WHAT'S AT ISSUE?

Yemen, already the poorest country in the Middle East, has since 2014 been ravaged by a brutal civil war that has collapsed its economy and created the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Fought between a U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis, a one-time rebel group that now serves as de facto government in a sizable part of the country, coalition blockades and a grinding military stalemate have created a conflict widely perceived as one of the most deadly and intractable in the world. However, both sides have mostly abided by a recent UN-brokered two-month truce that was extended for another two months on June 2. Some international observers are hopeful that the truce and its extension could be the first step toward talks that could lead to the war’s end. Whether the parties are able to overcome their numerous differences in order to reach a durable political settlement remains to be seen.

THE ORIGINS AND COURSE OF THE CONFLICT

Though the Yemen war is often thought of as a direct consequence of the Arab Spring, the conflict between the Houthis and central government goes back much further. The Houthis, like around a quarter of Yemen’s population including former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, are Zaydi Shia and the Houthi movement began as fundamentally a Zaydi revivalist movement. Fears about the increasing influence of Saudi Salafism in Yemen interwoven
with fears about a vanishing Zaydi identity being repressed by the central government led Hussein al-Houthi to start a movement formally called the “Believing Youth” in the early 1990s. Though initially peaceful, a series of events in 2003-2004 led to a rapid increase in violence. At an event where then-president Saleh was present, al-Houthi began a chant of what would later become the group's slogan, “God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Cursed be the Jews, Victory to Islam.” Saleh, who had been cooperating with the United States in its incipient “Global War on Terror” (GWOT), took the chant as an example of al-Houthi’s threat to his rule. He sent forces to arrest al-Houthi, who resisted and launched an insurgency. Hussein al-Houthi was killed by government forces soon after, but his death helped to catalyze the movement and his father Badr immediately took over as leader. The insurgency and government fought for the next several years, though the intensity remained much lower than the later conflict.

Between 2004 and 2010 there were numerous ceasefires and attempts at negotiation, most significantly one mediated by Qatar, but all fell apart quickly. Most ceasefires weren’t adhered to in practice. By the time of the Arab Spring, the Houthi rebellion was increasing the scope of its goals, and the Yemen government had consistently failed to achieve even small-scale military victories against the movement.

In 2011, the Houthis made common cause with the Arab Spring movements sweeping the Middle East and North Africa and for the first time posed a real threat to Saleh’s rule. Combined with the secessionist rebellion in the South and the massive number of Yemenis newly protesting the regime, the international community started to take seriously the threat that Yemen might collapse into a full-scale civil war. Saleh was forced from power with the support of the international community in 2011 after being gravely injured in a bombing, and in 2012 President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was sworn in. After two years of halting negotiations, in 2014 the Houthis seized Sanaa and sent the Hadi government into exile, kicking off the most violent phase of the war with the intervention of a Saudi-led and American-backed anti-Houthi coalition in March 2015. Later that year, former President Saleh declared an alliance between forces still loyal to him and the Houthis. That alliance was not particularly long lived, however, and in 2017 Saleh changed his allegiance to the Saudi-led coalition and was subsequently killed by the Houthis. Through 2018 the coalition’s prosecution of the war continued to intensify and in 2019 the Houthis began to attack Saudi territory with missiles, though they caused relatively few casualties. After a brief lull in 2021, the coalition again escalated its strikes on Sanaa, continuing until the current truce.

THE CIVILIAN TOLL OF THE CONFLICT

The Saudi-led coalition bears the majority of responsibility for the dramatic civilian toll of the conflict, much of which is due to its blockades. The average Yemeni has suffered immensely from the war: according to a UN estimate, the war is responsible for more than 377,000 deaths, mostly from hunger, equivalent to nearly 1.3% of the entire population. For context, if a country the size of the U.S. suffered that rate of fatalities, it would translate to over four million deaths. Children have been especially hard-hit, with some estimates suggesting that Yemeni child mortality as much as doubled over the course of the war.\(^2\) The war also cratered Yemen’s economy, causing it to contract by around 40% over the course of the conflict.

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2 The data set referenced by nearly every source discussing child mortality in Yemen is provided by the UN Interagency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME). Most of these sources ignore the fact that the IGME has an explicit disclaimer that it does not try to realistically estimate the child mortality rate for Yemen, stating “UN IGME has assessed recent humanitarian crises and, based on the scarcity of currently available data and the difficulties of estimating the broader impact of these crises on health systems, decided to hold the estimates constant from the start of the crisis while increasing the uncertainty over the crisis time for ... Yemen” (2020 Report on Levels & Trends in Child Mortality, page 36). While in general statistical models are not sufficient to estimate mortality in wartime, in this case they are the only plausible estimates available, given that IGME is implicitly assuming the war did not have an impact. For a statistical justification of the estimate of mortality doubling see Jenkins, D., Marktanner, M., Merkel, A.D. and Sedik, D. (2018), “Estimating child mortality attributable to war in Yemen”, International Journal of Development Issues, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 372-383. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJDI-02-2018-0031.
After a lull in attacks in 2021, the Saudi-led coalition tightened its fuel blockade and intensified airstrikes again in early 2022. Additionally, Yemen remains highly dependent on wheat imports from Ukraine and Russia, which are likely to be significantly impacted by the war there. Cholera also remains a major issue. In 2017, Yemen experienced one of the largest outbreaks of the disease ever recorded.

**U.S. INVOLVEMENT**

The United States has provided large quantities of weapons to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries since before the Gulf-led coalition began its strikes in Yemen. In 2010, the Obama administration formally notified Congress of its intention to sell $60 billion of weapons to Saudi Arabia, the largest arms sale to the Kingdom in U.S. history. The package, which included F15s as well as Apache and Black Hawk helicopters, proceeded without a congressional block. In 2012, the US completed the sale of 84 F-15s to Saudi Arabia (making up almost a quarter of all Saudi combat aircraft) for approximately $29 billion. Starting in 2015, the U.S. provided aerial refueling, logistical, and intelligence support to Saudi and UAE forces, in addition to increases in weapons sales. The Pentagon admitted it was possible that the munitions the coalition infamously used to bomb a school bus were U.S.-supplied.

![Notifications of US (FMS) Arms Sales to KSA](image)

*Note: the above graph shows foreign military sales (FMS), that is, direct government-to-government sales, only.*
U.S. support for the coalition has been controversial domestically: In 2019, rare bipartisan majorities in both the House and the Senate blocked arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, though the block was vetoed by former President Trump. Although the Trump administration was successfully pressured to end its refueling support for the coalition, other U.S. support remains in place. Despite promising to end all U.S. “offensive” support for the war, President Biden has continued to provide “defensive” logistical support to help Saudi Arabia and the UAE protect themselves from the Houthis. As the Security Assistance Monitor reported in 2021, despite the suspension of some assistance, the United States continues to provide services to the Saudi armed forces, including maintenance and sustainment assistance to the Royal Saudi Air Force. On June 1 of this year, a bill was introduced in the House invoking Congressional war powers to attempt to end US military involvement in the conflict for the third time.

Some Biden administration officials have justified this continued military assistance by claiming that cutting off U.S. logistical support would leave the Saudi air force completely unable to operate, rupturing the U.S.-Saudi relationship and leaving Saudi Arabia vulnerable to attack. The administration has often claimed equivalencies between Houthi actions and coalition ones, ignoring the discrepancy in scale between the attacks. American and Saudi supporters of the war have also claimed that the Houthis are simply Iranian proxies, often ignoring their complex history of conflict with the Yemeni government and significant independence from Iran. Though the Houthis are close with Iran, it is the war itself that brought them closer together as a consequence of the Saudi-led coalition's brutality.

The U.S. and the Saudi-led coalition have not only been involved militarily, but have also been the main providers of humanitarian aid to Yemen, both bilaterally and through the UN. This has aroused Houthi suspicions and, in many instances, made the provision of humanitarian assistance more difficult, since the Houthis thought the aid money was being dispersed with the goal of buying off the UN and global public opinion.³

**PROSPECTS FOR PEACE**

On April 1, both sides of the conflict agreed to an initial two-month truce, and on June 2 agreed to a further two-month extension. Additionally, in a move supported by the Saudi government, in April President Hadi stepped down and transferred power to a presidential council containing representatives from every major faction of the anti-Houthi coalition. Though the Houthis are not represented on the council and did not take part in the first round of talks, the fractious anti-Houthi coalition preparing a united front is likely a sign of real intention to negotiate. Though the Saudis delayed lifting the blockade on Sanaa

³ See Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups by Ashley Clements (2021), Chapter 2.
airport, on May 16 the coalition allowed a commercial flight to depart, the first in years. Regular commercial flights from Sanaa to Cairo were allowed to resume on June 1. Though issues still remain with access in Houthi areas, as of June 2, most hostilities have paused or become dramatically less intense.

Though the temporary truce and lifting of the blockade are no doubt positive, it is difficult to estimate the talks' probability of success. The Houthis have done quite well militarily, and due to disunity in the anti-Houthi coalition they control the most territory of any single faction in the country. This could lead them to press their advantage and back out of current talks in order to negotiate from a better position in the future. It is also possible that some local armed groups will continue to fight even after the primary belligerents reach an agreement. A resumption of hostilities would likely have even more dramatic humanitarian consequences than the previous conflict due to the compounding effects of fertilizer, fuel, and food shortages from the Russia-Ukraine war.