



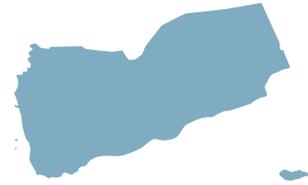
THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

	x	◇	x	x	△	-	-	▽	◇	x	▽
x		x	△	△	x	-	△	△	x	x	▽
◇	x		x	x	△	△	△	◇	▽	△	
x	△	x		◇	x	△	x	x	x	x	
x	△	x	◇		x	-	△	x	x	x	
△	x	△	x	x		▽	△	x	△	▽	
-	-	△	△	-	▽		◇	-	x	x	
-	△	△	△	△	△	◇		-	△	△	
▽	△	△	x	x	x	-	-		△	△	
◇	x	◇	x	x	△	x	△		△	◇	
x	x	▽	x	x	x	x	△	△		◇	
▽	▽	△	x	x	▽	x	△	◇		◇	

Yemen Matrix: Allies & Adversaries

Elana DeLozier

October 2020



Yemen Matrix: Allies & Adversaries

A concise resource guide to the
most important relationships in Yemen

ELANA DELOZIER



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
www.washingtoninstitute.org

First publication: October 2020

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

©2020 by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
1111 19th Street NW, Suite 500
Washington DC 20036
www.washingtoninstitute.org

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
PROJECT MECHANICS.....	4
VISUAL MATRIX.....	10
CAST OF CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS	11
Characters with Geographic Locations.....	12
Ali Mohsen.....	14
GPC-Sanaa.....	16
Hadi Government.....	18
Houthis.....	20
Iran.....	22
Islah-Riyadh.....	24
Mahri Protestors.....	26
Oman.....	28
Saleh Family.....	30
Saudi Arabia.....	32
Southern Transitional Council.....	34
United Arab Emirates.....	36
SELECT EVENTS.....	38
ANNEXES.....	43
Relationships by Type.....	43
Relationships by Event.....	44

Acknowledgments

The Yemen Matrix project is an idea I have been considering for years, and one I saw becoming ever more necessary as I came to know the bottomless depth and great complexity of the country. During my two years as a research fellow at The Washington Institute, the regular changing of the guard at government agencies has compelled me to think about creative ways to quickly educate those new to the Yemen portfolio. I wanted to create a guide that people could turn to regularly throughout their posting—that would give them the right questions to ask, provide all the nuance Yemen deserves, and leave bread crumbs for their further learning. Thus, the Yemen Matrix became a reality.

Yet this project would never have made it from the whiteboard on my wall to the public domain without the help of an extraordinary team. First and foremost, I want to thank the many Yemenis who have been so generous with their time over the years as I have poked and prodded for a deeper understanding of perspectives on their country's current events and history. I am especially grateful for the comments and fact-checking of those who saw early drafts of the Yemen Matrix, all of whom wish to remain anonymous, including two extraordinary subject-matter experts and dozens of Yemenis who count themselves among the groups outlined in this matrix at the leadership and middle levels. I have benefited from my visits with many of you in the region, and it is your openness that has allowed for the subtlety and complexity I tried to capture in this project.

Second, I want to thank Zied Bouchlaghem, a research assistant at The Washington Institute who has become quite the Yemen specialist himself over the last year and a half. He worked relentlessly to fact-check details and share narrative patterns he was seeing in his own research among the various Yemen actors, contributing enormously to the success of the project.

Third, the design team at New City and the Institute's publications team put together a cool interactive element and a beautifully designed report. Maria Radacsi and I became quite the team during this process, and I am grateful for her intuitive, elegant design sense, diligent work ethic, and patience. Jason Warshof, the editor for this project, has a wonderful way of figuring out how to say what I mean better than I do sometimes, and I appreciate his attention to detail with every sentence. I am grateful to all of these professionals for their forbearance as I nitpicked on every detail related to the design, functionality, and editing of this project.

Last, this project could not have happened without the support of Simon Henderson, the director of the Institute's Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy; the Institute's leadership, especially Executive Director Robert Satloff and Director of Research Patrick Clawson; and the Institute's generous trustees. I especially want to thank the Bernstein and Rubin families, which sponsor, respectively, the research program that covers Yemen and my fellowship at the Institute.

INTRODUCTION

To fresh eyes, the current conflict in Yemen may appear to have begun when a rebel group solidified its takeover of the capital in 2015, leaving the government to flee into exile and its regional neighbors scrambling to save it. Yet that story line only scratches the surface. Yemen is not a single story; instead, it is a complex web of stories. It is what some Yemenis call a soap opera (better known in Yemen as *musalsal turki*). Indeed, like a soap opera, the story of Yemen is defined by complex relationships, shocking events, ever-changing incentives, and unexpected partnerships—all of which have too often and for decades created instability and uncertainty for the Yemeni people.

Suffice it to say, the plotlines visible in Yemen today did not begin in 2015, and most will not end when the current war concludes. In fact, many Yemenis express concern that their compatriots are already writing the script for the next season in Yemen's story while this season still plays out. This should be cause for concern for more than just Yemenis. Yemen sits alongside key waterways for global trade, has served as a haven for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and has kept the Gulf region embroiled in conflict since 2015. Its complexity doubles as instability. To nudge Yemen toward stability requires a concerted effort and deep understanding of the relationships at play there.

Those new to the Yemen portfolio often find themselves confused by the web of relationships. To start, Yemen is a country of about 30 million people, but one where every Yemeni inexplicably seems to know every other. It is a place where the personalities drive events more than institutions, and where informal influence is often more potent than formal power. It is a country with an acute memory, where the events of 1962, 1986, 1994, and 2004 are still as much in

play as events of today. The Houthis no doubt remember who was against them in the Saada wars of 2004–10 (e.g., Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Islah). Those in the Southern Transitional Council (STC) remember who fought against secession in 1994 (e.g., Ali Mohsen, President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, Islah, the General People's Congress, the Saleh family), but also those who supported them at least notionally (e.g., [Saudi Arabia](#)). In the future, the actors in today's Yemen will recall who fought with and against them in this war.

These often visceral recollections help explain why, more frequently than not, grievance is at the heart of decisions and relationships in Yemen. Even when new political organizations pop up (e.g., the STC in 2017), they are often new faces for old grievances. Making them all the more potent, these gripes are not based on lore; rather, they have accumulated within the lifetimes of those involved. Yemenis alive today in both the north and south lost family members in the wars of 1962, 1986, 1994, and 2004, for example, and they hold other actors responsible. These wars, like all wars, have created adversaries more often than they have spurred a sense of common interest. In fact, the common interest between actors often is their common adversary. As a result, if one is trying to understand why an alliance exists in Yemen, it is often best to start with common adversaries or shared grievances.

For example, the Houthi invasion of the south was a watershed for the Hadi government and the STC. For the Hadi government, it was yet another symbol of the Houthi coup against it; for the individuals who would eventually form the STC, it was yet another northern invasion of the south. This shared sense of injustice aligned the two temporarily against the Houthis, yet their own enmity for each other—born of events in

1986, 1994, and after—simmered underneath and eventually emerged violently.

Given the number of adversarial relationships in Yemen, groups often choose the lesser of two enemies to work with against the greater enemy. It is the classic strategy epitomized in “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Or as Yemenis like to say, “My brother and me against my cousin. My cousin and me against the foreigner.” This can be confusing to new analysts but becomes clearer if one applies the adversary-centric lens.

In the current war, for example, using the term “pro-government forces” would suggest an affinity within those forces, when in reality few forces fighting the Houthis are actually pro-government; they are, instead, anti-Houthi. Their alignment with the government is shaky at best, as evidenced by the STC and Tariq Saleh’s forces refusing to report through a chain of command led by the government. Similarly, many of those aligned with the Houthis are not pro-Houthi but rather anti-Saudi.

This tendency to rank adversaries and team up accordingly creates strange bedfellows—like Ali Mohsen with the Arab Spring protestors, the STC with the Hadi government, or, perhaps strangest of all, the late former president Ali Abdullah Saleh with the Houthis. But it also clearly indicates to analysts and policymakers what splits are likely to occur when the common adversary or grievance is removed.

Just as aligned actors cannot be assumed to share interests beyond a common enemy, opponents are not always divided eternally by hatred. Onetime adversaries such as the Houthis and former president Saleh have been known to align with each other, only to split again. Similarly, allies are known to become adversaries, as happened with the STC and the Hadi government, only to become allies of convenience again.

Grievance constitutes the historical lens through which Yemenis view the present, defining their relationships, shaping their perspectives, and driving their behavior. Facts are often hard to come by in Yemen—for example, asserting for certain who

conducted a bombing—given the number of actors, the difficulties for journalists, and other contextual factors. Therefore, assessing perspective is often more useful in predicting the actions of groups or individuals. In August 2019, for example, the STC believed Islahis within the Hadi government were behind the killing of one of their senior commanders, even though the Houthis took credit for the attack. Many Yemen watchers, including [this author](#), anticipated that perspective would drive behavior; indeed, it led to the STC entering into a conflict with the government and taking over the city of Aden.

If Yemeni-Yemeni relationships were not complex enough, a regional element is often present too. Many Yemeni actors rely on an outside patron for financial support—as the STC does with the United Arab Emirates, the Mahri protestors do with Oman, and the Houthis do with Iran. This matrix shows that the closest “alliances” in Yemen are usually with a foreign patron. Yet perhaps counterintuitively, most Yemeni groups express fiercely anti-foreign-interventionist sentiments. As a result, the relationships with foreign patrons are multidimensional: the financial resources aid Yemeni groups in pursuing their ambitions, but these groups guard their autonomy by not always following their patrons’ advice. It is rare for a group in Yemen to act as a full proxy for an external country—Hadi occasionally snubs Saudi Arabia, the Houthis have flouted Iranian advice, and the STC sometimes defies the UAE’s cautions.

Moreover, no group in Yemen is a monolith, and not every Yemeni in a group ascribes to the entirety of that group’s view. In fact, it is common for individual members to disagree with their group in some way. No one-size-fits-all approach works completely with Yemen. Even when a shared sense of purpose leads actors to align with each other against a common enemy, each group and each member within it remains fiercely independent.

Out of this complexity comes this project, which attempts to disentangle and explain the web of relationships in Yemen by taking a kaleidoscopic lens to them. It is meant to be concise without being vague, simple without oversimplifying, informative but not exhaustive. It is, of course, impossible to put any

country or any set of relationships into a series of boxes with icons and call it comprehensive, let alone definitive. In fact, it is likely no two Yemen experts would agree on the exact icon to put in each box given the nuance in every relationship. But, for new Yemen analysts or for policymakers who are regularly confounded when sifting through the muddy waters of Yemeni relationships, this project

seeks to clarify and inform. For Yemen experts, it should spur conversation as well as provide a tool shared among stakeholders that allows for more in-depth and nuanced conversations. This project is a mere toe in the water for explaining the multifaceted country of Yemen, but the hope is that it will make the subtleties of Yemen more accessible to policymakers.

PROJECT MECHANICS

The Yemen Matrix is a guide to the relationships between the core actors involved in the country's various conflicts. It is meant to be a starter resource for new analysts, a quick-access volume for policymakers, and a refresher for experts.

STORY LINE CONCEPT

Learning any new subject area can be arduous, but this is especially so when the learning curve is as steep as it is in Yemen. Like a soap opera or complex TV drama, Yemen has a wide-ranging, fiercely independent cast of characters with interwoven relationships and multiple plotlines unfolding at once. In these situations, story arcs are effective tools for conveying the basics quickly. For example, if someone learns that the Houthis believe Ali Mohsen gave the order to kill their leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, in 2004, they immediately and viscerally grasp one side of that relationship without knowing any of the other multiple details in their history. Those details come in time.

A story also allows those new to the Yemen portfolio to connect with the actors, just as one does with characters in a well-written novel or TV show. Story lines are a way of humanizing the Yemeni experience, creating memorable impressions, and telling the history of Yemen through the people and groups who experienced it, rather than doing so as a series of faceless historical timelines and academic postulations. The American writer Kurt Vonnegut emphasized the power of story arcs because, as a reflection of our own lives, all humans know them by heart. Thus, finding the [story arcs](#) that exist in Yemen among the main actors can be an effective way of concisely depicting Yemen's complexity.

Unlike TV dramas or soap operas, this project does not dramatize or sensationalize events or relationships for the sake of crafting a good story. Yet much of Yemen's history is dramatic anyway. The story of the 1986 civil war in the south, for example, reads as if straight out of a dark novel.

METHODOLOGY

This matrix is the result of years of tracking Yemen and its wide-ranging cast of characters. Much of the information in this project, especially the nuance and detail, comes from conversations with the actors themselves, including at the leadership, middle, and "street" levels. This project is, in short, a collection of perspectives as interpreted by the author. The perspectives that actors have of each other form their relationships, and deciphering those relationships helps one make sense of events in Yemen.

Of course, any attempt to simplify relationships as complex as those in Yemen into a series of icons will never be comprehensive, or definitive, but it should be instructive. To keep it straightforward and user-friendly, the project has a word limit for all aspects, including profiles and relationship descriptions, as well as the number of select members and events.

PROJECT COMPONENTS

In keeping with the story line concept, this project centers on two components: the cast of characters and the relationships among them. The cast of characters section begins with a maps page and follows with a page for each actor that includes a concise profile, a select list of members (for groups), and the relationships. For each relationship, an icon denotes its place along the spectrum from ally to adversary, accompanied by a brief explanation and a few select events that have influenced it.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

The project includes twelve actors: four countries, one person, and seven groups of varied cohesiveness.

The four **countries** are key regional actors with a link to Yemen's current war and its players: Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. They are by no means the only regional states with an interest in Yemen. An expanded project could include Qatar or perhaps even Turkey, especially if their interest and influence continue to grow. These two states have particular influence over offshoots of Islah, which remain active.

The **person** singled out in the project is Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a preeminent figure in Yemeni politics whose complex history requires his relationships to be examined on their own. If former president Ali Abdullah Saleh or Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the late head of the Hashid tribal confederation, were still alive, either would be treated similarly—as an individual whose personal command was great enough to have his own slot in this project.

The seven **groups** in the project include the two main actors in the war (the Houthis and the Hadi government); the two main political parties (Islah and the General People's Congress [GPC]); the still-relevant and influential Saleh family, named after the late president of Yemen, who served for thirty-three years; the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which has made a name for itself in the south;

and the Mahri protestors, who arose in opposition to Saudi Arabia's presence in their province on Yemen's border with Oman.

Dealing with Splinters

Some political parties, such as Islah and the GPC, have splintered because of the war. Rather than covering all the factions, which remain difficult to precisely parse, this project includes only the core of each political party.

Thus, when this project refers to Islah-Riyadh, it refers to the faction of the Islah Party currently residing in Riyadh and led by those elected to leadership, namely Mohammed Abdullah al-Yadoumi and Abdulwahab Ahmed al-Ansi. Others based around the region in Cairo, Amman, and elsewhere accept this leadership. If this core faction is defined by its alignment with the coalition, other Islahis (not represented in this project) are defined by their opposition to the coalition. These individuals—many of whom have been formally dismissed from the core party—tend to be more closely aligned with the transnational Muslim Brotherhood and to reside in Turkey, Qatar, and Oman. These anti-coalition Islahis are important, even if they do not form a cohesive group, and they should be known to Yemen watchers given that they will play a role in the country's future. An expanded version of this project could take account of this assemblage, especially if they coalesce.

When this project refers to the GPC-Sanaa, it means the core party in Sanaa aligned with the Houthis. Several GPC members living outside Yemen—many with no affinity for the Houthis—aspire to rejoin and rebuild the party in the eventual aftermath of the war, including several individuals in Muscat, Cairo, and Abu Dhabi, but they are not counted among the GPC-Sanaa cohort in this project. If the GPC in Sanaa is defined by its opposition to the coalition, other party adherents outside Sanaa are defined by their alignment with the coalition or the Hadi government. The coalition-aligned GPC members, however, have not created a cohesive alternative GPC Party and often act in their own capacities instead (e.g., as a governor, a military figure).

Other Complications

Although the Saleh family was the mainstay of the GPC Party for three decades when Ali Abdullah Saleh was alive, the family's relationship with the party has become quite complicated since the Houthis killed Saleh in December 2017. Thus, the family is treated separately from the GPC-Sanaa in this project.

A map accompanying each character icon shows that many groups included in this project have representation in Yemen as well as in the regional capitals of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman. For example, the Houthis, the GPC-Sanaa, and Mahri protestors have representatives in Muscat; Islah-Riyadh and the Hadi government in Riyadh; and the STC and the Saleh family in Abu Dhabi. Some groups have their leadership primarily based in Yemen with representatives elsewhere, while other groups have the inverse setup.

Groups Not Included

There were several groups considered but ultimately not included in the project.

Al-Ahmar Family:

The al-Ahmar family would have been included in a project like this prior to the current war; the family, however, has lost collective influence since Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar died in 2007 and the Houthis overran its strongholds and burned its family home in 2014. Their lack of inclusion does not negate the possibility that they will return to importance and influence in the future.

Salafist Groups:

Also absent are Salafist groups, of which there are many. Given the nature of Salafism, no core group exists. Instead, Salafists are present in different forms among the STC, the Houthis, the Red Sea coast forces, Islah, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS), and elsewhere. If they coalesce into distinct groups, they may merit future inclusion.

Red Sea Forces:

The Red Sea forces—including various brigades, the Tihama Resistance forces, and even Tariq

Saleh's forces—are not included. However, Tariq's perspective is captured under the Saleh family, the Amaleqa Brigades fall under the Salafist category defined above, and others fall under the Hadi government's command. The Red Sea remains an area to watch closely, but in general this project has avoided including military brigades in the cast of characters.

Tribes:

The project also omits individual tribes, although many merit a close watch and are influential, including the Murad and Abida tribes of Marib, the Yafa tribe, the Awaliq tribes of Shabwa, the Hajour tribes of Hajjah, and others.

Terrorist Groups:

Finally, terrorist groups such as AQAP and IS are not included, in large part because they are broadly opposed by every other actor and thus do not make for an informative relationship map. Certain groups in Yemen face regular allegations of cooperating with terrorist elements, but all actors in this project condemn terrorism in their public statements.

Actor Profiles

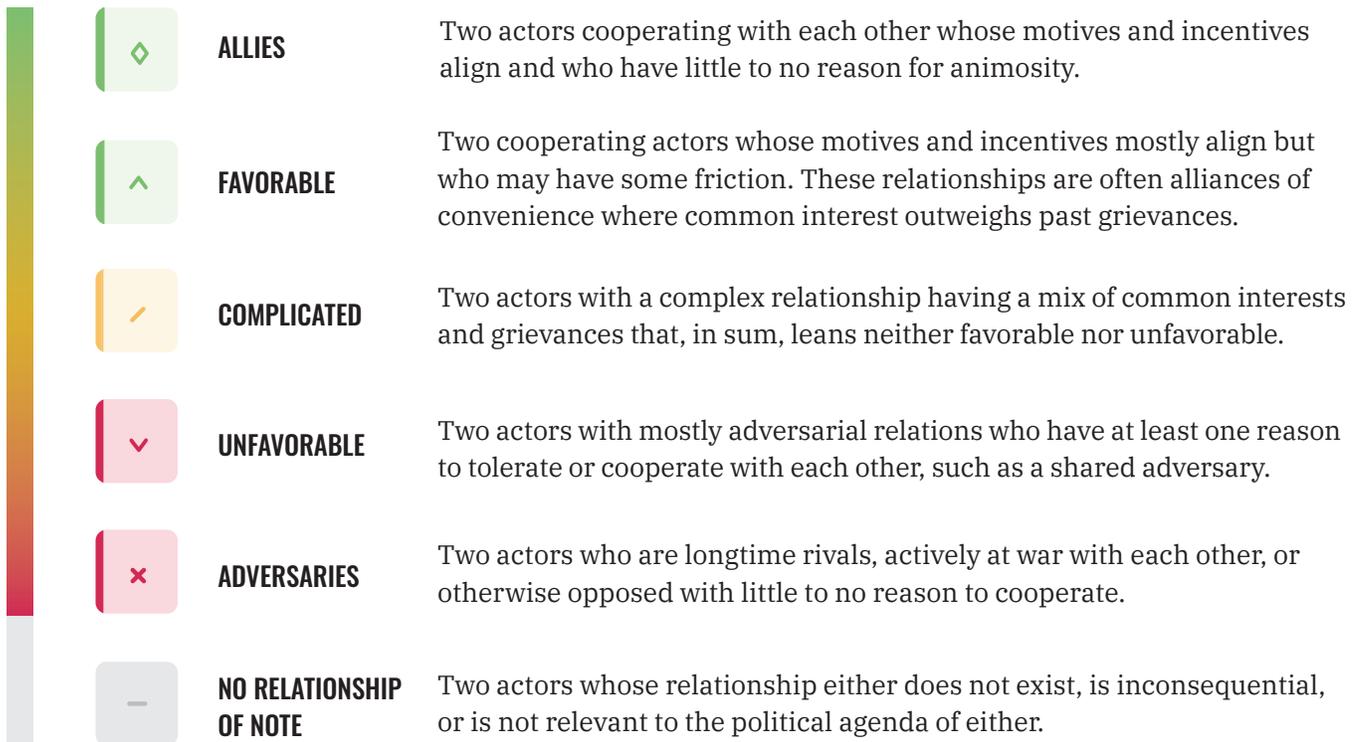
The profile tells the history of the actor as concisely as possible with particular reference, where possible, to the other actors and select events noted in the relationships section.

Select Members

The select members section is an ancillary short list of the most influential, discussed, commonly cited, or well-known members of a group. It is not meant to be—and is far from—an exhaustive list. Nor is it an ordered rank, or a list of those with the most important titles. Note that individual Yemenis often break with the party line, so not all views ascribed to a group can be ascribed to individual members.

THE RELATIONSHIPS

The project includes five main types of relationships on a spectrum from “allies” to “adversaries,” with “favorable,” “complicated,” and “unfavorable” between these poles.



Relationships are not stagnant and will move along the spectrum defined above, sometimes tipping more toward allies or more toward adversaries. This matrix attempts to be as timeless as possible. It will not capture the day-to-day nature of those variations but rather the broad nature of the relationship.

For example, the STC and the Hadi government are cited as “unfavorable.” There are moments when the two actors have been actively at war with each other, suggesting a move down the spectrum toward adversaries. Upon implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, they could move up the spectrum closer to complicated. Despite these occasional shifts, broadly speaking they have an adversarial relationship with at least one reason to cooperate (they are both part of the coalition against the Houthis); thus, their relationship is categorized as unfavorable.

In other cases, relationships do markedly change such that the matrix would require an update.

For example, the Saleh family’s relationship with the Houthis took a decisive turn when the Houthis killed the family patriarch in 2017. Tariq Saleh consequently switched sides in the war.

Relationships are inherently difficult to define when public expressions differ from private sentiments. This is most often relevant for countries, which can have a public position that differs from the day-to-day experience of their officials. In these cases, the matrix generally defaults to the actor’s public position since that is the one most relevant to policymakers; however, in these cases, the relationship description will allude to the private views.

The Hadi government–UAE relationship is a case in point. The UAE has a negative view of the Hadi government given its track record of mismanagement and its ties to Islah; meanwhile, the Hadi government is incensed that the UAE has financed groups, such as the STC, that compete for its legitimacy. Moreover, the

government believes the UAE intentionally bombed its forces in an August 2019 operation that the UAE defends as a counterterrorism move. Despite these significant disagreements, the two are part of the anti-Houthi coalition and the UAE publicly supports the Hadi government's legitimacy.

In another example, the Omani government has a friendly relationship with actors it hosts in Muscat, including the Houthis. But the project denotes its relationships with most actors as "complicated" rather than "favorable" because it officially takes a neutral position on the war.

In other cases, two actors may be part of a public alliance that is indeed quite messy behind the scenes. In these tricky cases, where reasonable experts could disagree on their placement on the spectrum, the author has made a judgment call.

For example, the Houthis and the GPC are aligned in the war against the coalition but have an increasingly strained relationship. Some may argue they are "allies," while others may argue the situation is "complicated." This project labels their relationship as leaning favorable given that they are aligned in a war together but with some complications.

The author often made these judgment calls by comparing the relationship in question to other relationships already denoted. The relationships, in other words, were determined relative to each other.

Making the project trickier still, relationships are often defined differently by the two actors in question. For example, Actor A may dislike Actor B

more than Actor B dislikes Actor A. In these cases, the relationship tends to capture the stronger view and denotes the imbalance in the relationship description.

Finally, the project uses the "no relationship of note" descriptor sparingly but deliberately. This sometimes means there is no relationship at all but more often means there is no notable relationship.

For example, Ali Mohsen and Gen. Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, the face of the Mahri protest movement, know each other from when they worked in the Saleh administration, but Ali Mohsen is not actively involved in a public way to either support or oppose the Mahri protest movement. Thus, the Ali Mohsen–Mahri protestors relationship is categorized as "no relationship of note."

Relationship Description

The relationship descriptions are minimalist by design. The author took the entire relationship into account when deciding on the taxonomy, but the write-up of the description sticks to the simplest explanation possible. For example, relationships like Ali Mohsen–Saleh family or GPC-Islah are decades deep, yet they are explained simply in terms of their current connection to the war in Yemen. All readers who wish to become Yemen specialists should dive deeper into these historical relationships.

Select Events

The select events are an ancillary aimed at directing the reader's attention to those key historical events that every Yemeni knows, often personally remembers, and that underpin many of the relationships the project highlights. The author chose events that occurred within the lifetimes of most Yemenis today. Events such as the 1962 North Yemen Civil War or the 1967 British withdrawal from South Yemen are foundational to understanding how Yemen arrived at its current situation, but the timeline is limited to those events closer in memory and more often invoked when describing modern-day relationships.

These events were sometimes a turning point in a relationship; other times they only solidified an existing relationship. The list is not meant to be—and is far from—exhaustive, but these events are essential to understanding Yemen today. Like other parts of this project, word limits were imposed, so the descriptions are instructive but not exhaustive; instead, they are written to give just enough context to understand how the event applies to the relationships it shaped.



●	1986	South Yemen Civil War
●	1994	North-South Civil War
●	2004–10	Saada Wars
●	2011	Arab Spring in Yemen
●	2014	Houthi Drive to Sanaa
●	2015–	Current Yemen War
●	2015	Battle of Aden
●	2017–	Saudi Deployment to al-Mahra
●	2017	Death of Ali Abdullah Saleh
●	2019	STC Takeover of Aden

VISUAL MATRIX

	ALI MOHSEN	GPC-SANAA	HADI GOVERNMENT	HOUTHIS	IRAN	ISLAH-RIYADH	MAHRI PROTESTORS	OMAN	SALEH FAMILY	SAUDI ARABIA	STC	UAE
ALI MOHSEN		✖	◇	✖	✖	◇	-	-	▽	◇	✖	▽
GPC-SANAA	✖		✖	◇	⚡	✖	-	⚡	⚡	✖	✖	▽
HADI GOVERNMENT	◇	✖		✖	✖	◇	⚡	⚡	⚡	◇	▽	⚡
HOUTHIS	✖	◇	✖		◇	✖	⚡	⚡	✖	✖	✖	✖
IRAN	✖	⚡	✖	◇		✖	-	⚡	✖	✖	✖	✖
ISLAH-RIYADH	◇	✖	◇	✖	✖		▽	⚡	✖	◇	✖	▽
MAHRI PROTESTORS	-	-	⚡	⚡	-	▽		◇	-	✖	✖	✖
OMAN	-	⚡	⚡	⚡	⚡	⚡	◇		-	⚡	⚡	⚡
SALEH FAMILY	▽	⚡	⚡	✖	✖	✖	-	-		◇	⚡	◇
SAUDI ARABIA	◇	✖	◇	✖	✖	◇	✖	⚡	◇		◇	◇
STC	✖	✖	▽	✖	✖	✖	✖	⚡	⚡	◇		◇
UAE	▽	▽	⚡	✖	✖	▽	✖	⚡	◇	◇	◇	

LEGEND

◇
ALLIES

◇
FAVORABLE

⚡
COMPLICATED

▽
UNFAVORABLE

✖
ADVERSARIES

-
NO RELATIONSHIP
OF NOTE

CAST OF CHARACTERS AND RELATIONSHIPS



ALI MOHSEN



GPC-SANAA



HADI GOVERNMENT



HOUTHIS



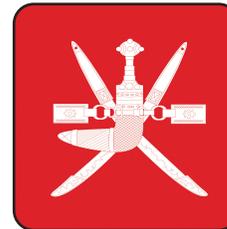
IRAN



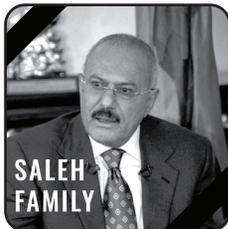
ISLAH-RIYADH



MAHRI PROTESTORS



OMAN



SALEH FAMILY



SAUDI ARABIA



SOUTHERN TRANSITIONAL COUNCIL (STC)



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

CHARACTERS WITH GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS



ALI MOHSEN



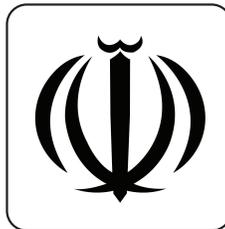
GPC-SANAA



HADI GOVERNMENT



HOUTHIS



IRAN

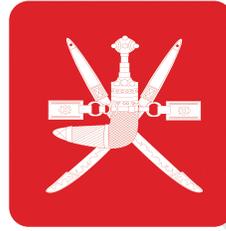


ISLAH-RIYADH

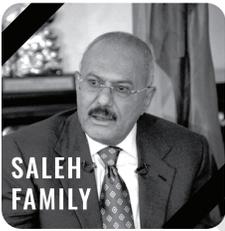




MAHRI PROTESTORS



OMAN



SALEH FAMILY



SAUDI ARABIA



STC



UAE





ALI MOHSEN

Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar

Born in 1945, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar was the preeminent military commander during the three-decade rule of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. After backing Saleh's rise to power in 1978, he supported the Yemeni mujahedin in Afghanistan in the 1980s and recruited many of them to fight against the south in the 1994 civil war. Some of those individuals would later be tied to terrorist activity inside Yemen. Ali Mohsen played a major role in the 1994 civil war and served as the commander of the six wars against the Houthis in the 2000s. His ruthless decision to shell Aden in 1994 and the role his command played in the death of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi in 2004

have created lasting resentment in northern and southern Yemen. In 2011, in a major defection, Ali Mohsen joined the Arab Spring protestors calling for Saleh's resignation. He and Saleh had developed a rivalry in the years prior over the promotion of Saleh family members, and leaked U.S. embassy cables cited a Saudi belief that Saleh had tried to kill Ali Mohsen in 2009. Although he claims to be a member of the General People's Congress (GPC), he has long been close to Islah and has historically had ties with the Muslim Brotherhood. In a controversial 2016 decision, President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi appointed Ali Mohsen vice president.



For more on Ali Mohsen, see Elana DeLozier:

["Yemen's Second-in-Command May Have a Second Coming"](#) | *November 9, 2018*

Ali Mohsen Relationships

ALLIES

HADI GOVERNMENT

Ali Mohsen has served as vice president in the Hadi administration since 2016. As military men, Hadi and Ali Mohsen served together during the 1994 war and for decades thereafter as members of Saleh's government, but they are not considered close.

1994 2015–

SAUDI ARABIA

Ali Mohsen and Saudi Arabia are fighting on the same side of the war against the Houthis, as they did in the 2004–10 Saada wars. Ali Mohsen resides in Riyadh and is close to the Saudis, despite his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and alignment with the Arab uprising protestors in 2011.

2004–10 2015–

FAVORABLE

ISLAH-RIYADH

Ali Mohsen was an early member of the GPC, a political ally of Islah until the mid-2000s but thereafter an opponent. He has developed relationships in both parties over decades, including with the Muslim Brotherhood wing of Islah. In 2011, he defected from Saleh's GPC camp to support the Arab uprising, which included Islah. He now serves as vice president in the Hadi government, which includes Islah-Riyadh in its political and military ranks, but he continues to cite a GPC Party affiliation.

1994 2004–10 2011 2015–

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE –

– MAHRI PROTESTORS

– OMAN

Because Ali Mohsen is part of the Hadi government, see the Hadi government–Oman relationship.

UNFAVORABLE

SALEH FAMILY

Ali Mohsen served as the preeminent military commander in the Saleh administration for decades. He defected from Saleh's camp to join the Arab uprising in 2011, formalizing a rivalry that had emerged with the family years earlier. Although Tariq Saleh defected to the coalition camp after the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, thus aligning him in the war with Ali Mohsen, personal animosity remains between the family and Ali Mohsen.

2011

UAE

The UAE distrusts Ali Mohsen due to his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which it reviles, and Islah. That said, the UAE notionally supports the coalition, of which Ali Mohsen is part.

2015–

ADVERSARIES

GPC-SANAA

As vice president in the Hadi government, Ali Mohsen opposes the GPC-Sanaa, which is aligned with the Houthis, in the current war. Ali Mohsen was an early member of the original GPC Party, but splits in the party have aligned him against the GPC-Sanaa faction.

2011 2015–

HOUTHIS

Ali Mohsen serves as vice president in the Hadi government, which is at war with the Houthis. The Houthis regard Ali Mohsen as the primary offender behind the 2004–10 Saada wars, which intensified after government troops under his command killed the movement's eventual namesake, Hussein al-Houthi. Upon entering Sanaa in 2014, one of the Houthis' first targets was Ali Mohsen, who escaped. After Saleh's death, the Houthis captured his son Mohsen Ali Mohsen.

2004–10 2014 2015–

IRAN

Iran is supporting the Houthis in a war against the Hadi government, which includes Ali Mohsen as its vice president.

STC

The STC includes a number of southern secessionists who fought in the 1994 civil war against the armies under Ali Mohsen's command. The STC regularly accuses Ali Mohsen of overcloseness to Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood and of having ties to terrorism. Although Ali Mohsen and the STC are aligned against the Houthis, personal animosities run deeper than their common cause.

1994 2015– 2019

SELECT EVENTS

-  1994 North-South Civil War
-  2004–10 Saada Wars
-  2011 Arab Spring in Yemen
-  2014 Houthi Drive to Sanaa
-  2015– Current Yemen War
-  2015 STC Takeover of Aden



GPC-SANAA

General People's Congress (in Sanaa)

The General People's Congress (GPC) was established as Yemen's ruling party by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1982. With no specific ideological basis, the party instead served as a wide foundation of institutional support for Saleh throughout his rule in the north and south. For decades, its loyalists were rewarded with government jobs and other forms of favor, until its longtime ruling-party status came under fire in 2011 during the Arab Spring and Saleh resigned from office in 2012. With the outbreak of the current war, the GPC split into factions, including one that remained loyal to Saleh, stayed in Sanaa, and ultimately joined political forces with the Houthis in

opposition to coalition-led airstrikes in the country. The Houthis and GPC under Saleh formed a National Salvation Government, which lacks international recognition. However, after the Houthis killed Saleh in December 2017, the pro-Saleh GPC faction split again, with many Saleh family members and loyalists defecting to the anti-Houthi front. The GPC Party that remains in Sanaa today, and to which this project refers, is technically still aligned with the Houthis in the National Salvation Government, but tensions exist. As the Houthis have increasingly taken over the reins of the state, the GPC-Sanaa has become more marginalized and less able to voice its own views.

SELECT MEMBERS



Sadeq Amin Abu Ras
President, GPC-Sanaa



Ghazi Ahmed Ali Mohsen
Secretary-General,
GPC-Sanaa



Yahya Ali Ahmed al-Rai
Speaker, Houthi-GPC
Parliament & First Vice
President, GPC-Sanaa



**Qassem Mohammed
Ghaleb Labouza**
Vice President,
GPC-Sanaa



**Abdulaziz Saleh bin
Hابتour**
Prime Minister, National
Salvation Government



Hisham Sharaf Abdullah
Foreign Minister,
National Salvation
Government

GPC-Sanaa Relationships

FAVORABLE ^

^ HOUTHIS

The GPC-Sanaa is aligned politically with the Houthis. The two actors have relied on each other out of necessity in the current war, but the relationship has never been close since Saleh's government fought the Houthis in the Saada wars and the Houthis joined the Arab Spring protests. The alliance has become more tense since the Houthis killed Saleh, the GPC leader, in late 2017 and many GPC members defected.

- 2004-10
- 2011
- 2014
- 2015-
- 2015
- 2017

COMPLICATED /

/ IRAN

The GPC-Sanaa tacitly benefits from Iran shoring up the Houthi arsenal, but Iran's ally and point of contact in Yemen is the Houthis, not the GPC. In fact, Iranian leaders congratulated the Houthis on killing GPC leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, accusing him of turning on the Houthis.

- 2015-

/ SALEH FAMILY

Even after the Houthis killed GPC leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, the GPC-Sanaa has remained tensely allied with them. Saleh family members such as nephew Tariq Saleh defected from the Houthi-GPC camp to join the coalition against the Houthis. Yet Saleh's son Ahmed Ali Saleh retains contacts in the party, and in 2019 the GPC-Sanaa nominated him as party vice president. Although he neither accepted nor declined the offer, the Saleh family remains committed to the return of a unified GPC.

- 2015-
- 2017

/ OMAN

Although some individuals linked to the GPC-Sanaa camp reside in Muscat and have favorable relations with Oman, the Omani government has taken a neutral stance in the Yemen war and officially recognizes the Hadi government.

UNFAVORABLE v

v UAE

The UAE and the GPC-Sanaa are adversaries in the war in Yemen. Yet individuals who maintain contacts in the Sanaa-based party occasionally visit the UAE, and the Emirati leadership has maintained a relationship with Ahmed Ali Saleh, who has ties to the GPC-Sanaa.

- 2015-
- 2015

x ADVERSARIES x

x ALI MOHSEN

As vice president in the Hadi government, Ali Mohsen opposes the GPC-Sanaa, which is aligned with the Houthis, in the current war. Ali Mohsen was an early member of the original GPC Party, but splits in the party have aligned him against the GPC-Sanaa faction.

- 2011
- 2015-

x HADI GOVERNMENT

The GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis in the current war against the Hadi government. Some GPC members defected to the Hadi government's side in the war after the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017.

- 2015-
- 2015
- 2017

x ISLAH-RIYADH

As opposing political parties, the GPC and Islah are rivals in Yemen. The 2011 Arab Spring protests and the 2015 war further entrenched divisions that began to take shape in the mid-2000s. In the current war, Islah-Riyadh sides with the coalition while the GPC-Sanaa is politically aligned with the Houthis.

- 2011
- 2015-

x SAUDI ARABIA

The GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis as an adversary against the Saudi-led coalition in the current war. In the past, key GPC figures have been part of Saudi patronage networks.

- 2015-
- 2015

x STC

The two are adversaries in the current war since the GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis while the STC is part of the anti-Houthi coalition. The 1994 civil war—when the GPC-led government defeated the southern separatists, many of whom are now part of the STC—remains in their collective memory.

- 1994
- 2015-
- 2015

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE -

- MAHRI PROTESTORS

SELECT EVENTS

- 1994 North-South Civil War
- 2004-10 Saada Wars
- 2011 Arab Spring in Yemen
- 2014 Houthi Drive to Sanaa
- 2015- Current Yemen War
- 2015 Battle of Aden
- 2017 Death of Ali Abdullah Saleh



HADI GOVERNMENT

Republic of Yemen Government

The government of Yemen has been run by Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi since he was appointed transitional president in 2012, after President Ali Abdullah Saleh resigned following the Arab Spring protests. President Hadi was appointed for a two-year term in an uncontested election as part of a Gulf Cooperation Council-led initiative. His term was then extended by one year to February 2015, but in late January 2015 the Houthis displaced him from power in the capital, Sanaa. He resigned, but then retracted his resignation after fleeing to Aden. Since the war began in March 2015, President Hadi's administration has operated

primarily from Riyadh as the head of the internationally recognized government of Yemen, but he has little domestic legitimacy in either the north or south. Saudi Arabia has led a coalition, which includes U.S. logistical support, to restore Hadi to power in Sanaa. In summer 2015, the UAE provided significant support to push the Houthis out of the south, but the relationship with the Hadi government has soured over UAE support to the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The Hadi government and STC are attempting to patch up their differences through the Saudi-negotiated Riyadh Agreement.



For more on the Hadi government, see Elana DeLozier:

[“UN Panel Highlights Command-and-Control Issues in Yemen”](#) | February 7, 2020

[A Caretaker President Clings to Legitimacy](#)
December 2019

[“In Damning Report, UN Panel Details War Economy in Yemen”](#) | January 25, 2019

SELECT MEMBERS



Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi
President,
Republic of Yemen



Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar
Vice President,
Republic of Yemen



Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed
Prime Minister,
Republic of Yemen



Sultan al-Barakani
Speaker of Parliament,
Republic of Yemen



Abdullah al-Alimi
Director of the Office
of the President,
Republic of Yemen



Nasser Abdu Rabu Hadi
Commander of the
Presidential Protection Forces,
Republic of Yemen



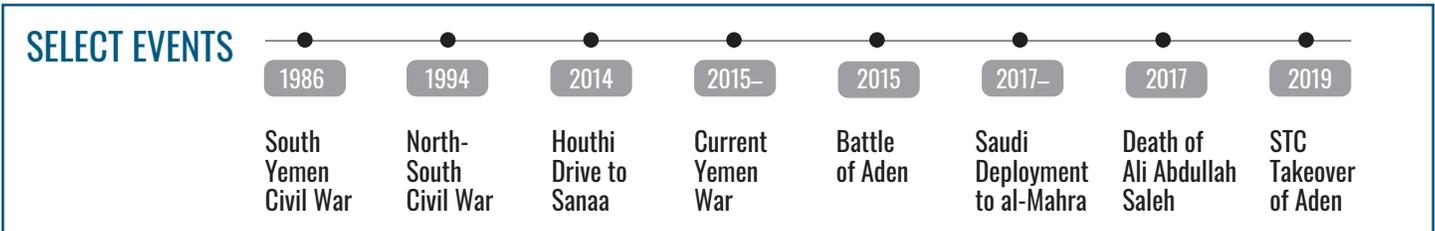
Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak
Ambassador to the
United States,
Republic of Yemen



Ahmed Obeid bin Dagher
Advisor, Office of the
President, Republic of
Yemen; Former Prime
Minister (2016–18)



Rashad al-Alimi
Advisor, Office of the
President, Republic of Yemen



Hadi Government Relationships

ALLIES

ALI MOHSEN

Ali Mohsen has served as vice president in the Hadi administration since 2016. As military men, Hadi and Ali Mohsen served together during the 1994 war and for decades thereafter as members of Saleh's government, but they are not considered close.

1994 2015–

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia supports international recognition of the Hadi government and relies on it to legitimize its use of military force in the current war against the Houthis. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

2015– 2015 2019

FAVORABLE

ISLAH-RIYADH

Islah-Riyadh is the largest Yemeni political party who has supported the legitimacy of the Hadi government. It is represented in Hadi's government, but Hadi does not belong to the Islah-Riyadh party. He is a member of the GPC splinter faction that is aligned with his government. Islah-Riyadh and the Hadi government back the unity of Yemen and oppose the STC.

2015–

COMPLICATED

MAHRI PROTESTORS

The Mahri protest movement publicly supports Hadi's legitimacy and the unity of Yemen. However, some of the protest leaders have expressed frustration with the Hadi government for doing too little to curb the Saudi presence in al-Mahra.

2017–

OMAN

The Hadi government is suspicious of Oman's neutrality since it hosts key Houthis in Muscat and was accused of allowing weapons smuggling to the group. Oman, however, officially recognizes the Hadi government's legitimacy in Yemen.

2015–

SALEH FAMILY

The Saleh family has a tense relationship with Hadi since he dismantled the family's networks after becoming president in 2012. Tariq Saleh switched allegiance to the coalition side in 2017; however, he has ensured his forces report directly to the coalition, not through the Hadi government. Both support maintaining the unity of Yemen.

2015– 2015 2017

UAE

The Hadi government and the UAE are aligned against the Houthis in the current war; however, the UAE has considered the Hadi government dubiously competent, unscrupulous, and too close to Islah for comfort, while the Hadi government has accused the UAE of setting up alternative power centers in the south through the STC and other militias, thus undermining its legitimacy.

2015– 2015 2019

UNFAVORABLE

STC

The Hadi government and the STC are aligned against the Houthis in the current war; however, the two disagree on the future of the south, with the STC supporting secession and the Hadi government supporting unity. Furthermore, while the STC acknowledges the Hadi government as legitimate, it opposes Islah-Riyadh's influence in that government. The two have repeatedly clashed militarily since 2018. The relationship is further soured by latent tensions from the bloody 1986 and 1994 civil wars, in which Hadi and STC leaders were on opposing sides. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

1986 1994 2015– 2015 2019

ADVERSARIES

GPC-SANAA

The GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis in the current war against the Hadi government. Some GPC members defected to the Hadi government's side in the war after the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017.

2015– 2015 2017

HOUTHIS

The Hadi government and Houthis are the main adversaries in the current war, which began in 2015 when the Houthis wrested control of the capital, Sanaa, from the Yemeni government and President Hadi fled first to Aden and eventually to Riyadh.

2014 2015– 2015

IRAN

Iran provides financial, logistical, and materiel support to the Houthis in the war against the Hadi government.

2015–



HOUTHIS

Ansar Allah

The Houthis, or Ansar Allah, represent the followers of the Houthi family from the Saada governorate in northern Yemen who fought a war against the Saleh government from 2004 to 2010, participated in the Arab Spring protests in Sanaa in 2011, and then rallied their forces to eventually take over the capital in 2014–15. The locally rooted rebel movement began in the 1990s as the Believing Youth, a Zaidi (Fiver Islam) revivalist group frustrated by the proliferation of Saudi-backed Salafist schools and the central government’s marginalization of Saada and surrounding areas. The Houthis—a religious family whose members are Hashimi, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad—actively participated in this movement, whose members protested the Yemeni president during his visit to a Saada mosque in 2003, thus sparking the Saada wars, a series of lengthy battles with the Saleh government from 2004 to 2010. The Yemeni military under Ali Mohsen’s command killed Believing Youth leader Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi

in the Saada wars’ early days, which led the Houthi family to assume the mantle of the fight. Saudi Arabia joined the war against the Houthis to protect its border in 2009, until a ceasefire in February 2010. The Houthis then joined the Arab uprising in 2011. In 2014, they marched their armies south with the help of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his GPC allies, overrunning Islahi strongholds and entering Sanaa. Since dislodging the Hadi government, they have taken over governance functions in Sanaa and formed several executive bodies, including the Supreme Revolutionary Council, Supreme Political Council, and a National Salvation Government co-run with the GPC-Sanaa. The source of the Houthis’ power remains local, but Iran boosts their capabilities by supplying weapons, oil, and other forms of support. The Houthis and many of their loyalists are ideologically grounded in Zaidism, a Shia sect that differs from Iran’s Twelver Shia belief system. Much of the Houthi negotiation team resides in Oman.



For more on the Houthis, see Elana DeLozier: [“Houthis Release Their Wish List for Ending the Yemen War”](#) | April 9, 2020

Also see Barbara A. Leaf and Elana DeLozier: [“It’s Time for a Serious Saudi-Houthi Back Channel”](#) War on the Rocks | January 9, 2019

SELECT MEMBERS



Abdulmalik Badr al Din al-Houthi
Leader,
Houthis (Ansar Allah)



Mahdi al-Mashat
President,
Supreme Political
Council



Mohammed Ali al-Houthi
President, Supreme
Revolutionary Committee



Mohammed Abdulsalam
Lead negotiator and
spokesperson,
Houthis (Ansar Allah)



Abdelkarim Amir al-Din al-Houthi
Minister of Interior,
National Salvation
Government



Yahya Badr al-Din al-Houthi
Minister of Education, National
Salvation Government



Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim
Chief of Military
Intelligence Authority,
Houthi Ministry of Defense



Abdulkhaleq Badr al-Din al-Houthi
Houthi Commander,
Central Military Region

Houthis Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ IRAN

Iran provides advisory, logistical, and material backing to the Houthis, such as free oil, media-messaging support, and weapons, including advanced missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles that have allowed the group to hit targets as far afield as Riyadh. The Houthis have appointed an “ambassador” to Iran. The relationship, which dates back at least a decade, has become more entwined over time.

2011 2015–

FAVORABLE ^

^ GPC-SANAA

The GPC-Sanaa is aligned politically with the Houthis. The two actors have relied on each other out of necessity in the current war, but the relationship has never been close since Saleh’s government fought the Houthis in the Saada wars and the Houthis joined the Arab Spring protests. The alliance has become more tense since the Houthis killed Saleh, the GPC leader, in late 2017 and many GPC members defected.

2004–10 2011 2014 2015– 2015

2017

COMPLICATED /

/ MAHRI PROTESTORS

The Mahri protestors and Houthis lack a visible relationship of note; however, they share a strong anti-Saudi, nationalist sentiment and occasionally reference each other in their media and social media. The Mahri protestors support the Hadi government’s legitimacy.

/ OMAN

In the early days of the current war, Oman helped familiarize the Houthis with the broader international system and helped facilitate meetings. Although an important Houthi contingent resides in Muscat and has favorable relations with the government, Oman has taken a neutral stance in the war and officially recognizes the Hadi government on the world stage.

2015–

ADVERSARIES x

x ALI MOHSEN

Ali Mohsen serves as vice president in the Hadi government, which is at war with the Houthis. The Houthis regard Ali Mohsen as the primary offender behind the 2004–10 Saada wars, which intensified after government troops under his command killed the movement’s eventual namesake, Hussein al-Houthi. Upon entering Sanaa in 2014, one of the Houthis’ first targets was Ali Mohsen, who escaped. After Saleh’s death, the Houthis captured his son Mohsen Ali Mohsen.

2004–10 2014 2015–

x HADI GOVERNMENT

The Hadi government and Houthis are the main adversaries in the current war, which began in 2015 when the Houthis wrested control of the capital, Sanaa, from the Yemeni government and President Hadi fled first to Aden and eventually to Riyadh.

2014 2015– 2015

x SALEH FAMILY

The Saleh family and Houthis were allied at the beginning of the current war, but the alliance was always tense because the two had been on opposing sides in the Saada wars. When the Houthis killed family patriarch Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, his nephew Tariq Saleh defected from the Houthi-GPC camp to the coalition. Ahmed Ali Saleh, despite his continued ties to members of the GPC-Sanaa, has condemned the Houthis for killing his father.

2011 2014 2015– 2015 2017

x SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia has backed the Hadi government in the current war against the Houthis, which began in 2015. Previously, it entered the Saleh government’s war with the Houthis in 2009. Meanwhile, the Houthis have for decades resented Saudi Arabia’s backing of Salafist elements in northern Yemen.

2004–10 2015–

x ISLAH-RIYADH

Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party, and the Houthis, a Zaidi (Shia) militia, are ideological and political opponents. Their rivalry is one of the fiercest in Yemen, rooted in the Houthis’ longtime resentment of the Saudi- and Islah-backed proliferation of Sunni ideology, especially Salafism, in northern Zaidi areas of Yemen. Meanwhile, Islah is deeply opposed to what it perceives as the Houthis’ radical ideology. On their drive to Sanaa in 2014, the Houthis explicitly targeted Islah members, detaining and “disappearing” hundreds of them. Today, Islah-Riyadh plays a role in the Hadi government, and its armies are fighting the Houthis.

2004–10 2011 2014 2015–

x STC

The STC is part of the coalition seeking to defeat the Houthis in the current war. Many of the armed units that fought the Houthis when they invaded the south in 2015 are now aligned with the STC. The STC considers the Houthis northern invaders, while the Houthis oppose the STC’s secessionist agenda. Both are vehemently opposed to al-Qaeda.

2015– 2015 2019

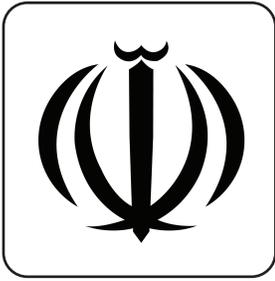
x UAE

Although the UAE [drew down from the war in Yemen in 2019](#), it remains part of the coalition seeking to defeat the Houthis. It sent ground troops and advisors to Yemen to fight the Houthis from 2015 to 2019, and in summer 2015 was critical to ousting the group from the south.

2015– 2015

SELECT EVENTS

- 2004–10 Saada Wars
- 2011 Arab Spring in Yemen
- 2014 Houthi Drive to Sanaa
- 2015– Current Yemen War
- 2015 Battle of Aden
- 2017 Death of Ali Abdullah Saleh
- 2019 STC Takeover of Aden



IRAN

Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran provides financial, logistical, and materiel support to the Houthis in Yemen. Iran and the Houthis are ideologically aligned in their view that the United States and its Gulf allies (e.g., Saudi Arabia and the UAE) along with Israel are the destabilizers in the Middle East. Religiously, Iran and the Houthis adhere to different branches of Shia Islam: Iranians are Twelvers while the Houthis are Fivers (Zaidis). Iranian support to the Houthis predates the current war by a few years, but it has ramped up significantly since the Houthis entered Sanaa in 2014. Its most important and game-changing contribution has been missiles and drones that can reach the capital of Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional adversary. Iran has also provided oil that generates revenue for the Houthi war effort, although

the amount has paled in comparison to the Houthis' domestic revenue sources, such as tax collection and fuel distribution. Moreover, Tehran provides media-messaging support and conceivably other types of advice on military and security matters. Although Iran is not the source of Houthi power, it serves as a critical booster for the group and allows it to target deeper into Saudi territory. It also bears noting that while Iran today wields influence in Yemen primarily through the Houthis, in past decades it consistently reached out to leftists, southern secessionists, and other groups. In fact, some anti-Houthi actors in the conflict today have previously benefited from Iranian sponsorship. Iran often denies reports that it provides certain types of support to Yemeni actors.



For more, see Farzin Nadimi:
[“The UN Exposes Houthi Reliance on Iranian Weapons”](#)
February 13, 2020

See section on Iran in Barbara A. Leaf and Elana DeLozier:
[“It’s Time for a Serious Saudi-Houthi Back Channel”](#)
War on the Rocks | January 9, 2019

Iran Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ HOUTHIS

Iran provides advisory, logistical, and materiel backing to the Houthis, such as free oil, media-messaging support, and weapons, including advanced missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles that have allowed the group to hit targets as far afield as Riyadh. The Houthis have appointed an “ambassador” to Iran. The relationship, which dates back at least a decade, has become more entwined over time.

2011 2015–

COMPLICATED ✂

✂ GPC-SANAA

The GPC-Sanaa tacitly benefits from Iran shoring up the Houthi arsenal, but Iran’s ally and point of contact in Yemen is the Houthis, not the GPC. In fact, Iranian leaders congratulated the Houthis on killing GPC leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, accusing him of turning on the Houthis.

2015–

✂ OMAN

Oman maintains friendly relations with Iran. In the Yemen context, Oman believes the Islamic Republic should participate in the conversation to end the war. The Omanis have hosted a contingent of Iran-backed Houthis in Muscat; however, Oman treats the Hadi administration, not the Houthis, as the internationally recognized government and claims neutrality in the conflict.

ADVERSARIES ✕

✕ ALI MOHSEN

Iran is supporting the Houthis in a war against the Hadi government, which includes Ali Mohsen as its vice president.

✕ HADI GOVERNMENT

Iran provides financial, logistical, and materiel support to the Houthis in the war against the Hadi government.

2015–

✕ ISLAH-RIYADH

Iran is supporting the Houthis in the war against the Hadi government, which includes Islah-Riyadh as a coalition ally.

2015–

✕ SALEH FAMILY

Despite the Houthi-Saleh alliance, Iran primarily backed the Houthis rather than the late president’s camp, and in fact, Iranian leaders congratulated the Houthis when they killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017. The Saleh family is close to the UAE and currently backing those fighting against the Houthis. In the past, the late president Saleh consistently railed against Iranian activities in Yemen.

2015–

✕ SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia and Iran are regional rivals. In the Yemen context, the Saudis lead the military coalition on behalf of the Hadi government against the Iran-backed Houthis.

2015–

✕ STC

The STC is aligned with the coalition against the Iran-backed Houthis; however, some STC members received limited Iranian support prior to this war when they were operating under other southern movement umbrellas.

2015–

✕ UAE

Iran and the UAE have trade and diplomatic ties but a tense bilateral relationship overall. In the Yemen context, the two are adversaries given that the Emirates has fought in the war against the Iran-backed Houthis.

2015–

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE –

– MAHRI PROTESTORS

SELECT EVENTS

- 2011 Arab Spring in Yemen
- 2015– Current Yemen War



ISLAH-RIYADH

Yemeni Congregation for Reform (in Riyadh)

Islah is an Islamist-leaning political party that was established as a counterweight to the southern Yemeni Socialist Party after national unification in 1990. Originally aligned with the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC), it became the main opposition bloc after the mid-2000s. Islah was established by the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the head of the Hashid tribal confederation, who was culturally Zaidi (the Fiver sect of Shia Islam) but doctrinally Sunni. It has become the Sunni Islamist party of Yemen and has traditionally included tribes, businesspeople, Salafists, and the Muslim Brotherhood among its membership. In 2011, during the Arab uprisings, the

party participated in protests against Saleh’s rule. It was then routed by the Houthis in 2014–15 after a longstanding rivalry. The party has long had diverse funding streams, from local as well as foreign sources, and a wide footprint in Yemen. It maintains a dominant political and military presence particularly in Marib and Taiz. The current war has splintered Islah. Several anti-Saudi offshoots of Islah, including some with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, reside in Turkey, Oman, and elsewhere; however, the party’s core leadership to which this project refers has been based in Riyadh since the current war began and is represented in Hadi’s government.

SELECT MEMBERS



Mohammed Abdullah al-Yadoumi
Chairperson,
Islah Party



Abdulwahab Ahmed al-Ansi
Secretary-General,
Islah Party



Abdullah bin Ali Saatar
Religious Figure;
Member, High
Committee of Islah Party



Mohammed Nasser al-Hazmi
Religious Figure;
Member of Parliament
(Islah Party)



Islah-Riyadh Relationships

FAVORABLE ^

^ ALI MOHSEN

Ali Mohsen was an early member of the GPC, a political ally of Islah until the mid-2000s but thereafter an opponent. He has developed relationships in both parties over decades, including with the Muslim Brotherhood wing of Islah. In 2011, he defected from Saleh's GPC camp to support the Arab uprising, which included Islah. He now serves as vice president in the Hadi government, which includes Islah-Riyadh in its political and military ranks, but he continues to cite a GPC Party affiliation.

1994 2004–10 2011 2015–

^ HADI GOVERNMENT

Islah-Riyadh is the largest Yemeni political party who has supported the legitimacy of the Hadi government. It is represented in Hadi's government, but Hadi does not belong to the Islah-Riyadh party. He is a member of the GPC splinter faction that is aligned with his government. Islah-Riyadh and the Hadi government back the unity of Yemen and oppose the STC.

2015–

^ SAUDI ARABIA

The core Islah party leadership supports the coalition and resides primarily in Riyadh. Many Islahi figures have long benefited from Saudi patronage. Yet local Islahi actors in Yemen do not always operate in line with Saudi objectives. Moreover, Saudi Arabia may harbor concerns about lingering Islahi sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a designated terrorist group in the kingdom.

2015–

COMPLICATED

^ OMAN

Islah-Riyadh follows the lead of its host country, Saudi Arabia. Oman's hosting and facilitation of the Houthis and other Islahi factions serves as a point of contention and suspicion for Islah-Riyadh members despite Oman's claims of neutrality.

2015–

UNFAVORABLE v

v MAHRI PROTESTORS

The Mahri protestors are deeply suspicious of and opposed to any form of Salafism. As a result, they oppose Islah's Islamist party platform. Given their conflict with Saudi Arabia in al-Mahra, they also oppose Islah-Riyadh's pro-Saudi stance. Yet the two share an adversary in the STC.

v UAE

The two both fight on the side of the coalition against the Houthis. However, the UAE, which is virulently anti-Muslim Brotherhood, views Islah in Yemen with great suspicion given that its political base has long included the Brotherhood. Islah-Riyadh has [unsuccessfully](#) tried on occasion to reconcile with the UAE.

2015–

ADVERSARIES x

x GPC-SANAA

As opposing political parties, the GPC and Islah are rivals in Yemen. The 2011 Arab Spring protests and the 2015 war further entrenched divisions that began to take shape in the mid-2000s. In the current war, Islah-Riyadh sides with the coalition while the GPC-Sanaa is politically aligned with the Houthis.

2011 2015–

x HOUTHIS

Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party, and the Houthis, a Zaidi (Shia) militia, are ideological and political opponents. Their rivalry is one of the fiercest in Yemen, rooted in the Houthis' longtime resentment of the Saudi- and Islah-backed proliferation of Sunni ideology, especially Salafism, in northern Zaidi areas of Yemen. Meanwhile, Islah is deeply opposed to what it perceives as the Houthis' radical ideology. On their drive to Sanaa in 2014, the Houthis explicitly targeted Islah members, detaining and "disappearing" hundreds of them. Today, Islah-Riyadh plays a role in the Hadi government, and its armies are fighting the Houthis.

2004–10 2011 2014 2015–

x IRAN

Iran is supporting the Houthis in the war against the Hadi government, which includes Islah-Riyadh as a coalition ally.

2015–

x SALEH FAMILY

Islah was a key opposition party participating in the 2011 Arab Spring protests that ultimately led to the removal of Ali Abdullah Saleh, and eventually his family, from power. Islah blames the Saleh family for the crackdown on protestors, while the Saleh family blames Islah, among others, for the collapse of its rule in Yemen.

2011

x STC

The Islamist Islah and secessionist STC are fierce rivals, with the former accusing the latter of undermining national unity and the latter claiming the former gives cover to terrorists. Originally formed after the 1990 North-South unification, Islah was fashioned as an Islamist political party to counter the socialist political blocs of the south. In 1994, Islah-aligned militias participated in the war against the southern secessionists, many of whom are now aligned with the STC. Although both groups belong to the anti-Houthi coalition today, Islah- and STC-aligned militias have regularly and violently fought each other in the south during the current war.

1994 2015– 2019



MAHRI PROTESTORS

Al-Mahra Governorate Peaceful Sit-In Organizing Committee

When Saudi Arabia deployed forces to Yemen’s al-Mahra governorate in 2017 ostensibly to counter smuggling from Iran to the Houthis over the Omani border, a group of Oman-backed protestors rose up against what they perceived as a Saudi occupation. Their demands primarily center on ending the Saudi military presence in the governorate and expelling the UAE from the south, including Socotra. The group is strongly nationalist, insular, and against foreign interference based on the area’s historic independence until 1967, when the sultanate comprising al-Mahra and Socotra was absorbed violently into communist South Yemen. This memory has left a lingering distrust of southern secessionist ambitions, as represented by the Southern

Transitional Council (STC). Officially named the al-Mahra Governorate Peaceful Sit-In Organizing Committee, the movement is fronted by Gen. Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, a former deputy governor. He is a polarizing figure, accused by some of participating in smuggling activities and praised by others for his commanding presence and respect from some local tribes. The protestors are supported by Oman, which has traditionally viewed the area as part of its sphere of influence—long providing economic and humanitarian support. Although the sultanate is uncomfortable with such a large Saudi presence on its border, it discourages armed struggle. Despite this, skirmishes between the protestors and the Saudi forces occur on occasion.



For more on the situation in al-Mahra, see Elana DeLozier: [“Challenges Await Oman’s New Sultan as Mourning Period Ends”](#) | February 20, 2020

SELECT MEMBERS



Gen. Ali Salem al-Hurayzi
Former Deputy for Desert Affairs, al-Mahra Governorate (and effective leader of the movement)



Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud al-Muhari Qumsayt
Deputy Head, al-Mahra Governorate Peaceful Sit-In Organizing Committee



Sheikh Mohamed Barakat Samouda al-Mahri
Tribal Leader, al-Mahra Governorate



Hamza Khodam
Head of the Organizational Body, al-Mahra Governorate Peaceful Sit-In Organizing Committee



Sheikh Amer Saad Ali Kilshat
Head, al-Mahra Governorate Peaceful Sit-In Organizing Committee



Ahmed Mohammed Qahtan
Former Director of General Security, al-Mahra Governorate



Sheikh Issa bin Salem bin Yaqout
Tribal Leader, Socotra Governorate



Sultan Abdullah bin Issa al-Afrar
Chairperson, General Council of the People of al-Mahra and Socotra (but who protests in his private capacity)

Mahri Protestors Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ OMAN

The Mahri protestors have a [strong relationship with Oman](#). Many carry Omani passports along with their Yemeni ones. Oman continues to provide support to those individuals who form the backbone of the protest movement but has rebuffed requests to supply resources that would contribute to more armed conflict.

2017–

COMPLICATED ↗

↗ HADI GOVERNMENT

The Mahri protest movement publicly supports Hadi's legitimacy and the unity of Yemen. However, some of the protest leaders have expressed frustration with the Hadi government for doing too little to curb the Saudi presence in al-Mahra.

2017–

↗ HOUTHIS

The Mahri protestors and Houthis lack a visible relationship of note; however, they share a strong anti-Saudi, nationalist sentiment and occasionally reference each other in their media and social media. The Mahri protestors support the Hadi government's legitimacy.

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE –

– ALI MOHSEN

– GPC-SANAA

– IRAN

– SALEH FAMILY

UNFAVORABLE ∨

∨ ISLAH-RIYADH

The Mahri protestors are deeply suspicious of and opposed to any form of Salafism. As a result, they oppose Islah's Islamist party platform. Given their conflict with Saudi Arabia in al-Mahra, they also oppose Islah-Riyadh's pro-Saudi stance. Yet the two share an adversary in the STC.

ADVERSARIES ×

× SAUDI ARABIA

Since Saudi Arabia's military entered al-Mahra governorate in 2017, the protest movement has viewed it as an occupier. Encounters have, on occasion, turned violent. Saudi statements suggest the protest leaders are [obstructing countersmuggling efforts](#). The protestors, in turn, question Saudi intentions, arguing that the kingdom's forces are more numerous than would be necessary for countersmuggling operations.

2017–

× STC

The Mahri protestors are strongly opposed to the STC and its secessionist ambitions, especially given their brutal experience in the post-1967 period in al-Mahra and Socotra, and they do not believe the group represents the entire south.

2015–

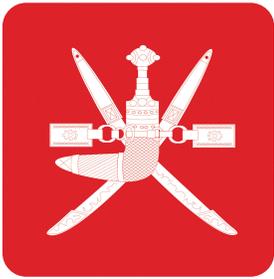
× UAE

Before the Saudi presence in al-Mahra, the Mahri protestors were fiercely against the UAE presence and its desire to create a "Mahri Elite Force." They remain strongly critical and suspicious of the UAE and its support to the STC.

2015–

SELECT EVENTS

- 2015– Current Yemen War
- 2017– Saudi Deployment to al-Mahra



OMAN

Sultanate of Oman

Oman maintains friendly relations with all actors in Yemen and its neighbors. It refused to join the GCC-led anti-Houthi campaign in 2015, instead remaining neutral and continuing to recognize the legitimacy of the Hadi government. As is common practice in Omani history, it has given refuge to Yemeni actors, including in some cases paying a monthly stipend for their living expenses. As a result of Oman's openness, a number of anti-Saudi and anti-UAE delegations have decided to base themselves in Muscat, including contingents of Houthis, Islahis, and Mahris. In the war's early days,

Oman provided capacity-building mentorship to the Houthis. Oman, which maintains a positive relationship with Iran, has been dogged by allegations that it turned a blind eye to Iran's sending weapons to the Houthis over its border with Yemen. Muscat has vehemently denied the allegations. Because Oman is friendly with most actors as well as their adversaries, its relationships are broadly listed as complicated; the exception is the Mahris, including the protestors, with whom the Omanis have a deeper relationship based on history and location.



For more on Oman's interests in Yemen, see Elana DeLozier:

["Challenges Await Oman's New Sultan as Mourning Period Ends"](#) | *February 20, 2020*

Oman Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ MAHRI PROTESTORS

The Mahri protestors have a [strong relationship with Oman](#). Many carry Omani passports along with their Yemeni ones. Oman continues to provide support to those individuals who form the backbone of the protest movement but has rebuffed requests to supply resources that would contribute to more armed conflict.

2017–

COMPLICATED /

/ GPC-SANAA

Although some individuals linked to the GPC-Sanaa camp reside in Muscat and have favorable relations with Oman, the Omani government has taken a neutral stance in the Yemen war and officially recognizes the Hadi government.

/ HADI GOVERNMENT

The Hadi government is suspicious of Oman's neutrality since it hosts key Houthis in Muscat and was accused of allowing weapons smuggling to the group. Oman, however, officially recognizes the Hadi government's legitimacy in Yemen.

2015–

/ HOUTHIS

In the early days of the current war, Oman helped familiarize the Houthis with the broader international system and helped facilitate meetings. Although an important Houthi contingent resides in Muscat and has favorable relations with the government, Oman has taken a neutral stance in the war and officially recognizes the Hadi government on the world stage.

2015–

/ IRAN

Oman maintains friendly relations with Iran. In the Yemen context, Oman believes the Islamic Republic should participate in the conversation to end the war. The Omanis have hosted a contingent of Iran-backed Houthis in Muscat; however, Oman treats the Hadi administration, not the Houthis, as the internationally recognized government and claims neutrality in the conflict.

/ ISLAH-RIYADH

Islah-Riyadh follows the lead of its host country, Saudi Arabia. Oman's hosting and facilitation of the Houthis and other Islahi factions serves as a point of contention and suspicion for Islah-Riyadh members despite Oman's claims of neutrality and claims neutrality in the conflict.

2015–

/ SAUDI ARABIA

Oman and Saudi Arabia are co-members of the GCC and frequently consult on regional issues, including Yemen. Tensions inevitably exist over Oman's friendly relationship with Iran, which backs the Houthis, and its support to the Mahris, who protest Saudi Arabia's presence on the Oman-Yemen border. Oman did not join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and has instead claimed neutrality in the war.

2015–

2017–

/ STC

Although the STC has previously praised Oman, and some STC members have a good relationship with Muscat, Oman is likely nervous about the group's pro-secession desires. Moreover, Oman supports the Mahri protestors, who are broadly against the STC.

/ UAE

Oman and the UAE are co-members of the GCC. Yet the UAE, like Saudi Arabia, is suspicious of Omani neutrality because Muscat hosts the Houthis and has been accused of turning a blind eye to weapons smuggling to them. Oman is suspicious of the UAE's support to the secessionist STC. The mutual wariness extends beyond Yemen, although the countries remain publicly friendly.

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE –

– ALI MOHSEN

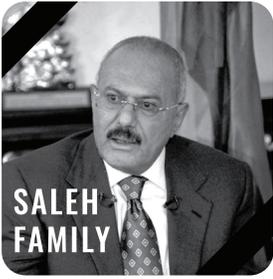
Because Ali Mohsen is part of the Hadi government, see the Hadi government–Oman relationship.

– SALEH FAMILY

Although no formal relationship exists, the Omani government, following its common practice, helped secure the release of Saleh family members from Houthi capture and granted them refuge in Muscat after the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017.

SELECT EVENTS

- 2015– Current Yemen War
- 2017– Saudi Deployment to al-Mahra



SALEH FAMILY

Family of the late Ali Abdullah Saleh

The Saleh family refers to well-known and engaged family members of the late Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled Yemen from 1978 to 2012. The most prominent members are Saleh’s son Ahmed Ali Saleh, who has no public role in the current war but retains ties with individuals in the General People’s Congress (GPC) in Sanaa, and Saleh’s nephews Tariq and Ammar Saleh, who are fighting the Houthis on the Red Sea coast under the Saudi-led coalition’s Joint Command. The family was originally aligned with the Houthis in the current war, until the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017. Tariq publicly defected to the coalition side, strengthening his ties with the UAE in particular.

Ahmed was sanctioned by the United Nations and United States in 2015, leading to his removal as Yemen’s ambassador to the UAE, but he has remained in the Emirates. Although ostensibly under close watch in Abu Dhabi, he—like Tariq—has been seen at high-profile events alongside senior UAE leaders, including Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed. Despite occasional complications, the family remains mostly aligned in its views toward other actors in Yemen and is, therefore, treated as a single entity in this project. Like other founding GPC members, the Saleh family would like to see the party rebuilt in the aftermath of the war.

SELECT MEMBERS



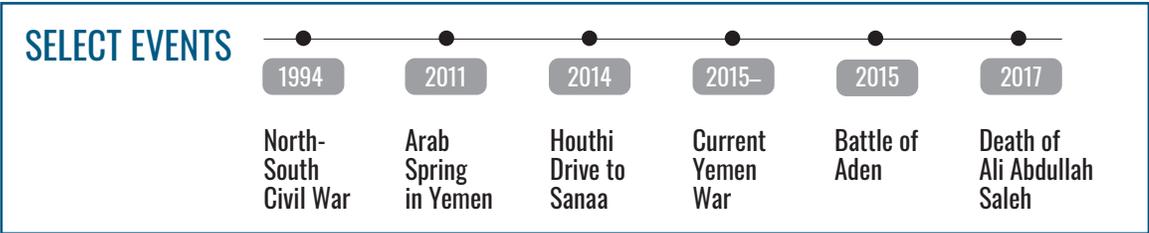
Ahmed Ali Saleh
Son of Ali Abdullah Saleh



Tariq Mohammed Saleh
Nephew of Ali Abdullah Saleh; Commander, Guards of the Republic and the National Resistance Forces



Ammar Mohammed Saleh
Nephew of Ali Abdullah Saleh; Former Deputy Director of the National Security Bureau



Saleh Family Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ UAE

The UAE has evidently kept Ahmed Ali Saleh, who is sanctioned by the United States and United Nations, under close watch since 2015; however, several photos suggest a close relationship with the UAE leadership. The UAE also has close relations with Tariq Saleh, whom the country has actively groomed to be a military leader in Yemen since he defected from the Houthi-GPC camp.

2015– 2015

FAVORABLE ^

^ SAUDI ARABIA

Tariq Saleh has an increasingly close relationship with Saudi Arabia, and his forces operate under the Saudi-led coalition's Joint Command. Ahmed does not have the same close relationship with the Saudis at present. Until the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, the family fought against the coalition in the war.

2015–

COMPLICATED ✂

✂ GPC-SANAA

Even after the Houthis killed GPC leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, the GPC-Sanaa has remained tensely allied with them. Saleh family members such as nephew Tariq Saleh defected from the Houthi-GPC camp to join the coalition against the Houthis. Yet Saleh's son Ahmed Ali Saleh retains contacts in the party, and in 2019 the GPC-Sanaa nominated him as party vice president. Although he neither accepted nor declined the offer, the Saleh family remains committed to the return of a unified GPC.

2015– 2017

HADI GOVERNMENT

The Saleh family has a tense relationship with Hadi since he dismantled the family's networks after becoming president in 2012. Tariq Saleh switched allegiance to the coalition side in 2017; however, he has ensured his forces report directly to the coalition, not through the Hadi government. Both support maintaining the unity of Yemen.

2015– 2015 2017

STC

To many STC members, the Saleh family represents northern dominance given its role in the 1994 north-south civil war and the 2015 invasion of the south by the Houthi-GPC camp. The Saleh family defected from the Houthi side in 2017 and now, like the STC, has close relations with the UAE. Moreover, Tariq Saleh and the STC both distrust Hadi, but the Saleh family supports unity while the STC supports secession.

1994 2015

UNFAVORABLE ∨

∨ ALI MOHSEN

Ali Mohsen served as the preeminent military commander in the Saleh administration for decades. He defected from Saleh's camp to join the Arab uprising in 2011, formalizing a rivalry that had emerged with the family years earlier. Although Tariq Saleh defected to the coalition camp after the Houthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, thus aligning him in the war with Ali Mohsen, personal animosity remains between the family and Ali Mohsen.

2011

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE –

– MAHRI PROTESTORS

ADVERSARIES ×

× HOUTHIS

The Saleh family and Houthis were allied at the beginning of the current war, but the alliance was always tense because the two had been on opposing sides in the Saada wars. When the Houthis killed family patriarch Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, his nephew Tariq Saleh defected from the Houthi-GPC camp to the coalition. Ahmed Ali Saleh, despite his continued ties to members of the GPC-Sanaa, has condemned the Houthis for killing his father.

2011 2014 2015– 2015 2017

× IRAN

Despite the Houthi-Saleh alliance, Iran primarily backed the Houthis rather than the late president's camp, and in fact, Iranian leaders congratulated the Houthis when they killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017. The Saleh family is close to the UAE and currently backing those fighting against the Houthis. In the past, the late president Saleh consistently railed against Iranian activities in Yemen.

2015–

× ISLAH-RIYADH

Islah was a key opposition party participating in the 2011 Arab Spring protests that ultimately led to the removal of Ali Abdullah Saleh, and eventually his family, from power. Islah blames the Saleh family for the crackdown on protestors, while the Saleh family blames Islah, among others, for the collapse of its rule in Yemen.

2011

– OMAN

Although no formal relationship exists, the Omani government, following its common practice, helped secure the release of Saleh family members from Houthi capture and granted them refuge in Muscat after the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017.



SAUDI ARABIA

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

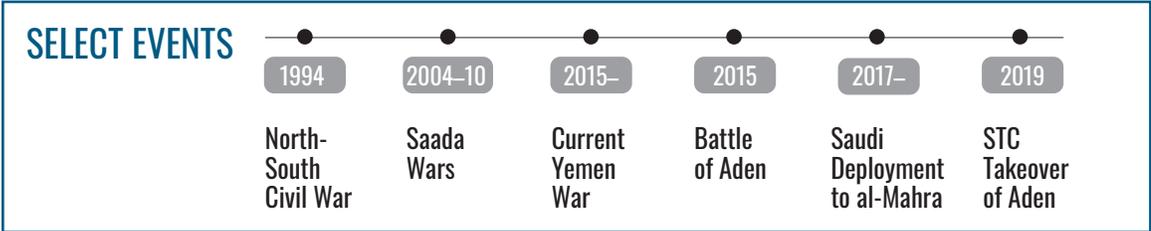
For most of the latter half of the twentieth century, the Saudis used largesse to mollify and coopt tribes in Yemen, primarily in the north. From the 1970s on, the kingdom also supported the proliferation of Salafist schools in northern Yemen, catalyzing a set of grievances among Zaidi families such as the Houthis that, among other reasons, led to the Saada wars of 2004–10. In 2009, the Saudis entered the Saada wars, remaining active until the next year’s ceasefire. In 2011, when the Arab Spring swept Yemen, Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners developed a transition plan that saw then president Ali Abdullah Saleh removed from power and Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi installed as a transitional president. This

transition plan fell apart when the Houthis entered the capital in September 2014. On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia launched its military efforts in Yemen, having formed a coalition to back the Yemeni government in countering the Houthi takeover. The coalition included several GCC states, particularly the UAE, as well as the United States and Britain. Most GCC states have since withdrawn from the war, excepting small contingents, and the United States has adjusted its support to the coalition over time. Saudi Arabia is increasingly at the helm of several negotiations in Yemen, including intermittent direct talks with the Houthis and dealmaking to end fighting between the Hadi government and Southern Transitional Council.



For more on Saudi Arabia’s role in Yemen, see Elana DeLozier (the July article coauthored with Zied Bouchlaghem): [“Riyadh Agreement Redux: Political Gains Still Dogged by Implementation Concerns”](#) | July 30, 2020

[“Saudi Leverage Not Enough to Achieve Peace in Yemen”](#)
April 29, 2020



Saudi Arabia Relationships

ALLIES

ALI MOHSEN

Ali Mohsen and Saudi Arabia are fighting on the same side of the war against the Houthis, as they did in the 2004–10 Saada wars. Ali Mohsen resides in Riyadh and is close to the Saudis, despite his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and alignment with the Arab uprising protestors in 2011.

2004–10 2015–

HADI GOVERNMENT

Saudi Arabia supports international recognition of the Hadi government and relies on it to legitimize its use of military force in the current war against the Houthis. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

2015– 2015 2019

UAE

Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain allies publicly, despite tensions that arose from the Emirates' [unilateral 2019 drawdown in Yemen](#). The two states have prioritized their support differently in Yemen, with the UAE primarily backing the STC and affiliated forces and Saudi Arabia primarily backing the Hadi government. The UAE has supported Saudi-led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

2015– 2015 2019

FAVORABLE

SALEH FAMILY

Tariq Saleh has an increasingly close relationship with Saudi Arabia, and his forces operate under the Saudi-led coalition's Joint Command. Ahmed does not have the same close relationship with the Saudis at present. Until the death of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2017, the family fought against the coalition in the war.

2015–

ISLAH-RIYADH

The core Islah party leadership supports the coalition and resides primarily in Riyadh. Many Islahi figures have long benefited from Saudi patronage. Yet local Islahi actors in Yemen do not always operate in line with Saudi objectives. Moreover, Saudi Arabia may harbor concerns about lingering Islahi sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a designated terrorist group in the kingdom.

2015–

STC

The Saudis and STC have generally had good relations, with the STC forming part of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis. The STC is particularly keen on maintaining a good relationship with Saudi Arabia, although the STC–Hadi government conflict has strained ties on occasion. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

1994 2015– 2015 2019

COMPLICATED

OMAN

Oman and Saudi Arabia are co-members of the GCC and frequently consult on regional issues, including Yemen. Tensions inevitably exist over Oman's friendly relationship with Iran, which backs the Houthis, and its support to the Mahris, who protest Saudi Arabia's presence on the Oman-Yemen border. Oman did not join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and has instead claimed neutrality in the war.

2015– 2017–

ADVERSARIES

GPC-SANAA

The GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis as an adversary against the Saudi-led coalition in the current war. In the past, key GPC figures have been part of Saudi patronage networks.

2015– 2015

HOUTHIS

Saudi Arabia has backed the Hadi government in the current war against the Houthis, which began in 2015. Previously, it entered the Saleh government's war with the Houthis in 2009. Meanwhile, the Houthis have for decades resented Saudi Arabia's backing of Salafist elements in northern Yemen.

2004–10 2015–

IRAN

Saudi Arabia and Iran are regional rivals. In the Yemen context, the Saudis lead the military coalition on behalf of the Hadi government against the Iran-backed Houthis.

2015–

MAHRI PROTESTORS

Since Saudi Arabia's military entered al-Mahra governorate in 2017, the protest movement has viewed it as an occupier. Encounters have, on occasion, turned violent. Saudi statements suggest the protest leaders are [obstructing countersmuggling efforts](#). The protestors, in turn, question Saudi intentions, arguing that the kingdom's forces are more numerous than would be necessary for countersmuggling operations.

2017–



SOUTHERN TRANSITIONAL COUNCIL

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) was established by Aidarous al-Zubaidi in 2017, shortly after he was ousted as governor of Aden by President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi. The group seeks to establish an independent southern state. Although the council is a new entity, some societal segments that supported other southern independence movements now back the STC, along with some former General People’s Congress (GPC) members, Yemeni Socialist Party members, Salafists, and others. Many members do not identify as separatists, arguing that the north broke its promises during unification in the 1990s and that the southern declaration of independence in 1994 should stand.

In their view, the north is occupying the south. The armed groups affiliated with the STC grew out of popular resistance committees that arose locally to fight AQAP and the Houthis. The STC fights alongside the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis, but its training and funding have primarily come from the UAE, where its leadership resides. Its political wing represents the most powerful independence movement in southern Yemen today and has wide appeal in southwest Yemen, particularly in Aden, Dhale, Lahij, and western Abyan governorates, but its appeal is not universal across the south. The government broadly sees the STC as a threat to its legitimacy and has sparred militarily with it.



For more on the STC, especially its relationship with the Hadi government, see Elana DeLozier (the July article coauthored with Zied Bouchlaghem):

[“Riyadh Agreement Redux: Political Gains Still Dogged by Implementation Concerns”](#)
July 30, 2020

[“Riyadh Agreement Delivers Political Gains in Yemen, But Implementation Less Certain”](#)
November 5, 2019

[“Houthis Kill Top UAE-Backed Separatist Yemeni Commander”](#)
August 1, 2019

SELECT MEMBERS



Aidarous al-Zubaidi
President, STC



Hani bin Brek
Vice President, STC



Ahmed Saeed bin Brek
Chairperson, STC National Assembly; Former President of the Self-Administration Committee for the South



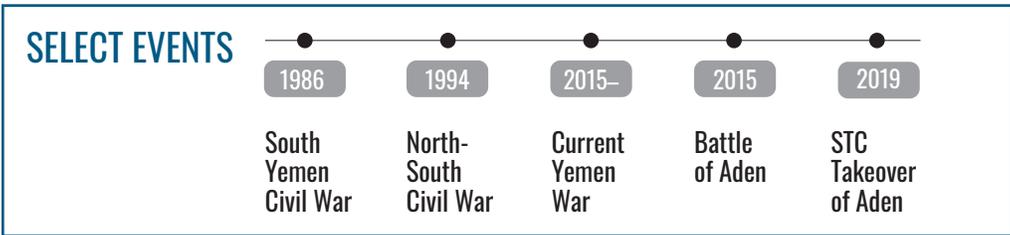
Nasser Mohammed Thabet al-Khobeiji
Member, STC Presidium; Head of Negotiation Affairs Unit



Ahmed Hamed Lamlas
Governor, Aden; Secretary-General, STC Presidium



Amr Ali Salem al-Beidh
Member, STC Presidium



STC Relationships

ALLIES

UAE

Since the STC's founding in 2017, the UAE has heavily supported the council, including with funding and residence in Abu Dhabi for its leadership. Moreover, the UAE has backed the STC's armed units in their fight against the Houthis and AQAP. Many of these units predated the conflict as popular committees or resistance groups. The UAE has modified aspects of its support since its drawdown from the Yemen war in 2019.

2015– 2015 2019

FAVORABLE

SAUDI ARABIA

The Saudis and STC have generally had good relations, with the STC forming part of the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis. The STC is particularly keen on maintaining a good relationship with Saudi Arabia, although the STC–Hadi government conflict has strained ties on occasion. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

1994 2015– 2015 2019

COMPLICATED

OMAN

Although the STC has previously praised Oman, and some STC members have a good relationship with Muscat, Oman is likely nervous about the group's pro-secession desires. Moreover, Oman supports the Mahri protestors, who are broadly against the STC.

SALEH FAMILY

To many STC members, the Saleh family represents northern dominance given its role in the 1994 north-south civil war and the 2015 invasion of the south by the Houthi-GPC camp. The Saleh family defected from the Houthi side in 2017 and now, like the STC, has close relations with the UAE. Moreover, Tariq Saleh and the STC both distrust Hadi, but the Saleh family supports unity while the STC supports secession.

1994 2015

UNFAVORABLE

HADI GOVERNMENT

The Hadi government and the STC are aligned against the Houthis in the current war; however, the two disagree on the future of the south, with the STC supporting secession and the Hadi government supporting unity. Furthermore, while the STC acknowledges the Hadi government as legitimate, it opposes Islah-Riyadh's influence in that government. The two have repeatedly clashed militarily since 2018. The relationship is further soured by latent tensions from the bloody 1986 and 1994 civil wars, in which Hadi and STC leaders were on opposing sides. Since 2019, Saudi Arabia has led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

1986 1994 2015– 2015 2019

ADVERSARIES

ALI MOHSEN

The STC includes a number of southern secessionists who fought in the 1994 civil war against the armies under Ali Mohsen's command. The STC regularly accuses Ali Mohsen of overcloseness to Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood and of having ties to terrorism. Although Ali Mohsen and the STC are aligned against the Houthis, personal animosities run deeper than their common cause.

1994 2015– 2019

GPC-SANAA

The two are adversaries in the current war since the GPC in Sanaa is aligned with the Houthis while the STC is part of the anti-Houthi coalition. The 1994 civil war—when the GPC-led government defeated the southern separatists, many of whom are now part of the STC—remains in their collective memory.

1994 2015– 2015

HOUTHIS

The STC is part of the coalition seeking to defeat the Houthis in the current war. Many of the armed units that fought the Houthis when they invaded the south in 2015 are now aligned with the STC. The STC considers the Houthis northern invaders, while the Houthis oppose the STC's secessionist agenda. Both are vehemently opposed to al-Qaeda.

2015– 2015 2019

IRAN

The STC is aligned with the coalition against the Iran-backed Houthis; however, some STC members received limited Iranian support prior to this war when they were operating under other southern movement umbrellas.

2015–

ISLAH-RIYADH

The Islamist Islah and secessionist STC are fierce rivals, with the former accusing the latter of undermining national unity and the latter claiming the former gives cover to terrorists. Originally formed after the 1990 North-South unification, Islah was fashioned as an Islamist political party to counter the socialist political blocs of the south. In 1994, Islah-aligned militias participated in the war against the southern secessionists, many of whom are now aligned with the STC. Although both groups belong to the anti-Houthi coalition today, Islah- and STC-aligned militias have regularly and violently fought each other in the south during the current war.

1994 2015– 2019

MAHRI PROTESTORS

The Mahri protestors are strongly opposed to the STC and its secessionist ambitions, especially given their brutal experience in the post-1967 period in al-Mahra and Socotra, and they do not believe the group represents the entire south.

2015–



UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In March 2015, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed Saudi Arabia into the Yemen war to counter the Houthi occupation of Sanaa and the takeover of the government. In the war in Yemen, the UAE assisted with coalition airstrikes in the north, but its primary effort was focused in the south. The UAE and the forces it backed were largely responsible for driving the Houthis out of Aden and AQAP out of al-Mukalla in 2015 and 2016. The Emiratis then turned their efforts to building or supporting anti-Houthi and counterterrorism forces in southern Yemen—these UAE-backed forces eventually included the Security Belt forces, the Amaleqa Brigades, the Hadrami and Shabwani Elite Forces, and the Guards of the Republic, among others. Some of those forces are now linked to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was formed in 2017, while others—such as Tariq Saleh’s Guards of the Republic—are not. The UAE has avoided ties to any Islahi groups in Yemen. Although

the UAE has never espoused a pro-secession view, its enduring decision to support the pro-secession STC often puts it at odds with the Hadi government. Moreover, the UAE leadership began actively supporting Tariq Saleh’s operations on the Red Sea coast after he defected from the Houthi-GPC camp. Having revoked Ahmed Ali Saleh’s ambassadorship and put limitations on his movements and activities in April 2015, Abu Dhabi appears to have now eased the restrictions, with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed even appearing in photos with him. In 2019, the UAE drew down from its Yemen operations and now claims to be involved only in counterterrorism operations and protecting the Red Sea coast. The UAE’s ruling family has a strong affinity for Yemen, as evidenced by the UAE’s founding father, Sheikh Zayed, famously saying his ancestral home was in Marib. Moreover, many Yemenis live in the UAE, with key Yemeni merchant families using Dubai as a trade hub.



For more on the UAE’s drawdown in Yemen, see Elana DeLozier: [“UAE Drawdown May Isolate Saudi Arabia in Yemen”](#) | July 2, 2019

UAE Relationships

ALLIES ◇

◇ SALEH FAMILY

The UAE has evidently kept Ahmed Ali Saleh, who is sanctioned by the United States and United Nations, under close watch since 2015; however, several photos suggest a close relationship with the UAE leadership. The UAE also has close relations with Tariq Saleh, whom the country has actively groomed to be a military leader in Yemen since he defected from the Houthis-GPC camp.

2015– 2015

◇ SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain allies publicly, despite tensions that arose from the Emirates' [unilateral 2019 drawdown in Yemen](#). The two states have prioritized their support differently in Yemen, with the UAE primarily backing the STC and affiliated forces and Saudi Arabia primarily backing the Hadi government. The UAE has supported Saudi-led negotiations to stop the fighting between the Hadi government and the STC.

2015– 2015 2019

◇ STC

Since the STC's founding in 2017, the UAE has heavily supported the council, including with funding and residence in Abu Dhabi for its leadership. Moreover, the UAE has backed the STC's armed units in their fight against the Houthis and AQAP. Many of these units predated the conflict as popular committees or resistance groups. The UAE has modified aspects of its support since its drawdown from the Yemen war in 2019.

2015– 2015 2019

SELECT EVENTS

- 2015– Current Yemen War
- 2015 Battle of Aden
- 2019 STC Takeover of Aden

COMPLICATED ✓

✓ HADI GOVERNMENT

The Hadi government and the UAE are aligned against the Houthis in the current war; however, the UAE has considered the Hadi government dubiously competent, unscrupulous, and too close to Islah for comfort, while the Hadi government has accused the UAE of setting up alternative power centers in the south through the STC and other militias, thus undermining its legitimacy.

2015– 2015 2019

✓ OMAN

Oman and the UAE are co-members of the GCC. Yet the UAE, like Saudi Arabia, is suspicious of Omani neutrality because Muscat hosts the Houthis and has been accused of turning a blind eye to weapons smuggling to them. Oman is suspicious of the UAE's support to the secessionist STC. The mutual wariness extends beyond Yemen, although the countries remain publicly friendly.

UNFAVORABLE ∨

∨ ALI MOHSEN

The UAE distrusts Ali Mohsen due to his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which it reviles, and Islah. That said, the UAE notionally supports the coalition, of which Ali Mohsen is part.

2015–

∨ GPC-SANAA

The UAE and the GPC-Sanaa are adversaries in the war in Yemen. Yet individuals who maintain contacts in the Sanaa-based party occasionally visit the UAE, and the Emirati leadership has maintained a relationship with Ahmed Ali Saleh, who has ties to the GPC-Sanaa.

2015– 2015

∨ ISLAH-RIYADH

The two both fight on the side of the coalition against the Houthis. However, the UAE, which is virulently anti-Muslim Brotherhood, views Islah in Yemen with great suspicion given that its political base has long included the Brotherhood. Islah-Riyadh has [unsuccessfully](#) tried on occasion to reconcile with the UAE.

2015–

ADVERSARIES ×

× HOUTHIS

Although the UAE [drew down from the war in Yemen in 2019](#), it remains part of the coalition seeking to defeat the Houthis. It sent ground troops and advisors to Yemen to fight the Houthis from 2015 to 2019, and in summer 2015 was critical to ousting the group from the south.

2015– 2015

× IRAN

Iran and the UAE have trade and diplomatic ties but a tense bilateral relationship overall. In the Yemen context, the two are adversaries given that the Emirates has fought in the war against the Iran-backed Houthis.

2015–

× MAHRI PROTESTORS

Before the Saudi presence in al-Mahra, the Mahri protestors were fiercely against the UAE presence and its desire to create a "Mahri Elite Force." They remain strongly critical and suspicious of the UAE and its support to the STC.

2015–

SELECT EVENTS

1986

SOUTH YEMEN CIVIL WAR

In January 1986, two rival factions of South Yemen's ruling Yemeni Socialist Party engaged in a two-week civil war that killed thousands. The Zumra faction comprised members primarily from Abyan and Shabwa governorates, while the Tughma faction was mostly from Lahij and al-Dhale governorates. The fighting was sparked when the Zumra faction, led by then president Ali Nasser Mohammad, opened fire on its Tughma rivals during a politburo meeting and the violence subsequently spilled into the streets. But the Tughma eventually won the brief war, and tens of thousands of Zumra, including Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, fled the country. Many of them, including Hadi, eventually made their way to North Yemen, joining the Saleh government and even fighting with the north in the 1994 civil war. A symbolic reconciliation between the southern groups occurred two decades later in 2007, but the current war has reopened wounds. Still acute is the memory of President Hadi aligned with the politburo assailants targeting the Tughma, from which much of the current Southern Transitional Council (STC) leadership hails.

Related actors:



HADI GOVT



STC

1994

NORTH-SOUTH CIVIL WAR

On May 4, 1994, a civil war broke out between North Yemen and South Yemen, which had united just four years earlier for the first time. The southerners had hoped to get economic stability out of unification, but they failed to secure significant seats in the 1993 parliamentary elections due to their smaller population and Islah's emergence as a new political party. This, alongside grievances focused especially on economic marginalization and political violence, prompted fears of total disenfranchisement under the northern leadership of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Thus, the southern leadership, led by Ali Salem al-Beidh, declared secession in May 1994. The ultimately victorious northern forces included various elements: the Saleh government; newly appointed defense minister Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and southern forces aligned with Ali Nasser Mohammed, both of whom had fled the south after losing the 1986 civil war; forces commanded by Gen. Ali Mohsen, including Arab fighters returning from the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan; and Islah-aligned armies. Notably, Saudi Arabia supported the southerners. The northern triumph over the south took only two months, driving the secessionist leadership into exile and the movement underground.



For more, see Simon Henderson:

["A Saudi Disaster Story: Yemen's Unity by Force"](#) | July 22, 1994

Related actors:



ALI MOHSEN



GPC-SANAA



HADI GOVT



ISLAH-RIYADH



SALEH FAMILY



SAUDI ARABIA



STC

2004-10

SAADA WARS

From 2004 to 2010, the Saleh government in Yemen waged a war in Saada governorate against the Houthi family and its advocates. Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, a charismatic politician whose speeches were disseminated on tape, symbolized and spurred northern opposition to Saleh’s pro-U.S. (and, in this view, anti-Muslim) foreign policy, particularly after 9/11 and the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. After he led a chant against Saleh in 2003, the Yemeni government tried to detain him but instead sparked a series of battles that ultimately led to Hussein’s death in September 2004. His death, which occurred under still-contested circumstances at the hands of the Yemeni military under Ali Mohsen’s command, elevated his brother, Abdulmalik al-Houthi, to the head of the movement and rallied many northerners to join the Houthi side against the Yemeni government. Other northern tribes and armed groups joined the government’s side, including some Islah-aligned ones, while Saudi Arabia entered the fight in 2009 to protect its border. The wars brought the Houthi movement to the fore, demonstrated its resilience, and allowed it to expand its strength in northern Yemen.



For more, see Simon Henderson:

[“Small War or Big Problem? Fighting on the Yemeni-Saudi Border”](#) | November 10, 2009

Related actors:



ALI MOHSEN



GPC-SANAA



HOUTHIS



ISLAH-RIYADH



SAUDI ARABIA

2011

ARAB SPRING IN YEMEN

The Arab Spring came to Yemen in the form of protests calling for the ouster of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled as president for three decades. Saleh’s influence in Yemen was already waning and his authority was under threat from the Houthis in northwest Yemen, the increasing sway of opposition parties such as Islah, and secessionist groups in the south. Many in Yemen also angrily suspected Saleh was grooming his son, Ahmed Ali, to replace him. Thus, as protests swept the broader region in early 2011, Yemenis took to the streets too, with the uprising spreading across the country and drawing attacks from security forces. The protestors included actors as diverse as Islah and the Houthis, among others, who themselves often clashed. In what was perceived as a shocking move, Saleh’s key commander and relative, Ali Mohsen, defected to the opposition, vowing to protect protestors. Some GPC members held unsuccessful counterprotests. By the end of 2011, President Saleh had agreed to step down. In a GCC-led initiative, he was replaced by President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi in February 2012 after a one-man election for a two-year term.



For more, see Michael Knights:

[“Yemen’s Crisis: Options for U.S. Policy”](#) | June 21, 2011

Related actors:



ALI MOHSEN



GPC-SANAA



HOUTHIS



IRAN



ISLAH-RIYADH



SALEH FAMILY

HOUTHIS DRIVE TO SANAA

In the first half of 2014, the Houthis fought fierce battles against Islah-aligned fighters in northern Yemen, causing many to flee. Having tasted success, the Houthis moved south. While expanding their presence in the north, the Houthis formed alliances or signed nonaggression pacts with a number of northern tribes, including some aligned with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh as part of a budding, if unexpected, partnership. The Houthis worked with these groups to eliminate their common enemies, including Salafists, Islahis, and allies of Gen. Ali Mohsen. Riding a populist wave that summer in reaction against the Hadi government’s decision to lift fuel subsidies, the Houthis moved into the capital with relatively little resistance. They explicitly targeted Islah members in a brutal suppression campaign that continues today. On September 21, 2014, the Houthis pressured the Hadi government to sign the Peace and National Partnership Agreement, granting them—and the southerners—a place in a new technocratic government. This government lasted about five months before Hadi resigned and fled under pressure. Shortly thereafter, the current war began.

Related actors:



CURRENT YEMEN WAR

In early 2015, the Houthis, their supporters, and backers of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh finished their gradual takeover of Sanaa, effectively exiling the internationally recognized Yemeni government. President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi fled to Aden, where the bombing of the presidential headquarters and the broader subsequent Houthi-GPC push to take southern governorates led Saudi Arabia and a larger Arab coalition to intervene to restore the internationally recognized government in March. The coalition, supported by the United States, conducted airstrikes on Houthi locations and imposed a naval and aerial blockade. After initial success in pushing the Houthis back from southern areas, the war has now fallen into a stalemate. Several turning points have occurred in relationships during the war: in 2016, Hadi appointed Ali Mohsen, whom both the Houthis and Southern Transitional Council (STC) despise, as vice president; in 2017, the Houthis killed their partner Ali Abdullah Saleh; and in summer 2019, the STC and Hadi government split and began to fight militarily. Efforts toward confidence-building measures and the negotiation of a comprehensive political settlement have so far failed. At present, the parties to the war include the Houthis and GPC-Sanaa on one side, receiving Iranian support, and the coalition—which includes the Hadi government, Islah-Riyadh, the STC, and certain members of the Saleh family, receiving Saudi and Emirati support—on the other. Oman has remained neutral.



For more, see Elana DeLozier:

[“Framing Yemen Peace Negotiations”](#) | May 31, 2018

[“Yemen’s Second-in-Command May Have a Second Coming”](#) | November 9, 2018

[“Saudi Leverage Not Enough to Achieve Peace in Yemen”](#) | April 29, 2020

Related actors:



2015

BATTLE OF ADEN

By February 2015, the Houthi-GPC camp, which included former president Saleh, had forced President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and his cabinet to resign. Hadi fled Sanaa to Aden, where he retracted his resignation and declared the city the provisional capital. In turn, the Houthi-GPC camp sent forces south to take over Aden, capturing the airport on March 25, as Hadi fled to Saudi Arabia. The Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, intervened militarily, and pro-coalition forces managed to liberate Aden by the end of summer 2015. During the fight to liberate Aden, UAE ground forces, including special forces, were heavily involved. Many pro-secessionist forces that now fall within the Southern Transitional Council (STC) fought alongside coalition forces amid resurgent fears that the rapid takeover of the south would herald northern dominance.



For more, see Michael Knights and Alex Almeida:

[“The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen \(Part 1\): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden”](#) | August 10, 2015

Related actors:



GPC-SANAA



HADI GOVT



HOUTHIS



SALEH FAMILY



SAUDI ARABIA



STC



UAE

2017–

SAUDI DEPLOYMENT TO AL-MAHRA

In November 2017, Saudi Arabia sent troops to al-Mahra governorate, ostensibly to curb suspected Iranian smuggling of weapons and supplies across the Omani border and up from the Yemeni coast to the Houthis. Locals who viewed the troops as occupiers doubted expressed Saudi intentions in the governorate, with some suspecting that the kingdom sought an oil pipeline to the Arabian Sea. Riyadh began exerting its influence in local politics by supporting the appointment of a pro-Saudi governor, Rajeh Bakrit, as well as President Hadi’s firing of Gen. Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, the governorate’s deputy for desert affairs and a leader of the protest movement. The kingdom’s troops eventually set up bases and took control of key seaports, airports, and land crossings. The Mahri protest leaders maintain close ties to Oman, with many of them carrying Omani as well as Yemeni passports. The protestors and Saudi forces have clashed several times; however, tensions have eased slightly since a new governor was appointed in February 2020. In addition to protesting the perceived Saudi occupation of their province, the protestors opposed the prior UAE presence in al-Mahra and continue to oppose any encroachment by the Southern Transitional Council (STC).



For more, see Elana DeLozier:

[“Challenges Await Oman’s New Sultan as Mourning Period Ends”](#) | February 20, 2020

Related actors:



HADI GOVT



MAHRI PROTESTORS



OMAN



SAUDI ARABIA

2017

DEATH OF ALI ABDULLAH SALEH

After relinquishing the presidency in 2012, Ali Abdullah Saleh continued to operate behind the scenes. Saleh, his General People’s Congress (GPC) Party, and the Houthis shared resentment toward the new status quo in post-2012 Yemen, especially Islah’s prominent role. In September 2014, as Houthi forces moved south toward Sanaa, Saleh leveraged his loyalties in the north to aid the Houthis. After seizing Sanaa, the GPC and Houthis entered into a power-sharing agreement, but the relationship was fraught with mistrust, given the war between the two in Saada from 2004 to 2010. In December 2017, the Houthis suspected Saleh was switching sides and killed him. Many of his close allies, if not killed or captured, switched sides to support the coalition, including, most notably, his nephews Tariq and Ammar Saleh.

Related actors:



2019

STC TAKEOVER OF ADEN

On August 1, 2019, a Houthi strike on a military graduation ceremony in Aden killed southern military commander Munir Mahmoud Ahmad al-Mashali, aka Abu Yamamah al-Yafai. A commander of the UAE-backed Security Belt forces and a supporter of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), Abu Yamamah was widely popular in the south and his death represented a pivotal moment. Although the Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, the STC believed Islah and its allies within the Yemeni government were complicit in it. Over the next three weeks, fighting erupted in Aden, Lahij, and Shabwa between STC-backed forces and those loyal to the Yemeni government. The STC seized control of Aden, ousting the Yemeni government—as well as areas further east—but could not take Shabwa. Fighting has continued off and on in these areas. Tensions increased between the UAE and the Yemeni government after Emirati airstrikes on August 29, 2019, killed twenty-five government-aligned soldiers. The Riyadh Agreement to patch up the conflict, which was shepherded by Saudi Arabia, signed in November 2019, and reinvigorated in July 2020, has yet to be fully implemented.



For more on the aftermath of this event, see Elana DeLozier (with Zied Bouchlaghem on the first article):

[“Riyadh Agreement Redux: Political Gains Still Dogged by Implementation Concerns”](#) | July 30, 2020

[“Riyadh Agreement Delivers Political Gains in Yemen, But Implementation Less Certain”](#) | November 5, 2019

[“Houthis Kill Top UAE-Backed Separatist Yemeni Commander”](#) | August 1, 2019

Related actors:



ANNEX: Relationships by Type

(Entries listed alphabetically)

ALLIES



Ali Mohsen & Hadi government
Ali Mohsen & Saudi Arabia
Hadi government & Saudi Arabia
Houthis & Iran
Mahri protestors & Oman
Saleh family & UAE
Saudi Arabia & UAE
STC & UAE

FAVORABLE



Ali Mohsen & Islah-Riyadh
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
Hadi government & Islah-Riyadh
Islah-Riyadh & Saudi Arabia
Saleh family & Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia & STC

COMPLICATED



GPC-Sanaa & Iran
GPC-Sanaa & Oman
GPC-Sanaa & Saleh family
Hadi government & Mahri protestors
Hadi government & Oman
Hadi government & Saleh Family
Hadi government & UAE
Houthis & Mahri protestors
Houthis & Oman
Iran & Oman
Islah-Riyadh & Oman
Oman & Saudi Arabia
Oman & STC
Oman & UAE
Saleh family & STC

UNFAVORABLE



Ali Mohsen & Saleh family
Ali Mohsen & UAE
GPC-Sanaa & UAE
Hadi government & STC
Islah-Riyadh & Mahri protestors
Islah-Riyadh & UAE

ADVERSARIES



Ali Mohsen & GPC-Sanaa
Ali Mohsen & Houthis
Ali Mohsen & Iran
Ali Mohsen & STC
GPC-Sanaa & Hadi government
GPC-Sanaa & Islah-Riyadh
GPC-Sanaa & Saudi Arabia
GPC-Sanaa & STC
Hadi government & Houthis
Hadi government & Iran
Houthis & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Saleh family
Houthis & Saudi Arabia
Houthis & STC
Houthis & UAE
Iran & Islah-Riyadh
Iran & Saleh family
Iran & Saudi Arabia
Iran & STC
Iran & UAE
Islah-Riyadh & Saleh family
Islah-Riyadh & STC
Mahri protestors & Saudi Arabia
Mahri protestors & STC
Mahri protestors & UAE

NO RELATIONSHIP OF NOTE



Ali Mohsen & Mahri protestors
Ali Mohsen & Oman
GPC-Sanaa & Mahri protestors
Iran & Mahri protestors
Mahri protestors & Saleh family
Oman & Saleh family

ANNEX: Relationships by Event

(Entries listed alphabetically)

1986 SOUTH YEMEN CIVIL WAR

Hadi government & STC

1994 NORTH-SOUTH CIVIL WAR

Ali Mohsen & Hadi government
Ali Mohsen & Islah-Riyadh
Ali Mohsen & STC
GPC-Sanaa & STC
Hadi government & STC
Islah-Riyadh & STC
Saleh family & STC
Saudi Arabia & STC

2004–10 SAADA WARS

Ali Mohsen & Houthis
Ali Mohsen & Islah-Riyadh
Ali Mohsen & Saudi Arabia
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
Houthis & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Saudi Arabia

2011 ARAB SPRING IN YEMEN

Ali Mohsen & GPC-Sanaa
Ali Mohsen & Islah-Riyadh
Ali Mohsen & Saleh family
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
GPC-Sanaa & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Iran
Houthis & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Saleh family
Islah-Riyadh & Saleh family

2014 HOUTHII DRIVE TO SANAA

Ali Mohsen & Houthis
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
Hadi government & Houthis
Houthis & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Saleh family

2015– CURRENT YEMEN WAR

Ali Mohsen & GPC-Sanaa
Ali Mohsen & Hadi government
Ali Mohsen & Islah-Riyadh
Ali Mohsen & Houthis
Ali Mohsen & Saudi Arabia
Ali Mohsen & STC
Ali Mohsen & UAE
GPC-Sanaa & Hadi government
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
GPC-Sanaa & Iran
GPC-Sanaa & Islah-Riyadh
GPC-Sanaa & Saleh family
GPC-Sanaa & Saudi Arabia
GPC-Sanaa & STC
GPC-Sanaa & UAE
Hadi government & Houthis
Hadi government & Iran
Hadi government & Islah-Riyadh
Hadi government & Oman
Hadi government & Saleh family
Hadi government & Saudi Arabia
Hadi government & STC
Hadi government & UAE
Houthis & Iran
Houthis & Islah-Riyadh
Houthis & Oman
Houthis & Saleh family
Houthis & Saudi Arabia
Houthis & STC
Houthis & UAE
Iran & Islah-Riyadh
Iran & Saleh family
Iran & Saudi Arabia
Iran & STC
Iran & UAE
Islah-Riyadh & Oman
Islah-Riyadh & Saudi Arabia
Islah-Riyadh & STC
Islah-Riyadh & UAE
Mahri protestors & STC
Mahri protestors & UAE
Oman & Saudi Arabia
Saleh family & Saudi Arabia
Saleh family & UAE
Saudi Arabia & STC
Saudi Arabia & UAE
STC & UAE

2015 BATTLE OF ADEN

GPC-Sanaa & Hadi government
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
GPC-Sanaa & Saudi Arabia
GPC-Sanaa & STC
GPC-Sanaa & UAE
Hadi government & Houthis
Hadi government & Saleh family
Hadi government & Saudi Arabia
Hadi government & STC
Hadi government & UAE
Houthis & Saleh family
Houthis & STC
Houthis & UAE
Saleh family & STC
Saleh family & UAE
Saudi Arabia & STC
Saudi Arabia & UAE
STC & UAE

2017– SAUDI DEPLOYMENT TO AL-MAHRA

Hadi government & Mahri protestors
Mahri protestors & Oman
Mahri protestors & Saudi Arabia
Oman & Saudi Arabia

2017 DEATH OF ALI ABDULLAH SALEH

GPC-Sanaa & Hadi government
GPC-Sanaa & Houthis
GPC-Sanaa & Saleh family
Hadi government & Saleh family
Houthis & Saleh family

2019 STC TAKEOVER OF ADEN

Ali Mohsen & STC
Hadi government & Saudi Arabia
Hadi government & STC
Hadi government & UAE
Houthis & STC
Islah-Riyadh & STC
Saudi Arabia & STC
Saudi Arabia & UAE
STC & UAE

THE AUTHOR



ELANA DELOZIER is the Rubin Family Fellow in the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, where she specializes in Yemen, the Persian Gulf states, and nuclear weapons and proliferation. She is also an adjunct assistant professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service.



THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY
1111 19TH STREET NW • WASHINGTON, DC 20036
WWW.WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG

©2020 THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY.
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.