitarian access and affect aid delivery, largely in Houthi-controlled areas, where the Houthis have detained UN and aid workers. Terrorism designations, U.S. assistance policy changes, or escalation of conflict could affect trade and humanitarian operations.

## Counterterrorism

Insecurity in Yemen creates opportunities for Yemen-based Al Qaeda and Islamic State members. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Lebanon's Hezbollah also have operated in Yemen. UN monitors and the U.S. military report that the Houthis have pursued mutually beneficial arrangements with Al Qaeda forces in Yemen and "like-minded groups on the coast of Africa."

## Yemen and the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress

The 2025 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 118-159) did not extend a previous ban on U.S. in-flight refueling of aircraft engaged in hostilities in Yemen's civil war. Supplemental appropriations for FY2024 (P.L. 118-50) and continuing appropriations for FY2025 (P.L. 119-4) provide additional funds for U.S. Central Command. President Trump, like President Biden, has asserted authority to direct military operations in Yemen pursuant to the President's constitutional authority as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive. In April, some Representatives and Senators sought details from the Administration on its strategy and plans. Through oversight and appropriations, Congress may evaluate, support, or constrain executive branch efforts to weaken Houthi capacity, interdict Iranian support, or address humanitarian conditions.

**Christopher M. Blanchard**, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.