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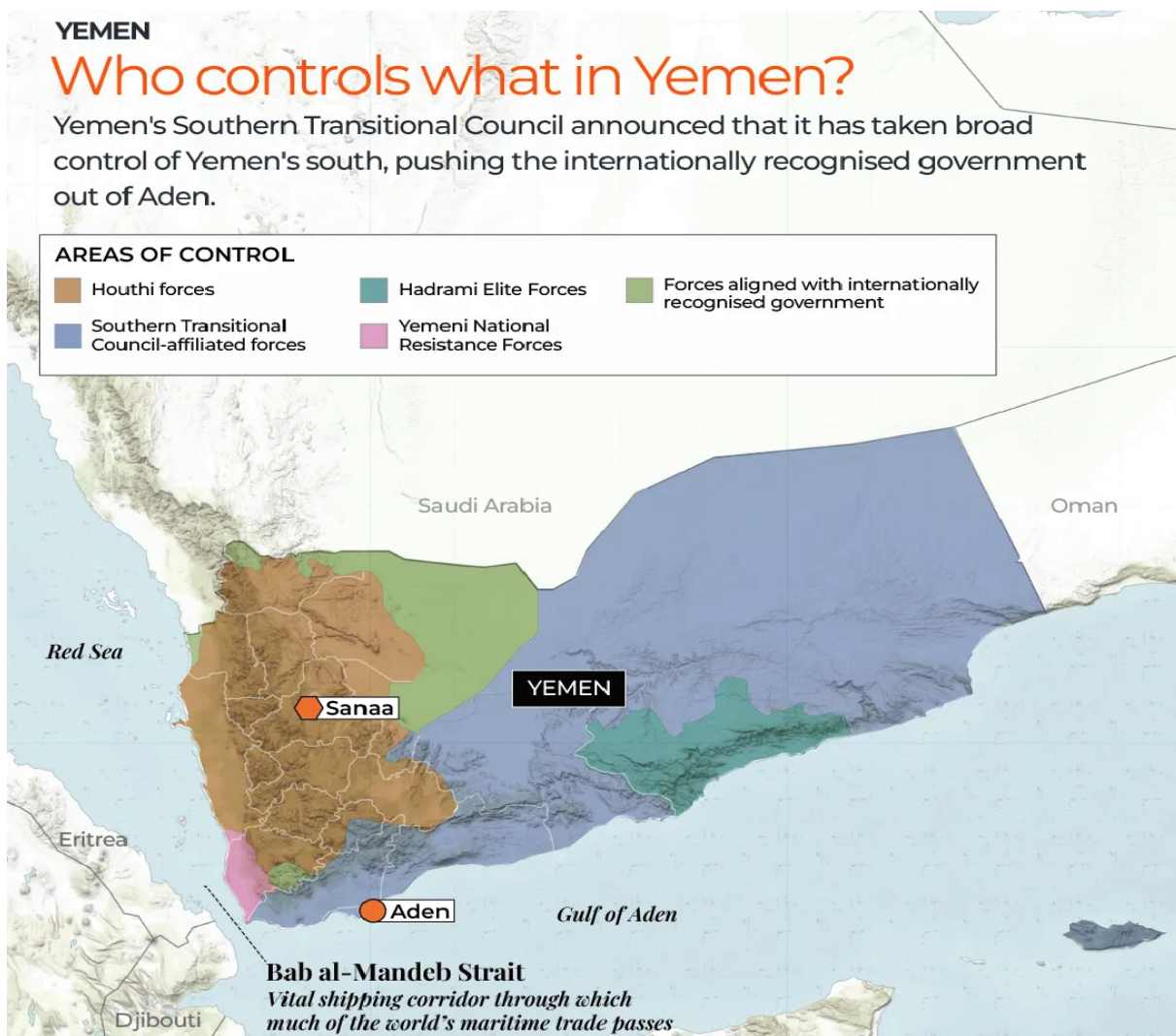
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THE CRISIS IN YEMEN AND SAUDI-EMIRATI DIVERGENCE

Introduction

For the past decade, Yemen has been afflicted with one of the most dehumanizing conflicts of recent times. 40.5 million Yemenis have died as a consequence, in the last ten years. Yemen's contemporary crisis, along with the rising tensions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in this theatre, cannot be understood without recognizing that the country has been subjected to prolonged internal conflict, aggravated by not only the sectarian flavors of proxy warfare but also by the divergence of interests between Arab coalition partners. The Yemeni state has historically struggled to exercise

effective authority across its territory. As a result of the Arab Spring-influenced civil war since 2014, the state has been fragmented into three major spheres of influence: one controlled by Houthis (33% territory), the second controlled by the Saudi-led Presidential Leadership Council (10% territory), and the third under the control of southern separatist forces (52% territory), mainly the Southern Transitional Council.¹ Along with these three major forces controlling their respective areas, there are many other smaller groups with their spheres of influence as well ((Yemeni National Resistance Forces and Hadrami Elite Forces with their allegiance to Saudi and Emirati backers, respectively).



Source: Al-Jazeera

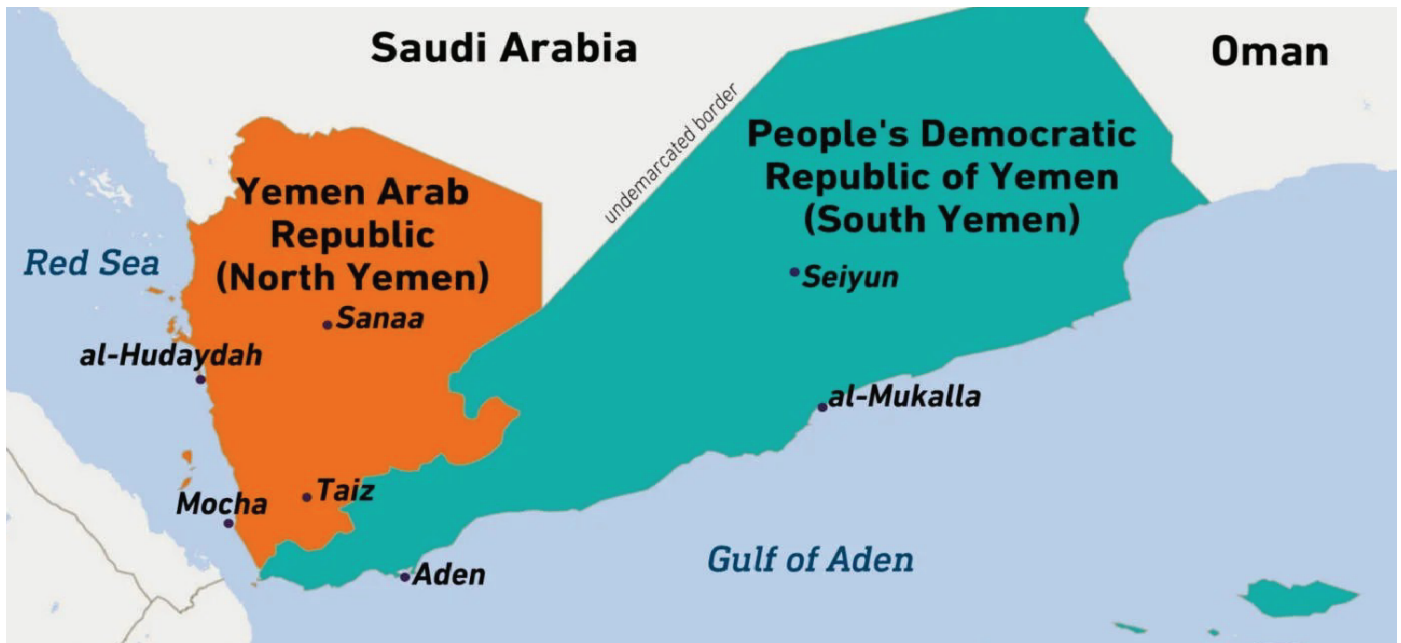
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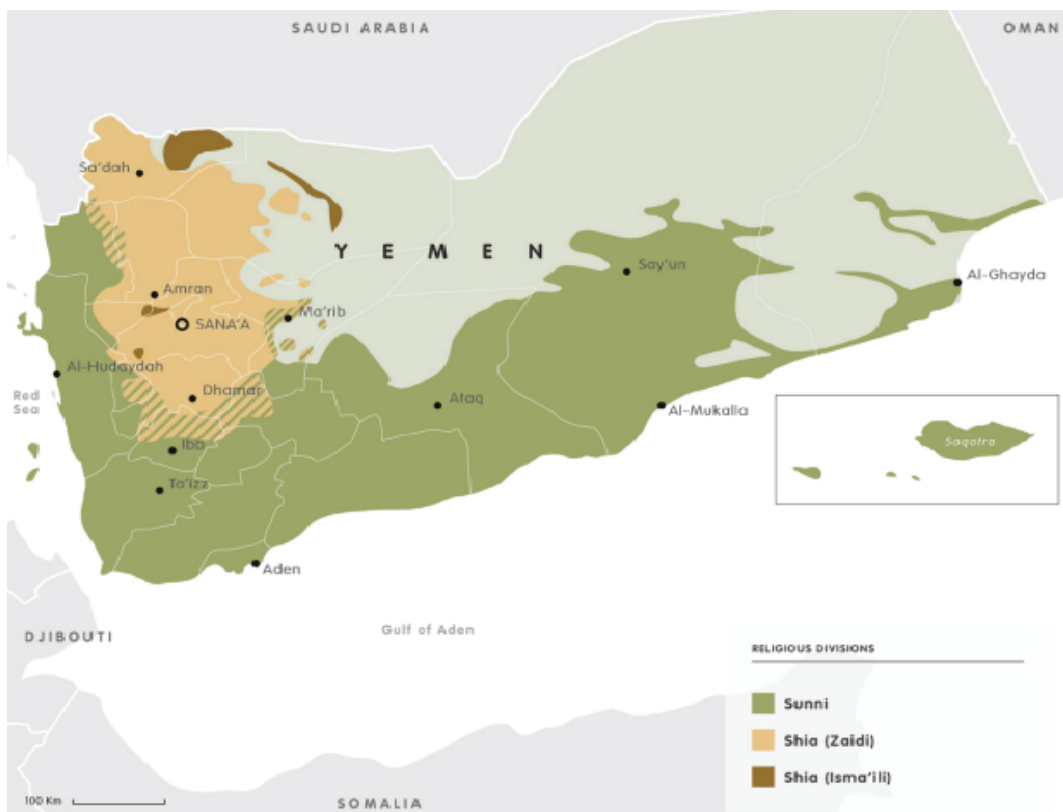
Brief History

As a territory, Yemen's existence predates Islam, but there are few references to it being under the rule of a single entity, as a unified state. The north-south divide has been the most significant division in Yemen. Northern Yemen, officially declared the Republic of Yemen in 1970, gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Southern Yemen that gained independence from the British in 1967, was later taken over by Marxists-Leninists in 1969, and was named the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.²

Despite the unification, the north-south divide had deep imprints, and the institutions in the north and south were never merged and reconciled. This divide has considerable implications even today. The other major division in Yemen has been along sectarian lines. Zaidis, a Shiite sub-sect, are in majority in the northern highlands of Yemen, while the Sunnis dominate the rest of Yemen. There is little to no evidence of historical rifts on these sectarian lines in Yemen,³ but the events since 2004, with the Zaidi's revolt and rise of puritanical tendencies among Sunnis has accentuated this divide.



Yemen before Unification
Source: Middle East Eye



Religious Divisions in Yemen
Source: European Council on Foreign Relations

The Houthis originated in 2004 from the mountainous northern region of Yemen, stemming from the "Believing Youth," a revivalist movement created to safeguard Zaidism in response to apprehensions regarding its dilution by the proliferation of Sunni religious influences.⁴ Initially, the small insurrection, originating from the Houthi family's strongholds in Sa'da, was restricted to the rough northern terrain; nevertheless, consecutive conflicts progressively broadened the group's geographic presence. By the late 2000s, confrontations had proliferated throughout Sa'da province and adjacent regions of Amran and western Al Jawf, indicating the movement's increasing military capability and the state's diminishing authority. The turmoil of Yemen's 2011 revolt, with influences from the Arab Spring, was pivotal, enabling the Houthis to secure complete dominance over Sa'da and advance southward towards the capital. On 21 September 2014, they captured Sanaa, swiftly expanding their influence into Ibb and the critical Red Sea port of Al Hudaydah.⁵ In January 2015, their offensive compelled President Hadi to retire,⁶ allowing the group to extend its reach to Abyan, Aden, and Lahj until being subsequently repelled later that year by local resistance forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition. The Saudi-led coalition used maximum force to contain the Houthi threat until a ceasefire was signed between both parties in 2022.⁷ Since then, there have been little to no events of large-scale conflagration between the two parties.

Divergent Interests of Saudi Arabia and UAE

As mentioned earlier, the Houthi successes against the Yemeni government were seen from a sectarian lens as the Houthi rebels had all the possible support from Iran. This solicited a collective response from the Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia. However, the UAE, being another significant player in the region, joined the Saudi-led coalition, but with different objectives. Thus, the divergence of interests between Saudi Arabia and UAE has largely shaped the dynamics of the conflict in Yemen. Their principle positions on Yemen, as well as the groups they support in Yemen, are different and they have different objectives.

Saudi Arabia's engagement in Yemen has been shaped primarily by existential security considerations, rooted in the direct exposure of its southern borders to Yemen's chronic instability and the risk of hostile actors entrenching themselves along that frontier. From Riyadh's perspective, a fragmented Yemen represents not merely a neighborhood crisis but a sustained strategic liability, capable of exporting insecurity well beyond its borders. This logic has underpinned Saudi Arabia's continued emphasis on preserving Yemen as a single political entity rather than allowing its disintegration into competing authorities. In line with this approach, Riyadh played a central role in facilitating the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), seeking to consolidate anti-Houthi forces under a unified, internationally recognized framework capable of negotiating a political settlement. Saudi Arabia's position has also found resonance

beyond its own security calculus. It enjoys broader regional backing, including support from Oman, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and much of the wider Arab world, reflecting a shared concern that Yemen's permanent fragmentation would deepen regional instability rather than resolve the conflict.⁸

The United Arab Emirates, by contrast, has approached Yemen through a narrowly defined strategic approach that differs fundamentally from Saudi Arabia's objective of securing its borders by establishing a friendly and stable Yemeni state. Emirati interests have remained largely concentrated along Yemen's southern and western coastal belt, where control over ports, shipping routes, and maritime access offers long-term strategic depth and leverage over key sea lanes. From the outset, Abu Dhabi prioritized securing coastal areas and critical infrastructure rather than sustaining a comprehensive campaign across Yemen's interior. This approach translated into support for local southern actors, most notably the Southern Transitional Council, whose agenda aligns with Emirati preferences for localized authority and a permissive environment for maritime control. In practical terms, this has meant condoning, if not facilitating, Yemen's political division by backing a southern project that challenges the notion of a unified Yemeni state. While Saudi Arabia carried the primary burden of confronting the Houthis across expansive territorial and logistical fronts, the UAE pursued a selective strategy aimed at consolidating influence in the south, including securing access to ports and spreading its naval foothold.⁹

STC and Southern Separatism

The call for an independent southern state is not a by-product of the Arab Coalition's intervention, nor is it merely an instrument of Emirati influence. Southern separatism predates the civil war and has remained a persistent political current shaped by historical grievances, perceptions of marginalization, and unresolved questions surrounding the nature of Yemeni unity, as evident in the separatist revolt of 1994.¹⁰ These grievances did not disappear with unification; they were institutionalized within a state that lacked mechanisms for equitable power-sharing.

Southern Transition Council emerged in April 2017 from the broader Southern Movement (al-Hirak), with the objective of establishing a separate state of Southern Yemen.¹¹ The emergence of the Southern Transitional Council transformed southern grievances into an organized political and military project. The STC's growing territorial influence did not merely reflect Emirati backing; it capitalized on longstanding southern discontent and the vacuum created by Yemen's collapsing state institutions.

STC has been backed by UAE as UAE's interests align with those of STC. However, another controversial connection STC has been trying to solidify is its relationship with Israel. STC openly offered Israel its support against Houthi

attacks on vessels in the Red Sea.¹² There have also been speculations about negotiations between STC leadership and Israeli and US officials.¹³ This move by STC is a bid for gaining acceptance from the US by acting as an ally for Israel, and as a result, soliciting support from these players.

STC's Current Offensive and Saudi Response

The recent rise in tensions between Saudi-led coalition and the UAE-backed STC is a consequence of STC's push to gain additional territory, previously under PLC's control. STC's offensive, launched on 3rd December 2025, was met with opposition from Saudi Arabia, as STC captured strategically significant regions like Hadramaut and Al-Mahra. Hadramaut houses 80% of Yemen's oil and gas wealth. The recent takeover and consolidation of control in Hadramaut marked a critical turning point. Hadramaut is not just another province; it is strategically significant due to its size, resources, and geographic position. The STC's expansion into this region crossed threshold that Saudi Arabia had long sought to preserve. The tensions, since then, have risen between STC and the Yemeni army as well as between STC and Saudi-backed group Hadramaut Tribal Alliance (HTA).

The Saudi actions on 30th December 2025 marked the running out of Saudi Arabia's patience vis-à-vis STC and its backers, the UAE. The move was aimed at effective strategic signaling to reassert Saudi Arabia's control over the region, as well as to draw the red line for the factions not under Saudi control. Saudi actions were aimed at deterring the UAE from supporting STC in its newly launched offensive in the south. Saudi Arabia has time and again reiterated that the political arrangement and power-sharing between various factions can be negotiated, but the division of Yemen is out of question. Balkanization at its border has been completely rejected by Saudi Arabia as an option for the future of Yemen.

The UAE has responded to the Saudi signaling by backing off and not worsening the situation by insisting on keeping its presence. As Saudi Arabia manifested its dominant influence on PLC by getting the PLC leadership to demand the exit of the UAE's forces within 24 hours, the UAE has responded positively. This has provided an avenue for normalization and attenuation of tensions after the showdown. PLC has also announced the cancellation of a joint defense agreement with the UAE. The counter-offensive by the Saudi-backed forces has also been forceful, with the forces retaking the governorates of Hadramaut and al-Mahra swiftly.¹⁴

The Uncertain Future

The current phase of Saudi-Emirati bickering over Yemen is unlikely to mark the end of their divergence. It reflects a deeper structural contradiction between competing visions of order, one centered on preserving state unity, the other on managing fragmentation through localized control. Such bickering will also provide Houthis an avenue to exploit

and can be used to extend their control and gaining of territory. Moreover, it is not only in Yemen that the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been manifested. The larger picture depicts that the UAE's strategic ambitions in Somaliland and Sudan also reflect an opposite viewpoint to that of Saudi Arabia, and even the other Arab states. Moreover, the Israeli angle in the situation, as STC reaches out to Israel and the UAE has a formal relationship with Israel, has the potential to further deteriorate the situation in the region by polarizing the states into respective camps. The Saudi Foreign Ministry has officially invited the separatist factions in the south of Yemen for a dialogue in Riyadh. STC has responded positively to the offer of dialogue.¹⁵ However, although the dialogue can lead to a truce, the deeper fault lines will make it difficult for the parties to reach an agreement over the long-term control of southern Yemen.

Yemen today is not amenable to clean solutions. Fragmentation cannot be resolved by declaring new states amid ongoing war, nor can unity be imposed through external force alone. Any durable settlement must confront Yemen's crisis as a single political challenge, even if the eventual outcome accommodates regional autonomy and decentralization. The UAE must avoid supporting elements bidding for the fragmentation of Yemen, and also supported by Israel. The situation also necessitates that Saudi Arabia ensure that PLC realizes the very objectives it was created for: achieving breakthroughs in economic and living conditions, providing services, restoring the state, and achieving peace for Yemenis.¹⁶

Notes

- ¹ Ali, “Yemen Conflict: Who Controls What Areas?,” accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/yemen-conflict-who-controls-what-areas/3773897>.
- ² Daniel Tester, “War in Yemen: Why the UAE Backs the Southern Transitional Council,” Middle East Eye, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/explainers/war-yemen-who-stc-uae-saudi-arabia-houthi>.
- ³ “Yemen: The Sectarianization of a Political Conflict,” ISPI, n.d., accessed January 8, 2026, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/yemen-sectarianization-political-conflict-19933>.
- ⁴ Adam Baron, Mapping the Yemen Conflict, Explainer (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), <https://ecfr.eu/special/yemen/>.
- ⁵ “Yemen Houthi Rebels Capture Red Sea Port of Hodeida,” BBC News, October 14, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29611677>.
- ⁶ “Yemen President Quits, Throwing Country Deeper into Chaos | Reuters,” accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/yemen-president-quits-throwing-country-deeper-int-o-chaos-idUSKBN0KV0HT/>.
- ⁷ “Saudi-Led Coalition Announces Yemen Ceasefire Ahead of Peace Talks,” France 24, March 29, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220329-saudi-led-coalition-announces-yemen-ceasefire-ahead-of-peace-talks>.
- ⁸ Madeline Stahle, “Oman’s Calculus Amid the STC’s Southern Gains,” Gulf International Forum, December 31, 2025, <https://gulffif.org/omans-calculus-amid-the-stcs-southern-gains/>.
- ⁹ “Satellite Images Reveal New UAE Bases Circling Gulf of Aden,” Middle East Eye, accessed January 2, 2026, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-yemen-somalia-circle-bases-control-gulf-of-aden>.
- ¹⁰ Nada Mohamed Seed and Raed Sami Hamid, “The Yemeni Civil War in 1994,” Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities 30, nos. 11, 1 (2023): 231–43, <https://doi.org/10.25130/jtuh.30.11.1.2023.13>.
- ¹¹ Tester, “War in Yemen.”
- ¹² Giorgio Cafiero, “Israel, the UAE, and Yemen’s South: The Politics of Unlikely Alliances,” Arab Center Washington DC, May 22, 2024, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/israel-the-uae-and-yemens-south-the-politics-of-unlikely-alliances/>.
- ¹³ Samer Al-Atrush Correspondent Middle East, “Yemen Will Never Be United, Say Separatists Backed by the UAE,” accessed January 8, 2026, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/yemen-never-united-separatists-backed-by-the-uae-51019nmmf>.
- ¹⁴ Al Jazeera Staff, “Saudi-Backed Government Forces Retake Multiple Cities in Southern Yemen,” Al Jazeera, accessed January 5, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/4/saudi-backed-government-forces-retake-multiple-cities-in-southern-yemen>.
- ¹⁵ “Yemen’s Southern Separatists Welcome Saudi Call for Dialogue amid Saudi-UAE Rift,” Middle East, Reuters, January 4, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-calls-restraint-amid-rapidly-moving-yemen-crisis-2026-01-03/>. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1963856>
- ¹⁶ “Yemen’s PLC in 100 Days: Overcoming Divisions, Prioritizing the Economy,” accessed January 2, 2026, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/3784766>.