Yemen: The World's Worst Humanitarian Crisis Enters Another Year

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Bringing clarity to crisis

Four years after the Houthi takeover of the capital Sana'a and the beginning of the Saudi-led military intervention, there is little to suggest that Yemen will find peace in the near future. As of January 2018, the conflict has killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions, causing widespread devastation to the country's civilian and public infrastructure, including hospitals, airports, roads, houses and factories (*see* Figure 1). With more than 8 million people 'a step away from famine' (Al Jazeera, 10 December 2017) and a major cholera outbreak that has killed 2,000 people and infected almost 1 million (World Health Organisation, 11 December 2017), Yemen has descended into what has been described as the 'world's worst humanitarian crisis' (New York Times, 23 August 2017).

Figure 1: Number of Conflict and Protest Events by Type and Location in Yemen, 2017
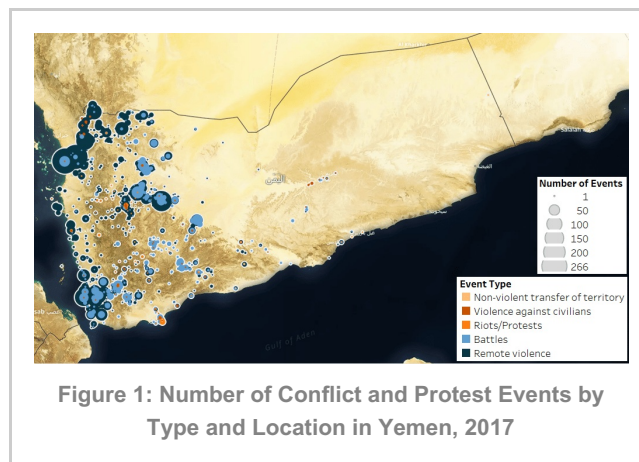
Yemen's political crises

The ongoing civil war in Yemen is the result of several local and national power struggles, aggravated by a regional proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Yemen is currently the theatre of at least four intertwined political crises, involving a constellation of political actors and armed groups seeking political power, recognition and influence (The Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018).

The first crisis pits the northern-based Houthi Movement and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh against the government of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. The current stage of this long running conflict began in September 2014, when Houthi militants and military units aligned with Saleh, after stirring up anti-government sentiment against proposed fuel subsidy cuts, seized control of the capital Sana'a. They proceeded to occupy key state institutions and forced President Hadi to reshuffle his cabinet. Months later, the rebels dismissed the internationally recognised government, arrested several ministers and forced the President to flee to the southern port city of Aden.

As the Houthi-Saleh forces occupied Yemen's central and southern regions, closing in on Aden, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of nine countries providing ground, air and naval support to restore Hadi's government in Sana'a and prevent the Houthi-Saleh forces from overtaking Aden. Backed by the United States and the United Kingdom, the Saudi-led coalition that formed to support Hadi also included the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan and Qatar. During this period, local armed militias known as "Popular Resistance" or "Popular Committees" began to mobilise across central and southern Yemen to oppose the Houthis' takeover of the country. Since the Houthi-Saleh forces were driven out of Aden later in 2015, the conflict has largely stabilised along a frontline that stretches from the northern and central highlands of Marib and Al Jawf to the coast of Hodeidah, through the flashpoint city of Taiz.

Southern Yemen is also the site of two other major political crises that share little with the largely northern Houthi conflict. These include the confrontation between the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) and President Hadi and an Islamist insurgency involving Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (IS). These groups have exploited the ongoing unrest to expand their outreach across central and southern Yemen: after seizing large swathes of territory in the provinces of Abyan, Shabwah and Hadramawt, AQAP took control of the port of Mukalla in 2015, from which they were ousted in 2016 following an Emirati-backed offensive. AQAP and IS have claimed several attacks against the Houthi-Saleh forces, and are believed to have taken advantage of widespread anti-Houthi sentiment to gain support of local tribes in southern Yemen (Al Dawsari, 11 January 2018).

The last political crisis sees Yemen at the centre of a regional competition between Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE (and, to a lesser extent, Oman) which reflects the widening divisions and divergent political priorities within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Iran's alleged support to the Houthis is the motivation for the continued military intervention by these countries in Yemen. At the same time, Hadi's dependence on Saudi patronage, the UAE's increasing involvement in southern Yemen and Oman's quiet presence in the east of the

country show that these countries are seeking to create their own "spheres of influence" in a disintegrating country (Dahlgren, January 2018).

Emerging fractures and the collapse of war alliances

The outbreak of the civil war led political leaders and armed groups to form uneasy coalitions with former enemies. Despite a long history of confrontations, the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh entered into a political and military alliance that proved critical for the takeover of Amran and Sana'a in 2014 and the early military successes in 2015. Saleh revived the Republican Guard, a military elite unit formerly disbanded under Hadi, to support the Houthi militiamen while several Saleh loyalists within the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) joined the ruling committees established by the Houthis. No less surprising was the anti-Houthi alliance between Hadi and the secessionist Southern Movement that had accused the national government of marginalising the south during the National Dialogue Conference, from which they had walked out in early 2014 after rejecting a proposed federal reform (BBC News, 10 February 2014). These subterranean tensions within the warring coalitions surfaced in 2017, leading to increasing infighting and to their ultimate collapse.

Political divisions between Saleh's GPC and the Houthi Movement ran high throughout the year, and eventually broke out in heavy battles in Sana'a between the Republican Guard loyal to Saleh and the Houthi militias. The former president sought support from the *collar tribes* around the capital, but their decision to stay out of the conflict resulted in the isolation of Saleh's loyalists, and his death on December 4. The military and political consequences of the split remain unclear: despite some important territorial losses and further divisions within the GPC[1], the Houthis have reportedly retained tribal support in the northern highlands and do not seem to face any imminent threats.

The collapse of the coalition that nominally supported the internationally recognised government of President Hadi also protects the Houthis from threats to their territorial holdings. In April 2017, the secessionist Southern Movement, backed by local militias and the UAE, set up the STC that rejects Hadi's authority to seek independence from northern Yemen. Consisting of prominent southern figures, militia leaders, as well as current and former government officials[2], the STC has political and financial support from the UAE, which provides training to armed militias and military units across southern Yemen. In late January 2018, these tensions culminated in heavy clashes between Hadi's presidential forces and security forces and militias loyal to the STC in Aden. These developments are likely to have far-reaching political consequences for Yemen and the wider region.

These developments point to the divergent strategies of regional powers in Yemen, and especially to emerging rifts between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are forging alliances with local groups to counter Iran's support to the Houthis and consolidate their patronage networks across Yemen (Ardemagni, 28 December 2017; Salisbury, 20 December 2017). External interference in Yemen's internal affairs is the main fuel for the intense violence and continued civilian suffering. The Saudi near-total blockade on Yemen's Houthi-controlled

territories, imposed after several missiles were launched into Saudi territory and later lifted in December, contributed to aggravate the humanitarian crisis but did not succeed in subduing Houthis' military resistance. In the south, a failure to conciliate Hadi's claims of authority and the southern secessionist bid is likely to escalate violence opening a new front in the civil war (Washington Post, 29 January 2018).

Table 1 summarises the four crises currently unfolding in Yemen, highlighting the composition of the main warring coalitions and the governorates involved in each of these conflict.

**Table 1: The Current Four Major Crises in Yemen**

Political Crisis	Main Actors		Conflict Areas
Houthi War	Military Forces of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council Military Forces of Yemen (2016-) Republican Guard (*formerly*) GPC: General People's Congress (*split*) Iran (*alleged*)	Military Forces of Yemen (2012-) Hadi Faction Operation Restoring Hope Al Islah Party GPC: General People's Congress (*split*) Southern Resistance Tihama Resistance Popular Resistance Tribal Coalition AQAP: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula	Countrywide – with the exception of Hadramawt and Al Mahrah, as well as of Abyan and Aden since 2016
Southern Secession	Military Forces of Yemen (2012-) STC faction – including Security Belt Forces, Hadhrami Elite Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, Aden Police Southern Resistance United Arab Emirates Southern Movement	Military Forces of Yemen (2012-) Hadi Faction – including Presidential Guard Saudi Arabia GPC: General People's Congress	Aden, Abyan, Shabwah, Hadramawt, Lahij, Ad Dali, Al Mahrah

Islamist Insurgency	AQAP: Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula Islamic State	Military Forces of Yemen (2012-) Hadi Faction Military Forces of Yemen (2012-) STC faction Military Forces of Yemen (2016-) Supreme Political Council United States	Hadramawt, Shabwah, Abyan, Aden, Lahij, Al Bayda, Dhamar, Ad Dali, Marib
GCC-Iran Proxy Conflict	Iran	Saudi Arabia United Arab Emirates	Countrywide

The conflict in 2017

In 2017, Yemen continued to witness high rates of political violence across its territory. A faltering peace process and occasional ceasefire attempts have failed to reduce the impact of violence. During the past year, during the past year, ACLED, together with local partner the Yemen Data Project, consistently recorded over 540 conflict events and at least 975 conflict-related fatalities each month. As shown in Figure 2, the two spikes in January and December occurred when army units loyal to president Hadi and anti-Houthi militias, with air and ground support of the Saudi-led coalition, achieved major territorial gains in the provinces of Taiz, Al Hudaydah, Sadah and Shabwah. Overall, the numbers of conflict events and reported fatalities were highest in Taiz governorate, in the areas east of Sana'a and near the northern border with Saudi Arabia, which have seen intense fighting throughout 2017.

Figure 2: Number of Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities by Type in Yemen, 2017
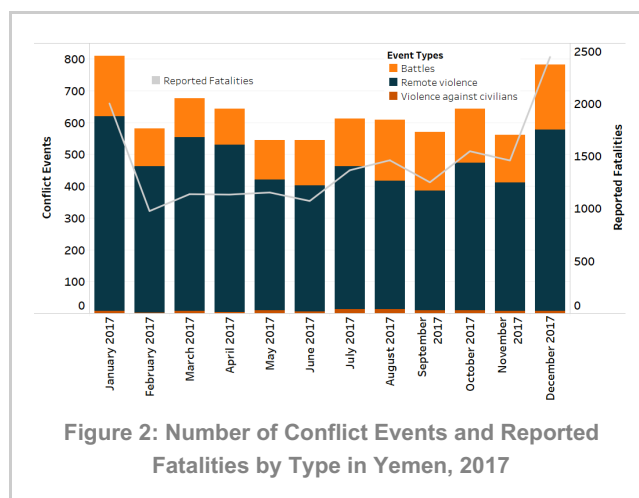
The presence of a wide array of conflict agents populating Yemen's political landscape remains a major obstacle to reducing violence levels. Non-state actors, such as tribal fighters, Islamist groups and other political militias, often operate in conjunction with Yemen's multiple

governing authorities and enjoy the support of domestic elites and foreign governments. In central and southern Yemen, for instance, the chronic weakness of state institutions has proven crucial for increasing infighting among anti-Houthi militias, which engaged in sporadic clashes over security provision and tax collection (Al Hikhmanet, 18 October 2017; Al Mersad, 25 November 2017; Yaman News, 30 October 2017). While the proximate political goals of these armed groups may be distinct, they all share a common desire to maximise the profits of a war economy that has flourished over the past three years thanks to arms smuggling, racketeering and predatory tax collection (Salisbury, 20 December 2017). For many actors, perpetuating violence is thus a strategy to position themselves within Yemen's political marketplace and secure patronage from national and international sponsors.

A distinctive element of Yemen's conflict environment, however, has been the widening state security sector. In order to win the loyalty of local elites and militia leaders, government agents, sponsored by external patrons, have provided government status and channelled resources to a multitude of formerly disbanded army units and non-state armed groups. The creation of UAE-backed counter-terrorism forces in southern Yemen, and the subsequent outsourcing of security provision to these groups, the incorporation of pro-government militias into army ranks in Taiz, and the inclusion of prominent militia leaders into government positions are incentivising rent-seeking behaviour, while aggravating factional divisions within the state sector. Rather than upholding a unified military, this conflict patronage system is contributing to blur the boundaries between state and non-state agents.

Data appear to confirm the centrality of state actors in Yemen's conflict. Of all total conflict events recorded by ACLED in 2017, 55% involved army units loyal to either the Houthi Movement and the late Ali Abdullah Saleh[3] or President Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council (*see* Figure 3); all have some legitimate claim to be regarded as a 'government force'. Involvement in 55% of all conflict events is significantly higher than levels observed in other conflict environments across the Middle East and Africa, where armed militias and rebel groups contribute more to overall violence levels (ACLED Conflict Trends Report, 7 February 2017).

Figure 3: Percentage of Conflict Events by Actor Type in Yemen, 2017
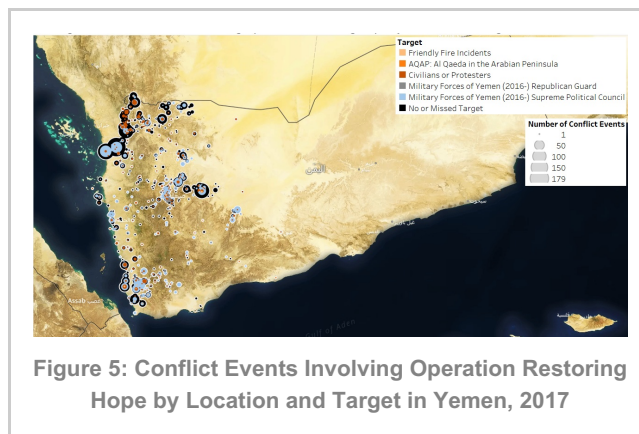
This proliferation of state and quasi-state agents, however, did not translate into higher security for the Yemeni population in general. Figure 4 shows that Yemen's state actors account for more than 20% of total civilian targeting, while another 68% is attributed to foreign governments, mainly those participating in the Saudi-led *Operation Restoring Hope[4]*. Approximately 1,800 unarmed civilians were killed as a result of direct targeting in 2017, 78% of which were in operations conducted by the Saudi-led coalition. Although civilians constitute the primary target of violence in only 7% of all events recorded by ACLED in 2017, many more are reported to have died as collateral damage of indiscriminately targeting armed groups in

civilian populated areas. The totals are therefore likely to be far higher than 1,800. These figures point to the flagrant disregard that all conflict agents, and especially international actors, have demonstrated towards safeguarding civilian lives. In particular, the significant role of external agents in civilian targeting suggests that there are few if any consequences for attacking civilians, other than terrorizing the population.

Figure 4: Civilian Targeting by Perpetrator in Yemen, 2017
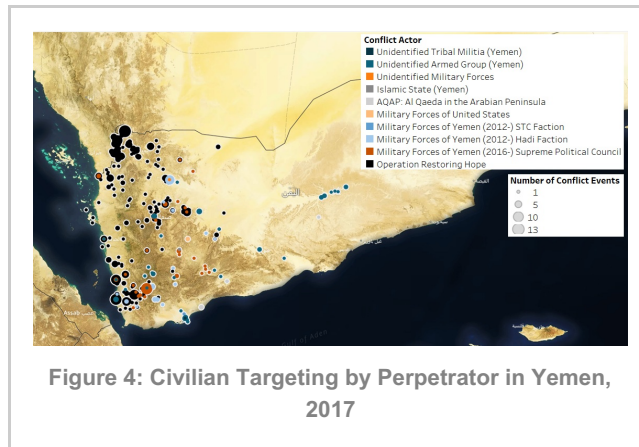
Despite a highly volatile conflict environment with regards to violent agents and alliances, the Yemeni civil war currently displays remarkable stability in the levels and the geography of violence. Over the past year, the frontlines of the conflict have not changed significantly, and although the security situation remains fragile across the country, around 60% of Yemenis feel safe or mostly safe according to a recent survey (Heinze and Albukari, January 2018). These surprising findings for a country at war since 2015 reflect Yemen's uneven geography of violence, with several areas experiencing little or no conflict and others situated along fronts of almost unabated fighting.

However, although the frontline of the conflict has largely remained static, Saudi-led airstrikes contributed to spreading insecurity by hitting thousands of positions inside Houthi-controlled territories and inflicting heavy losses on military forces and the civilian population. As captured in Figure 5, the outreach of *Operation Restoring Hope* extended well beyond the battlefronts, including the capital Sana'a as well as predominantly rural areas in Amran, Mahwit and Sadah. Limited access to these remote regions has proved crucial to aggravating the humanitarian crisis.

Figure 5: Conflict Events Involving Operation Restoring Hope by Location and Target in Yemen, 2017

Future Prospects

There is little evidence that the violence in Yemen will decline in 2018. All attempts at resuscitating the peace process have failed to yield tangible results, and an increasingly heterogeneous and volatile conflict landscape is unlikely to facilitate the emergence of a negotiated settlement in the short term (Lackner, 6 January 2018). The challenge for Yemen's political actors and the international community alike is to remedy the shortcomings of UNSC Resolution 2216, accused of excluding politically relevant groups from the peace process, and address the roots of the domestic political crises.

Today Yemen is a highly divided country, which the civil war has contributed to further fracturing along regional, tribal, sectarian and political lines. As the war drags on, these widening divisions are unlikely to facilitate the resolution of the crises. Elites within and outside the state have engaged in a multilevel and multipolar power struggle where violence is used to position themselves vis-à-vis each other and no party seems ready to compromise. It is unclear, therefore, whether Yemeni political actors and their international sponsors are able, or willing, to engage in credible negotiations and commit to de-escalation strategies for reducing the overall human cost of the war.

[1] Several among Saleh's relatives and party loyalists died in the fighting or defected to the Hadi government, while prominent GPC leaders, including the prime minister in the Houthi-backed government Abdulaziz bin Habtoor and long-time minister Sadiq Amin Abu Ras, confirmed their support to their allies (The National, 13 December 2017; Gulf News, 8 January 2018).

[2] The President of the STC, Aidaroos Al-Zubaidi, was the Governor of Aden until Hadi sacked him in April 2017, while the Vice President and leader of the UAE-backed Security Belt Forces, Hani bin Braik, was appointed minister of state in November 2016. Several southern governors continue to seat in the STC.

[3] ACLED treats the forces loyal to the Supreme Political Council as state agents. Since 2015, the Houthis and their allies have taken over the ministries in the capital Sana'a and claimed to represent the legitimate government of Yemen, while controlling several highly populated areas in central and northern Yemen.

[4] Several reports have documented widespread violations committed by domestic and foreign government forces across the country, including the use of child soldiers and banned antipersonnel landmines by the Houthi forces (Amnesty International, 28 February 2017; Human Rights Watch, 20 April 2017), the use of cluster bombs and indiscriminate air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition (UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, 27 January 2017), human rights abuses by UAE-sponsored security forces in the south (Human Rights Watch, 22 June 2017) and civilian killings in US raids (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 9 February 2017).