THE CRISIS IN YEMEN

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DECEMBER 2018

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ARX

KEY POINTS...

The severe degradation of Yemen's security, economy and infrastructure has exacerbated a cycle of violence which will likely destabilise the country for years if not decades. This poses a particular risk to the maritime sector, as the deteriorated security situation has reduced the forces available to safely police and secure Yemen's coastline.

This is a critical risk to the security of the Bab Al Mandeb strait, which has historically been at high risk of piracy and other criminal activity, and through which travels nearly 20% of global shipping.[1]

The deteriorating internal security situation has resulted in the spread of criminal and terrorist groups in the region, and the proliferation of small arms and light weapon systems.

Conflict overspill has resulted in direct and collateral damage to shipping, ports, and trade. Both parties seek to control the sea routes into Yemen, and the critical trade routes through the Gulf of Aden.

Houthi rebels have demonstrated a capacity for ballistic missile launch, WBIED (Water Bourne Improvised Explosive Device) and direct attacks with small arms. Maritime areas within reach of Houthi controlled territory are at risk of attack.

ARX has previously detailed the manner in which a Water Bourne Improvised Explosive Device may be employed against shipping, and the Houthis have the capacity and motivation to employ such tactics as the Civil War continues to turn against them. [2]

The Saudi's coalition willingness to escalate strikes against Houthi strongholds, and the failure of the 2018 peace talks, push the Houthis into a position where asymmetric tactics may pose the most effective method of disrupting Hadi government control.

[1] https://www.vox.com/world/2017/7/13/15948184/pirates-terrorists-somalia-isis-shabaab
[2] Previous White Papers

SITUATION REPORT
(The Crisis in Yemen)

Introduction

As of December 2018 Yemen's Civil War has lasted three years and is one of greatest humanitarian disasters in recent history. Two million people have been displaced, both internally, and as refugees into neighbouring countries.[3] The war has evolved into a regional proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Iran's overt political backing and tacit military support of the Houthi movement, contends against Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention. [4]

Al Qaida, Islamic State and other international terrorist organisations have participated in and exacerbated the spread of the crisis.[5] The country has been flooded with small arms, as well as light and heavy weapons, including long range ballistic missiles, both in support of the Saudi coalition, and in support of the Houthi Movement.[6]

Previously ARX has outlined the direct risk to shipping posed by the crime-terrorism nexus developing between terrorist and pirate organisations in the Gulf of Aden, and has detailed the threat profile of such an attack.

In this report we break down the conflict: how it relates to the maritime sector as a whole, the risks posed by this conflict in the future, and we advise stakeholders on managing risk in the region.

The Crisis in Yemen

The 2015 Yemeni Civil War began after the Houthi Shia Muslim movement took power from the incumbent, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Hadi escaped captivity in Feburary 2015, declared Aden the new capital of Yemen, and marshalled some former government forces - including Sunni militias, in a bid to retake power.
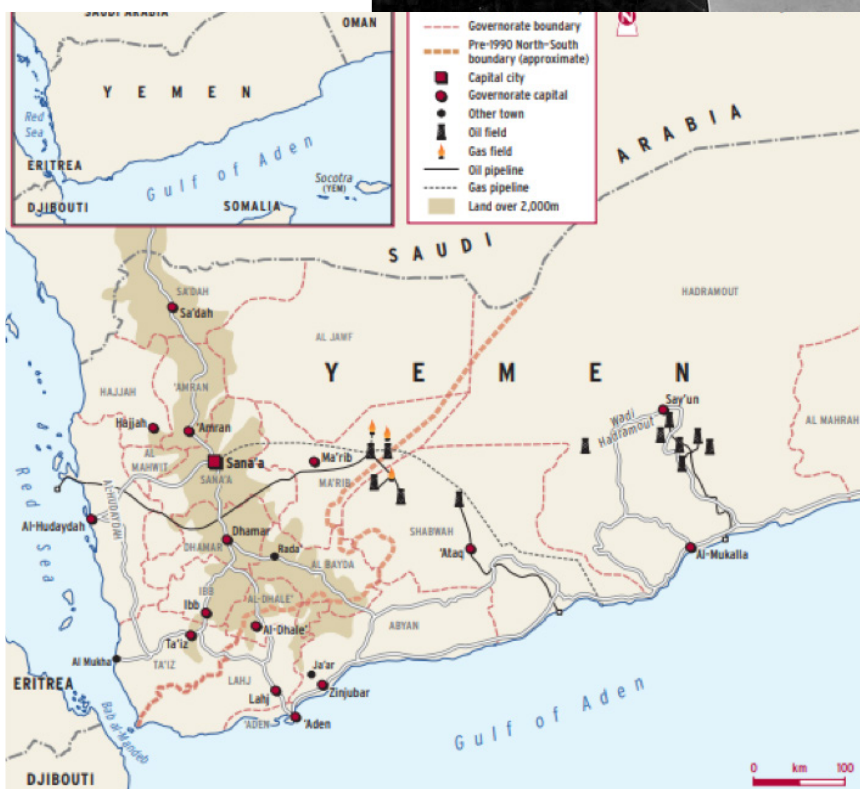
Though the period of conflict referred to as the Yemeni Civil War began in 2015, after the Houthi movement gained legitimacy by taking Sana'a – Yemen's capital – the war follows on from years of Houthi insurgency and Hadi government repression.

The insurgency itself is predicated upon a decades old conflict between Yemeni political factions, which is in turn a product of complex socio-political factors - underscored by the centuries old conflict between the Shia and Sunni sects of Islam.

The Civil War in Yemen is often erroneously painted as a simple expression of this ancient conflict, as the Iranian backed Houthi Shia Muslims fight against the Saudi Arabian backed Hadi government.

However, the conflict is not simply a religious proxy war. Indeed, the violence in Yemen is as much, if not more, socio-economic and tribal, than religious.

Understanding the verticals by which national and regional stakeholders engage with the conflict is key to understanding the future of Yemen as an area of potential threat to commercial enterprise.[7]

[3] http://www.unhcr.org/yemen-emergency.html
[4] https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/doubling-down-on-americas-misadventure-in-yemen/
[5] http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/B-Occasional-papers/SAS-OP09-Yemen.pdf
[6] http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/focus-projects/yemen-armed-violence-assessment.html -
   https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/yemen-houthi-rebels-fire-ballistic-missile-saudi-capital-180411153418562.html
https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/letter-dated-26-january-2018-panel-experts-yemen-mandated-security-council-resolution
[7] https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/yemens-houthi-movement-and-the-revolution/

The Houthi Movement and Iran

The Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, is named for Hussein Badruddin Houthi, their former leader killed by government forces in 2004. Hussein's death triggered the eleven year-long insurgency, culminating in the Hadi government's defeat in 2015.

The Houthis are primarily Zaidis, a sect of Shia Islam, and the Houthi movement began as a political and religious organisation designed to protect Zaidi tribal, political and religious interests against the Yemeni government's perceived US and Salafist bias.

The Houthi movement fights under a banner which reads, 'God is great, death to the US, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam,' displaying marked similarities to Hezbollah's anti-West, anti-Israel, pro-Shia ideology.[8]

Iran has been identified as a key backer of the Houthi movement, providing small arms, light weapons, and more sophisticated ordnance such as short range ballistic missiles and UAV anti-armour capability.[9]

However, Yemen does not have the same kind of history of Sunni-Shia conflict as other Middle-Eastern nations, and the Zaidi sect of Shia Islam has the greatest religious similarities to Sunni Islam.[10] As such, this conflict should not be understood purely in religious terms.

The conflict is more socio-economic than religious, provoked by the consolidation of power and resources in South Yemen, and exacerbated by climate change, drought, and urbanisation.[11]

Noticeably, there has been a reduced access to water in a country where 90% of the population only has 90 m3 of water per person per year.[12]

Drought, economic mismanagement and territorial disputes have denied many Yemeni's their traditional sources of employment. This, combined with Yemen's large youth population, has created fertile ground for regular and widespread revolt.[13]

The Houthis seek to protect Zaidi interests in Yemen, and to secure the borders of their powerbase in Northern Yemen.

> "The conflict is as much socio-economic as religious, provoked by the consolidation of power and resources in South Yemen, and exacerbated by climate change, drought, and urbanisation."

However, Yemen's oil and gas reserves, and key trading hubs, are located predominately in the southern part of Yemen.

Accordingly the Houthis are compelled to continue striking out at opposition forces in the South, and to hold onto key infrastructure such as ports and oil infrastructure.

Access to the sea, and the international aid shipments that arrive via ports, is a critical aim for both warring parties.[14] Indeed, Houthi forces hold the port city of Hudaydah, and, as of November 2018, continue to fight against a mounting aerial and artillery bombardment by pro-government forces.[15]

The Houthis will need to hold onto key infrastructure, particularly oil, gas and sea assets, in order to assert their status as a legitimate warring party, and thereby gain leverage in future peace talks.

As such, the war in Yemen will continue to be focused on both urban centres and coastal regions, following a general trend of modern insurgency towards the urban and the littoral.

This littoralisation of conflict has threatened maritime traffic in one of the most crucial shipping lanes in the world, the Gulf of Aden.[16]

Iran's tacit support for the Houthi is not primarily religious so much as geopolitical: a strong and well-armed Houthi movement counters Saudi Arabia's support for the Hadi government and challenges Saudi Arabia's border security.[17]

The Hadi Government and Saudi Arabia

Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was elected President of Yemen in 2012, running unopposed and taking 100% of the vote.[18]

Hadi pushed to implement a decentralised federal model in Yemen, a move which critics suggested would redistribute wealth into the few provinces which contained the country's oil and gas resources.[19]

This move was judged by certain parts of Yemeni society to be designed to facilitate foreign control of Yemeni natural resources, primarily by Saudi Arabia and the US.[20]

8   https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/4/12/houthi-propaganda-following-in-hizballahs-footsteps
9   https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/doubling-down-on-americas-misadventure-in-yemen/
10 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/understanding-houthi-motives-complicated-essential-yemen-future
11 https://www.ru.nl/publish/pages/871321/a_real_tragedy.pdf
    https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-23777176/yemen-facing-water-shortage-crisis
12 http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/G-Issue-briefs/SAS-Yemen-AVA-IB2-ENG.pdf
13 https://climateandsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/a-storm-without-rain_yemen-water-climate-change-and-conflict_briefer-40.pdf
14 https://stableseas.org/rule-of-law/yemen%E2%80%99s-war-against-houthis-has-always-been-about-ports-and-sea

15 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46125858
16 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf
17 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf
18 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-06/yemen_34.php
19 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/19/understanding-houthi-motives-complicated-essential-yemen-future
20 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf

Furthermore this vindicated the Houthi's belief that the Yemeni government was conspiring to marginalise North Yemen interests.[21] In the following years the Houthis made substantial advances, culminating in the capture of Sana'a, and the resignation of President Hadi, under duress.[22] Hadi escaped and called upon the Saudi Arabian government to launch a counter offensive against Houthi held cities and infrastructure.

The civil war has drawn in many of the neighbouring Arabic states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia and the UAE form the basis of the coalition ostensibly fighting to reinstate the Hadi government.[23]

The USA have also provided logistical and intelligence support for the Saudi coalition, ostensibly connected to the US counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaida.[24]

The Houthis have attacked Saudi Arabian warships and commercial shipping in the Gulf of Aden, and have launched cross border attacks into Saudi Arabia, employing both ground forces and short range ballistic missiles.[25]

The external support enjoyed by Hadi government, and the Houthis' capability for transnational attacks, has resulted in extensive conflict overspill.

This conflict overspill has had a huge human and commercial cost.

Both sides have attacked civilians, resulting in significant casualties and mass displacement of people.

Saudi Arabia have enforced a blockade on Yemen, blocking food and further exacerbating one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades.[26]

The Saudi coalition has also been accused of failing to provide effective rules of engagement, resulting in excessive civilian casualties from airstrikes and crossfire.[27]

The severe degradation of Yemen's security, economy and infrastructure has exacerbated a cycle of violence which will likely destabilise the country for years if not decades.

This poses a particular risk to the maritime sector, as the weakened security situation has reduced the forces available to safely police and secure Yemen's coastline.

This is a critical risk to the security of the Bab Al Mandeb strait, which has historically been at high risk of piracy and other criminal activity, and through which travels nearly 20% of global shipping.[28]

21 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf
22 https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-06/yemen_34.php
23 https://www.cfr.org/interactives/global-conflict-tracker#!/conflict/war-in-yemen
24 https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf
25 https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1431531/yemen-houthis-openly-plant-naval-mines
26 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/all-sides-in-yemen-may-be-responsible-for-war-crimes-say-un-experts
27 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/all-sides-in-yemen-may-be-responsible-for-war-crimes-say-un-experts
28 https://www.vox.com/world/2017/7/13/15948184/pirates-terrorists-somalia-isis-shabaab

Conflict Overspill, Al-Qaida and Piracy

There are three primary risks posed to the Maritime sector by the Yemen Civil War: Conflict overspill, terrorist attacks against shipping, and increases in traditional piracy.

Conflict Overspill

Conflict overspill refers to the tendency for internal conflicts to spill out into the greater region. This may be directly, through attacks by intra-state actors against the territory or property of other actors, or indirectly, through the blockading of ports, embargoes placed upon goods, or the seizure of private shipping by state entities.

Conflict overspill has been a regular occurrence throughout the civil war. In 2016 a civilian vessel was struck by what is believed to have been a Houthi cruise missile, whilst sailing the Bab Al Mandeb strait.[29]

Similar attacks have continued in 2017/2018, and the Houthi's demonstrated capacity for long-range missile strikes has created a further avenue by which the conflict may directly spread to the maritime sector.

ARX has detailed the manner in which a Water Bourne Improvised Explosive Device may be employed against shipping, and the Houthis have the capacity and motivation to employ such tactics as the Civil War goes on.[30]

The Saudi's coalition willingness to escalate strikes against Houthi strongholds, and the failure of the 2018 peace talks, push the Houthis into a position where asymmetric tactics may pose the most effective method of disrupting Hadi government control.[31]

Indirectly, the Saudi blockade has devastated Yemen's international trade, and the substantial damage to Yemeni ports will impact commercial companies' risk appetite in the region for the foreseeable future.[32] The Houthis have laid sea mines in coastal areas they have controlled, contaminating the maritime area off the coast of Yemen, most recently killing five Yemeni fishermen, and conveying the Houthis' willingness to extend their reach into the maritime trade corridor.[33]

Direct and indirect conflict overspill has resulted in cross-pollination of tactics, arms, and the social unrest with terrorist and criminal groups, such as Al-Qaida, Al-Shabaab, and Islamic State.

Terrorism and Piracy

Al-Qaida has committed hundreds of terrorist attacks in Yemen during the Civil War, against both Houthi and Hadi forces.[34] These attacks have included suicide bombings, mass shootings, and attacks on shipping.[35] Indeed, Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups have been responsible for significant civilian casualties, and have engineered their attacks to cause the greatest political fallout, aiming to extend the duration of the civil war, and promote their own domestic insurgency.[36]

Terrorist groups profit from the continued conflict, both in the absence of a strong internal security situation, and in the spread of arms, training, and potential recruits, which have greatly increased their capacity for violence.

This threat escalation has been exacerbated by the specialist training and armament offered by external actors to both the Houthi and Hadi governments. Regardless of how or when the conflict ends, the skills and armaments which have been supplied to individuals and groups within Yemen will remain a lasting legacy of the conflict.

[29] https://www.thenational.ae/uae/crew-members-of-uae-ship-attacked-by-houthis-tell-of-terrifying-raid-1.162275
[30] ARX Maritime, 'Terrorism In the Gulf of Aden'.
[31] https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-06/yemen_34.php
[32] https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/events/2015-11-07-yemen-key-players-prospects-peace-meeting-summary_4.pdf
[33] https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1431531/yemen-houthis-openly-plant-naval-mines
[34] https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/the-two-faces-of-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula/
[35] https://www.businessinsider.com/stavridis-terrorist-attacks-at-sea-2017-6
[36] https://warontherocks.com/2018/10/the-two-faces-of-al-qaeda-in-the-arabian-peninsula

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The threat posed by these technologies and skills is not incomparable to the MANPADS (Man Portable Air Defense System) crisis which affected conflict zones after the 1980s, in which long range weapon systems were provided to anti-communist forces and which then offered a cheap and effective equaliser for non-state armies and guerrilla forces against conventional militaries.[37]

Yemeni armed groups' short range ballistic missile capacity, the training necessary to construct and employ unmanned IEDs -whether aerial or waterbourne – and the experience of over a decade of conflict, will provide new and challenging threats for the foreseeable future, particularly as these skills further proliferate out to terrorist and criminal organisations.

Though both the Houthi movement and the Hadi government have fought against terrorist insurgent groups, the groups have proven difficult to eradicate. Indeed, counterterrorism efforts in Yemen have been compared to those in Somalia, in which the 'kill-capture' cycle is believed to have caused further insurgency, criminality, and instability.[38]

ARX described the crime-terrorism nexus developing in the Gulf of Aden, between terrorist groups and pirates, in 'Horizon Scanning: Terrorism in the Gulf of Aden'. This blurring between criminality and terrorism has continued to affect maritime traffic throughout 2017-2018. In 2017 Somali pirates seized a UAE oil tanker, in one of the most significant vessel hijackings in the 2010-2018 period.[39]

Throughout 2018 there has been mounting evidence of increase maritime terrorist activity within the Gulf of Aden, including remote controlled WBIEDs, and armed men in skiffs attempting to board commercial vessels, though these were repelled by the ships' security measures.[40]

Conclusion

The proliferation of armed terrorist groups, the spread of weapons and skillsets, and the mounting pressure on the Houthi movement is likely to lead to further and more severe terrorist incidents in the Gulf of Aden.
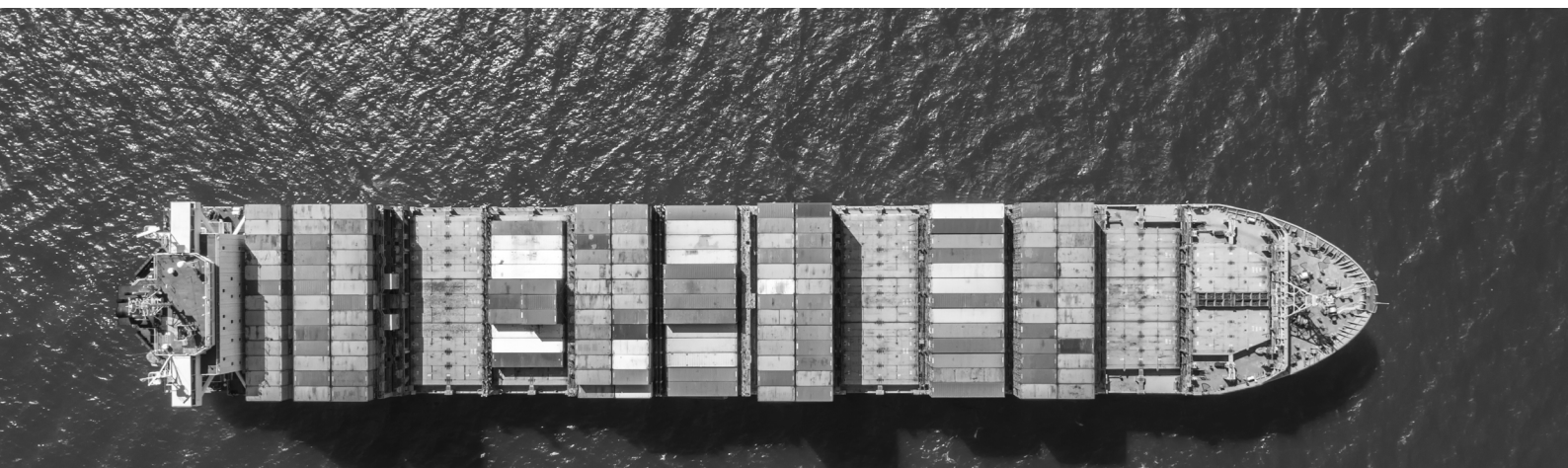
The littoralisation and urbanisation of the Civil War, and the struggle to control water ways and water sources, will potentially focus more and more of the fighting into the maritime sector. The socio-economic and socio-political trend underwriting both the Civil War and the greater regional struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, will continue to exacerbate the conflict, and destabilise the peace process.

The strait of Bab Al Mandeb is now bordered on both sides by fragile states in which terrorist groups operate extensively: in Yemen Al-Qaida, in Somalia Al-Shaabab.

These terrorist groups continue to profit from the regional instability, and will only grow in strength as long as Yemen and Somalia remain fragile states, riven by civil war and internal violence.

Maritime security services in the area are dependent upon a rapidly changing and instable security situation, Somalia has very little in the way of a functioning coast guard, and the civil war in Yemen has reduced oversight within the Bab El Mandeb. Going forward, oversight of the region's seaways depends largely upon international willingness to police the maritime area, and to provide security for commercial shipping interests.[41]

Drawing these factors together suggests that the Gulf of Aden will continue to be a high risk area for maritime traffic. Ship-owners and maritime stakeholders should continue to consider the area high risk, and should take all necessary precautions to secure their vessels.

36 https://fas.org/asmp/campaigns/MANPADS/MANPADS.html
37 https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/us-counterterrorism-strikes-tempo-remains-high-in-somalia-and-yemen-transparency-improves.php
38 https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/doubling-down-on-americas-misadventure-in-yemen/
39 https://www.thenational.ae/world/yemen-war-threatens-to-spill-into-international-arena-as-maritime-risks-grow-1.14432
40 https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review#_ftn3
41 http://www.ics-shipping.org/docs/default-source/Piracy-Docs/1---interim-guidance-on-maritime-security-in-the-southern-red-sea-and-bab-al-mandeb.pdf?sfvrsn=0
http://unipath-magazine.com/yemens-strategic-role-in-maritime-security/
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