Who's Fighting Whom in Yemen?

- **Security Belt Forces**
  - Founded in 2016
  - UAE Proxy Force
- **Tariq Saleh's Forces**
  - The Giants Brigade
  - Local Tihama Fighters
- **Shabwani Elite Forces**
  - Founded in 2016
  - UAE Proxy Force
- **Hadrami Elite Forces**
  - Founded in 2016
  - UAE Proxy Force

**Houthi Areas of Control**

**Government Areas of Control**

**AQAP Areas of Activity**

**ISIS Areas of Activity**

**1000 Fighters**

**Houthi-Government Frontline**

Gregory D. Johnsen
Although it got little attention at the time, the war in Yemen began more than four years ago in July 2014. (For a full legal and political analysis of the start of the war in Yemen, see this piece at Lawfare.) Since that date the war has expanded significantly, morphing into a confusing and chaotic jumble of conflicts and players that defies neat categories. In the space below, the Arabia Foundation delves into the war and explains exactly who is fighting whom in Yemen, from the states involved to their proxy forces, and the terrorist groups that are trying to exploit the chaos and upheaval.

**The Rebels**

**The Houthis** are led by Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, a thirty-eight-year-old sayyid, or descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, who succeeded his half-brother and father as leader of the movement. The Houthis have been at war for much of their existence, fighting six separate wars against the Yemeni government from 2004 to 2010. In the wake of the Arab Spring and the collapse of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s government in 2011, the Houthis took de facto control of Sa’dah, their home governorate on the border with Saudi Arabia. Three years later, with the Yemeni government still deeply divided, the Houthis advanced on the capital of Sana’a, initiating what would become a slow-moving coup d’état and firing the first shots of the current war.

Since the beginning of the war in July 2014, the Houthis have consolidated their control over much of Northern Yemen, including Sana’a, and co-opted large portions of the Yemeni military, as well as heavy weapons depots and tanks, which they grafted onto a preexisting tribal militia. The Houthis have received smuggled Iranian ballistic missiles, and three Houthi leaders, including Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, are under UN sanctions.

**The Yemeni Government and Its Associated Forces**

**President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi**, who took over for Saleh in early 2012, is the commander in chief of the Yemeni armed forces, but relatively few of the troops under his direct command are believed to be personally loyal to him. To offset this imbalance, Hadi has established five presidential protection brigades, each with an estimated strength of one thousand to two thousand fighters. At times, presiden-
tial protection brigades in Aden have come into conflict with UAE troops, including repeated clashes over control of the airport in 2017.

Hadi also appoints the commanders of all of Yemen’s seven military districts, but as with many of Hadi’s pronouncements, it is unclear the extent to which paper decrees equate to power on the ground. For instance, the Houthis control large parts of three military districts, and in the Second Military District, Hadi’s military commander doubles as the governor of Hadramawt, in addition to commanding the Hadrami Elite Forces, a UAE proxy force in Yemen. The other regular military units under Hadi’s overall command tend to be poorly paid and under-equipped.

Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar is Yemen’s vice president and is from the same tribe as the late former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, although the two broke ties during the Arab Spring. For years, al-Ahmar headed the First Armored Division and was Saleh’s “iron fist,” responsible for conducting the wars against the Houthis from 2004 to 2010. The Houthis got their revenge in 2014, overrunning al-Ahmar’s base in Sana’a and forcing him to take refuge in the Saudi Embassy, from where he was later smuggled out of the country to Saudi Arabia.

In April 2016, Hadi tapped al-Ahmar to be his vice president. Over the past two years, al-Ahmar has rebuilt his military network and now has several thousand men under his command, mostly situated in and around Marib.

Saleh’s Military Network

In December 2017, the alliance of convenience between Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis collapsed in a brief but brutal battle in Sana’a that ended with Saleh being executed by the Houthis. What’s left of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s military network, about three thousand fighters who are mostly former Republican Guards and Special Guards, is now headed by his nephew Tariq Saleh. These troops are currently on the Red Sea coast and taking part in the battle for Hodeidah. Although these men are anti-Houthi—Houthi forces are holding Tariq Saleh’s eldest son, his brother, and two of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s sons hostage—they are not pro-Hadi.
The Coalition

Saudi Arabia heads the multicountry coalition fighting on the side of the Yemeni government. Saudi Arabia has relatively few ground troops in Yemen. Those they do have are concentrated along the Saudi border as small groups of Special Forces teams or are detached as private security details to protect individuals like Vice President al-Ahmar. Saudi Arabia does carry out frequent air strikes on Houthi positions throughout the country, which are backed by US refueling efforts and logistics. The coalition’s joint command center is based in Saudi Arabia.

The United Arab Emirates carries out air strikes in Yemen and has an estimated five thousand troops on the ground, mostly in Aden, Hadramawt, and along the Red Sea coast, where they are participating in the battle for Hodeidah. UAE ground force commanders deploy to the country on six-month rotations. The UAE also supports and trains various proxy forces and oversees a number of prisons in Yemen that have been the subject of allegations of human rights violations. Additionally, the UAE partners with the United States in its war against al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Other coalition countries include Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan, which in the past have contributed logistics and fighter planes to the war effort. Additionally, Sudan has sent at least eight thousand ground troops to Yemen.

Proxy Forces

The Hadrami Elite Forces were formed, funded, and trained by the UAE in early 2016 as part of the operation to retake the city of al-Mukalla from AQAP. That operation was a success, but the Hadrami Elite Forces, which are made up of local fighters, have not disbanded. The UAE continues to pay the salaries of the estimated three thousand to four thousand fighters, in addition to equipping them. In a letter to the UN Security Council earlier this year, Yemen’s government said these forces operate outside its command-and-control. Further muddying the command structure is the fact that Faraj al-Bahsani, the commander of Yemen’s Second Military District and the governor of Hadramawt, also has a command-
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The Shabwani Elite Forces were formed a few months after the Hadrami Elite Forces, in late 2016, on much the same model: roughly three thousand to four thousand local fighters who are funded, trained, and equipped by the UAE. These forces have taken part in the war against AQAP alongside both UAE and US forces and, like the Hadrami Elite Forces, operate outside the command and control of the Yemeni government.

The Security Belt Forces, formed in March 2016, are also trained, funded, and equipped by the UAE. Although these forces technically come under the command of Yemen’s Ministry of the Interior, the Yemeni government has said it has no control over them. Initially numbering about ten thousand fighters, the Security Belt Forces have since grown to more than fifteen thousand soldiers. Security Belt Forces operate in Aden, Abyan, and Lahj.

The Giants’ Brigade is made up of roughly fifteen thousand fighters, most of whom are southerners who are trained, funded, and equipped by the UAE. The Giants’ Brigade is currently taking part in the battle for Hodeidah.

Terrorist Groups

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) took advantage of the chaos of war to seize the eastern port city of al-Mukalla—Yemen’s fifth-largest city—in early 2015. One year later, in the face of a UAE-backed advance, AQAP elected to withdraw from the city rather than stay and fight. Since that time the group has suffered significant losses from US air and drone strikes. In 2017 alone, the United States carried out more than 130 strikes against AQAP and ISIS targets in Yemen. Although diminished in many ways, AQAP continues to present a threat both internally and externally. Within Yemen the group is fighting all sides—the Houthis, the Yemeni government, and the Saudi-led coalition—and has carried out suicide attacks, assassinations, mortar strikes, and small-scale assaults and has planted IEDs.
ISIS is much smaller than AQAP and is largely centered in and around the governorate of al-Baydha. In 2017, for the first time, the United States carried out strikes against ISIS targets in Yemen. Like AQAP, ISIS has also carried out suicide attacks and assassinations—some of which it films with body cameras—in Aden. It is unclear what number of ISIS fighters fleeing the collapse of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria have reached Yemen.

**Other Actors**

**The United States** is engaged on two fronts in Yemen. It carries out Special Forces raids and drone strikes against AQAP and ISIS targets in the country, and conducts midair refueling and provides logistics and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition in their fight against the Houthis. These are two separate wars, and the United States has made it clear that while it is engaged in a war against AQAP and ISIS, it does not believe its support for the Saudi-led coalition rises to the level that would make it a party to the conflict against the Houthis.

**Iran** is the only country that still has a functioning embassy in Houthi-controlled Sana’a. In early 2018, a [UN Panel of Experts](https://www.un.org/egovgb/panels/experts) (of which I was a member) found Iran in noncompliance with a UN Security Council resolution for failing to prevent smuggled Iranian ballistic missiles from reaching the Houthis. Much of the evidence strongly suggests that Iran is actively supplying the Houthis with ballistic missiles to launch at Saudi Arabia. Iran has also made clear that when the time comes for a final settlement in Yemen, it wants a seat at the negotiating table.

**The Southern Transition Council** (STC) was [formed on May 11, 2017](https://www.un.org/egovgb/panels/experts), shortly after President Hadi fired Aydarus al-Zubaydi as governor of Aden and Hani bin Brik as minister of state. Both men, along with several other southern governors and politicians, then formed the STC to push for an independent South Yemen. The STC claims to represent the eight southern governorates of Aden, Abyan, al-Dhala, Hadramawt, Lahj, al-Mahra, Shabwa, and Soqotra. In 2018, the STC opened a US office and hired a lob-
bying firm to represent its interests in the United States. It has significant support within Yemen’s armed forces, many of whom have appeared at official functions waving the southern flag.

Multiple Salafi groups are taking part in the fight against the Houthis. One of the most prominent of these is led by Adil Abdu Farea al-Dhabhani, who is better known as Abu al-Abbas, and is based in Taiz. Up until mid-2017, Abu al-Abbas received support and aid from the UAE. But on October 25, 2017, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the other members of the newly formed Terrorism Financing Targeting Center, which is based in Riyadh, sanctioned Abu al-Abbas for supporting AQAP. This charge appears to stem from instances in which AQAP members fought alongside Abu al-Abbas’s men in Taiz. The two groups, however, remain distinct.

The tribes in Yemen are weaker now than at any point in the last seventy years. A combination of the Houthi wars, political overstepping, and personal corruption has largely broken bayt al-Ahmar, the first family of the Hashid tribal confederation. Yemen’s other major confederation, Bakil, has similarly seen its influence reduced. This is not to say that tribes are no longer important in Yemen—they are—but now they are merely one player among many.

Other militia groups number in the dozens in Yemen and are active on all sides. Many of these receive support from either the Yemeni government or outside powers such as the UAE. The proliferation of so many different armed groups, with different sponsors and alliances on the ground, will likely complicate any future peace deal in Yemen.