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Yemen: Conflict, Red Sea Security, 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. The Strait has become a more important conduit for energy and goods as regional conflict has disrupted flows through the Strait of Hormuz in 2026. Since 2015, a civil war has pitted the Iran-backed Houthi movement against Yemen's internationally recognized government (IRG), the IRG's foreign backers, and other anti-Houthi forces. The Houthis control most of northwestern Yemen, including the capital, Sana'a ([Figure 1](#)). Foreign intervention complicates the conflict, which has contributed to a long-standing and ongoing humanitarian crisis. An uneasy truce has frozen conflict lines since 2022, but regional conflict in 2026 has contributed to rising tensions in Yemen.

The Iran-backed Houthis launched numerous attacks on international shipping from October 2023 (after Hamas-led attacks on Israel sparked the war in Gaza) to December 2024, before pausing these attacks in early 2025. From March to May 2025, U.S. forces expanded strikes against the Houthis seeking to compel a lasting end to Houthi maritime attacks. The U.S. campaign ended under an agreement brokered by neighboring Oman in which the Houthis agreed to cease targeting U.S. vessels and the United States agreed to halt strikes. The Houthis renewed attacks on some non-U.S. ships in July 2025 and launched strikes against targets in Israel, ostensibly to compel Israel to end its war with Hamas. The Houthis suspended their attacks on Israel after the October 2025 Israel-Hamas ceasefire, but restarted them during the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. In June 2026, the Houthis threatened to attack Israel-linked ships.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) once collaborated in Yemen to counter the Houthis and other threats, but have more recently competed there, despite shared concerns about Iranian support to the Houthis. In December 2025, Saudi Arabia accused the UAE of providing military support to the Yemeni separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the STC's bid to seize Yemen's eastern governorates and Aden, the IRG's seat. Saudi Arabia military intervention against the STC was followed by the departure of UAE forces, but STC activists have [resisted](#) IRG and Saudi initiatives.

Iranian and Houthi leaders have threatened to target commerce in the Red Sea corridor, potentially expanding regional conflict involving Iran. In July 2026, flights from Iran to Houthi-controlled Sana'a were followed by [strikes](#) (attributed by the Houthis to Saudi Arabia) on the Sana'a airport. The Houthis then [announced](#) they would target Saudi Arabia-linked ships. Conflict and threats raised the [prospect of disruption](#) of shipments of Saudi oil and Gulf imports rerouted to the Red Sea from the Strait of Hormuz because of the U.S.-Iran conflict.

Background 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, "North

Yemen") and the Aden-led People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (a former British colony and Marxist regime, "South Yemen"). North-south tensions and conflict have recurred since the 1960s, and the STC leveraged some southerners' continuing demands for independence. The IRG, STC, and the Houthis maintain influence through complex ties with tribal networks and local actors—the most powerful forces in many areas.

In 2012, Arab Spring-era protests and unrest prompted the president of the **Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG/IRG)** to resign. 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 sought international intervention.

In 2015, a coalition led by **Saudi Arabia** began a military campaign against the Houthis. Houthi attacks across Yemen's borders grew in complexity and scope with deepening support over time from **Iran**. The **United States** provided logistical, intelligence, and advisory support to the coalition, but ended aerial refueling in 2018 and curtailed some arms sales to Saudi Arabia in response to civilian casualties and [action in Congress](#).

Power-sharing agreements in 2020 and 2022 brought anti-Houthi Yemenis together under a coalition. An STC offensive on IRG-aligned forces in December 2025 and Saudi military intervention resulted in the STC's dissolution and changes in the makeup of the IRG's eight-person **Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)** and the IRG cabinet. Saudi Arabia is now the IRG's principal sponsor and security partner.

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. Prior to the ceasefire, foreign observers [attributed](#) human rights violations to all parties. Since 2022, violence has not returned to [pre-truce levels](#), but intermittent cross-line fighting occurs. The STC's dissolution is prompting a [reorganization](#) of anti-Houthi forces. The Houthis have [reasserted](#) control in the north and can threaten Israel, other regional states, and shipping, including energy supplies.

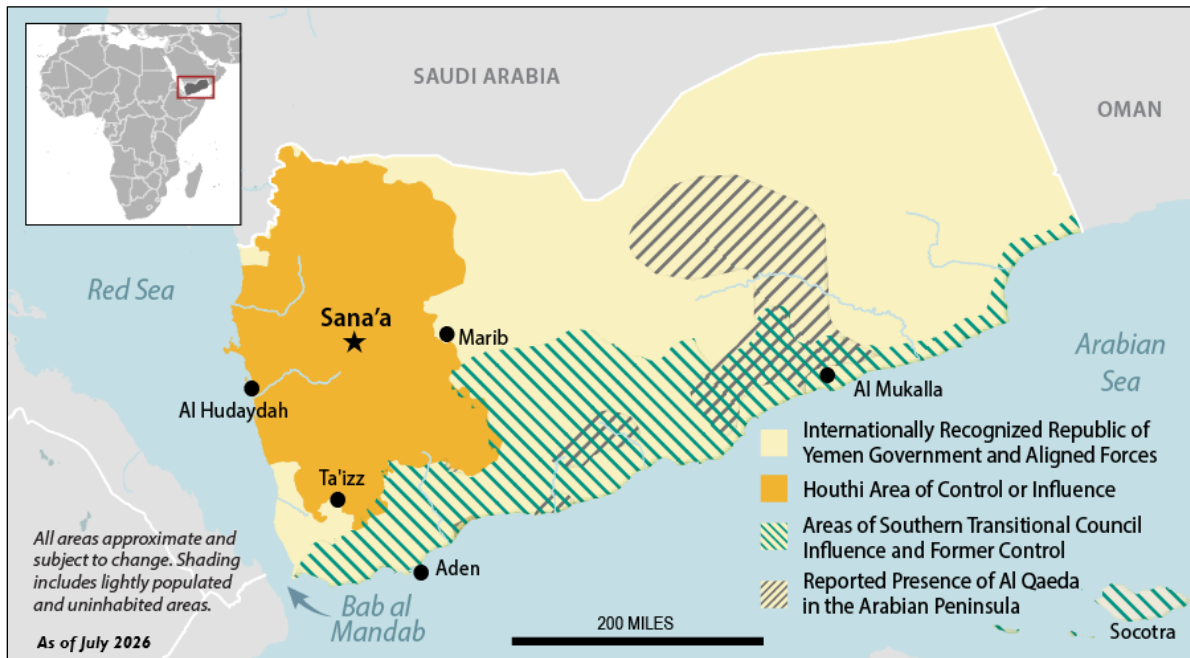
The Trump Administration has taken military action against the Houthis and in March 2025 [redesignated](#) the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). The Administration supported the UN Security Council's decision to end the [UN Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement](#) (UNMHA), a 2018 ceasefire agreement that halted fighting over Houthi-held Red Sea ports.

Since February 2015, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen and a Yemen Affairs Unit (YAU) have been based at the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Jonathan Peccia [serves](#) as U.S. Chargé d'Affaires. UN [Special Envoy](#) for Yemen Hans Grundberg engages Yemeni and regional actors in efforts [aimed at](#)

“insulating Yemen from wider regional escalation” and pursuing talks “to end the conflict comprehensively.”

Figure 1. Yemen: Approximate Areas of Influence and Operation

As of July 2026



Source: CRS, using ACAPS, Humanitarian Access Overview, December 2025, ESRI, UN Panel of Experts, and U.S. State Department data.

Humanitarian Situation

The UN reports that 22.3 million Yemenis (more than half the population) need humanitarian assistance and protection, including 18.3 million people who are acutely food insecure, of whom more than 2 million are acutely malnourished children. UN agencies reported that a “severe gap” in humanitarian funding during 2025 forced providers “to scale back critical services despite escalating needs.” The annual UN humanitarian needs and response plan for Yemen seeks \$2.16 billion to reach 12 million people. As of July 21, 2026, it was 19% funded. Limits on movement constrain humanitarian access and affect aid delivery, largely in Houthi-controlled areas, where the Houthis have detained UN and aid workers. The World Food Programme (WFP) has terminated its operations in Houthi-controlled northern Yemen given security risks and funding cuts. Economic side effects of regional conflict since February 2026 have raised costs of imported food and fuel, on which Yemenis depend.

Counterterrorism

Insecurity in Yemen creates opportunities for an estimated 2-3,000 Yemen-based Al Qaeda members, who UN monitors report have a “covert pragmatic relationship” with the Houthis and an alliance with the Somalia-based Al Shabaab. UN monitors report the Houthis also have “limited collaboration” with Al Shabaab. Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force and Lebanon’s Hezbollah also have operated in Yemen.

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. Through 2024, U.S. forces intercepted Houthi-launched projectiles, prevented some attempted Houthi vessel

seizures, led coalition patrols, and struck Houthi targets. 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. A U.S.-Houthi truce has held since May 2025, but Houthi attacks on Israel did not end until October 2025 and resumed during the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict. In June 2026, the Houthis announced they would target Israel-linked vessels, and in July 2026 they similarly threatened Saudi-linked vessels. UN Security Council Resolution 2722 (2024) demands the Houthis cease attacks, and notes the right of member states to defend their vessels from attack. In June 2025, 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 Houthi experience may allow the group to pose enduring regional security risks. U.S. sanctions target the group’s far-reaching networks. U.S. officials have reported that Iran has supplied the Houthis with weaponry, targeting information, and military advice. In 2025, Yemeni forces seized tons of Houthi-bound arms, and in July 2026, U.S. and IRG officials said Iranian air links to Sana’a pose security risks.

Yemen and the 119th Congress

The 119th Congress may consider whether or how to respond to developments in Yemen, including through legislation that would address Houthi human rights violations (H.R. 1848/S. 3451). Members also may conduct oversight of Yemen-related diplomacy or military and intelligence operations. The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 119-60) authorized the U.S. military to treat as U.S. stocks any weapon or materiel intended for the Houthis obtained by the United States in transit

or otherwise and to use them for drawdown purposes, including transfer. In 2025, some Members questioned President Trump's assertions of authority to direct military operations in Yemen.

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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