

## UN Panel Highlights Command-and-Control Issues in Yemen

[Elana DeLozier](#)

February 7, 2020

The latest Panel of Experts report shines a much-needed light on operational control issues that will likely complicate postwar efforts to unify the country's sundry armed forces.

A year ago, the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen detailed the rise of a robust war economy that gave neither side much incentive to reach peace. Although that problem persists, [this year's recently completed 207-page report](#) focuses on the litany of local command-and-control issues and seemingly unending stream of brutal behavior that characterized 2019.

Composed of independent experts with specialized knowledge, the panel presents an annual report to the UN Security Council regarding implementation of the arms embargo and sanctions on Yemen, as detailed in Resolutions 2140 (2014) and 2216 (2015). Building on [last year's assessment](#), the latest edition details the economic warfare practiced by both sides to the detriment of the Yemeni people, and explains the Houthis' ease of procuring certain weapon components (an issue discussed at length [in PolicyWatch 3261](#)). Yet its main takeaway is twofold: President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has been unable to control his coalition partners, while the Houthis have resorted to heavy suppressive measures as a mechanism of control.

### THE GOVERNMENT'S CONTROL ISSUES

The report spends considerable space deconstructing the various armed groups within the coalition meant to support the legitimacy of Hadi's internationally recognized government. It concludes that the government exerts little to no authority over many of them, and that last year's fighting further diminished "the already tenuous level of control exercised by President Hadi" (paragraph 9). The sobering irony is that the coalition claims it operates in Yemen only at Hadi's request, yet most of its constituent parts do not follow his orders.

Instead, at least half a dozen armed organizations operate under different chains of command—some reporting to Hadi, some to the United Arab Emirates, some to Saudi Arabia, and some unclear. The panel calls them "non-State armed groups" (para. 25). They include the Security Belt Forces, Shabwani Elite Forces, Hadrami Elite Forces, Abu al-Abbas Forces, and West Coast Forces, with the latter containing three subgroups: the Amaleqa (Giants) Brigades, Tihama Brigades, and Guards of the Republic.

The West Coast Forces are a prime example of the problem. Most of them were under the UAE's de facto command until it left the western front last summer. They now fall under a Joint Forces Command in which officers from the various armed groups report to the Saudi/Emirati-led coalition. In another example, the report details how the Security Belt Forces in Aden were subject to vacillating government control from 2016 to 2019 (Table 8.1). Then, last August, they affiliated themselves with the Southern Transitional Council (STC)—only to fall under Saudi operational control in November. Meanwhile, the Shabwani and Hadrami Elite Forces remain notionally under UAE control. The panel also struggles to define the chain of command for Yemeni fighters at the Saudi border, noting that it is unclear whether they are an armed group or private contractors (Annex 8:8a). What is clear in the report is that none of these disparate groups are under the operational control of the Yemen National Army.

This has real implications on the ground, particularly when it comes to establishing law and order and safeguarding human rights. For example, the panel notes that the government does not control major prisons in the southern cities of Aden and al-Mukalla (para. 106). This lack of control over basic law and order gives armed groups the space to make their own rules. Along these lines, the panel takes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the Security Belt Forces, and the Shabwani Elite Forces to task for repeated cases of "arbitrary arrest and detention, ill-treatment, torture and enforced disappearance" (para. 100-101). Faced with such serious allegations and largely powerless to do more, the panel reminds the Security Belt Forces that "inasmuch as they exercise governmental-like functions, [they] are bound by human rights norms" (para. 107).

According to the Hadi government, these disparate forces will eventually fall under the National Army—last November's Riyadh agreement was [meant to integrate](#) forces aligned with the STC, and officials insist that other coalition armed groups will soon follow suit. Yet the Riyadh agreement has failed thus far, in large part because the STC still demands that it retain its chains of command even as it "integrates" under the Ministry of Defense. The West Coast Forces would similarly refuse to fall under the army's command if asked. Both factions argue that the National Army is controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood, dubbing it the "Islahi army" instead.

Of course the reality is more nuanced, but these narratives are firmly in place and will be impossible to dislodge, especially since the UAE broadly shares this view. Such attitudes contribute to what the panel calls “inadequate” coalition support to the government’s regular forces, “leading to an incapacity by the latter to conduct significant military operations” (para. 11).

These problematic command-and-control arrangements will not be easily consolidated after the war. The Saudi-led coalition will want to disband and let Yemenis run their own affairs, but it may struggle to do so lest it leave certain armed groups outside the National Army’s command. True military reunification will remain a formidable challenge internally—even more so if the Houthis are expected to integrate their own forces under the current or future national military.

## **HOUTHISUPPRESSION**

In contrast to the coalition’s chaotic arrangements in the west and south, the panel describes how the Houthis ruled the north with an iron fist last year, noting that they “continued to consolidate their control...and present a unified military force” (para. 9). The Houthis managed this feat in large part through suppression of dissent, forced conscription, and other aggressive behavior.

Last year’s report indicated that the Houthis were “facing slightly increasing levels of dissent” from major tribes and “the street.” This year’s edition notes that they have used their near-monopoly over security in the north to brutally suppress tribal dissent through new-fangled intelligence organs and hard power—especially against the Hajour tribe, which has suffered “heavy casualties” (para. 20). The panel also highlights the Houthis’ reported use of horrifying tactics such as arbitrarily arresting and detaining women, subjecting them to rape in prison, and threatening to label them as prostitutes in order to shame them and their families.

In addition, the Houthis have allegedly strong-armed local populations into fighting for them, including children—a charge they have repeatedly denied. Last year’s report stated that regular recruitment had become more difficult in the north; this year, the panel describes children being taken from their homes and put into Houthi-led ideological and military camps for months at a time, often with little food. Whether the children are actually needed for the battlefield or simply being used as pawns to intimidate the population remains unclear.

Such tactics may backfire if tribes or other groups with grievances are able to seek retribution after the war. As this writer and Ambassador Barbara Leaf [wrote previously](#), “Revenge...will be a powerful post-conflict motivator in Yemen’s tribal society, and the Houthis have much to answer for in the eyes of [their enemies].” This concern may blunt the Houthis’ willingness to participate fully in a postwar disarmament plan.

## **WHAT’S TO COME IN 2020**

Until recently, a kind of military stalemate had settled over Yemen following the coalition’s stalled 2018 campaign in Hodeida and the UAE’s decision to start drawing down its forces last summer. Yet this stalemate has at least temporarily collapsed—various forces are now fighting again along several fronts around the capital province. Moreover, the Riyadh agreement in the south and Stockholm agreement in the west are hanging by a thread. Leaders on all sides are divided over whether peace or war is the best way forward. Although diplomats made significant progress last fall, their successes were too limited and too slow to maintain momentum. As a result, more hawkish elements may once again come to the fore in the near term.

At the same time, each of the Yemeni parties has been increasingly damaged by the other’s economic warfare, and none of the domestic or foreign players (except perhaps a small contingent of Houthis) wants to be dragged into a larger regional conflict, as was threatened several times in 2019. Given these fears and the population’s broader war weariness, the time is ripe for meaningful talks.

Despite their many flaws, the [Stockholm agreement](#) and [Riyadh agreement](#) are good starting points for a conversation. The United States should double down on its diplomatic efforts to get the local combatants to the table. For their part, both sides must commit to implementing real confidence-building measures in order to maintain momentum. Neither the Hadi government nor the Houthis benefit from a longer war, especially as the economy continues to degrade and both are likely to face more dissent in their ranks.

*Elana DeLozier is a research fellow in The Washington Institute’s Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy.*