

The Betrayal of Yemen

The one successful revolution of the so called ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 has been ruthlessly suppressed and misrepresented, not only by the interventionist western powers, but also by the UN Security Council (UNSC). First those who claimed to support democratic revolutions declared war, next the international community imposed a genocidal blockade on the little country. Poor understandings of the roots of the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen hide those culpable for the bombing, siege and mass starvation.



Image 1: strategic position of Yemen in US military plans (L) and China's BRI (R)

Since early 2015 an Ansarallah-led revolutionary coalition government (often disparagingly called ‘The Houthis’, as though it were one family rule, like the Saudis) has controlled the Yemeni capital Sanaa and most of the country's population. In late 2016 this Ansarallah led coalition, including Saleh's General Peoples' Congress (GPC), formed a National Salvation Government (NSG) (Rezég 2016). This was led by Abdul Aziz Habtoor, a figure in Saleh's GPC and a defector from the transitional regime of Mansour Hadi (CNN 2016).

Some years later, all well informed commentators recognised that “Ansarallah, defined as ‘the de facto authorities’ in some U.N. documents, are organising the structures of daily life for a large majority of Yemenis (Bell 2022). The North American Brookings think tank also recognises that “the Houthis have won in Yemen” (Riedel 2022). However that recognition and its consequences are not yet widely understood and that ignorance has fuelled mass participation in the war and siege. The result is that, while crocodile tears are shed over the bombed and besieged millions of Yemeni citizens, a US-Saudi-UAE-Israeli coalition continues its bloody war and the UNSC imposes punishing sanctions on the de facto government and therefore also on the majority of the population.

Washington's line is that “the Houthis—officially known as AnsarAllah (Partisans of God)—are an Iranian-backed, Shiite Muslim military and political movement in Yemen ... [which] has waged a series of bloody insurgencies against the Yemeni government since 2004, overthrowing them and seizing power in Sanaa in 2015” (CEP 2022). The ‘Yemeni government’ referred to

here is the transitional regime led by Mansour Hadi, which filled the gap after the ousting of long term President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 and the Ansarallah led takeover in 2014-2015. Hadi left the country for Saudi Arabia in early 2015 and has been in exile ever since (Amos 2015). Nevertheless UNSC resolutions still designate Hadi as the ‘President’ of Yemen and maintain ‘Houthi rebels’ as a sanctioned entity.

U.S. aligned writers present Yemen as an inherently “tribal democracy” (al-Qarawi 2011) and naturally fragmented by “religious and cultural divisions” (Robinson 2021). However this ignores both the role of imperial intervention in fragmenting Yemen and the decades long construction of a genuine national and “social revolution” (Zabarah 1984). Issaev (2018) explains in some detail why the Ansarallah led revolution of 2014 is best seen as a continuation of that ‘unfinished’ Republican revolution of the early 1960s.

The western claim that Ansarallah/Houthis are “Iranian-backed, Shiite Muslim” movement is also false. In a religious sense they are a Zaydi revivalist movement, quite distinct from Shiism, except that their religion, like that of the Shiia, urges rebellion against unjust rule, “drawing inspiration from the prophet Muhammad who has revolted against the unjust rule of the Qurayshi elites of Mecca” (Tharappel 2019). Unlike the Shiia however, Zaidis do not believe in the infallibility or hereditary transmission of Imams. They are also said to closer in jurisprudence to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam (Khan 2016). Nevertheless, Yemen’s salafist sheikhs denounce Zaydism, especially over the “duty to rebel” against unjust rulers (Issaev 2018: 9). It was mainly after they rose to power that they enjoyed moral support from Iran.

The political process that led the Houthis to form Ansarallah in 2011-2012 and subsequently to control the capital and most of the country has involved alliances with many other groups. They have joined coalitions with the Baath Party (Arab nationalists), with socialists (Hizb al Ishtiraki) and they created the Steadfast Youth (Shabab al Sumud) movement (Wells 2012).

The western line remains broadly that the ‘revolution’ of 2011 was just the ousting of Saleh, after which the Arab monarchies intervened. Even more independent sources present the ‘revolution’ as the 2011 uprising which unseated Saleh, while the ‘Houthi’ “takeover” is something separate (MEMO 2017). A better perspective is that the Ansarallah coalition is central to the continuation of a real, indigenous Yemeni revolution (al-Fasly 2015). The revolutionary government speaks of “The Revolution” as defined by their takeover of the capital on 21 September 2014, to demonstrate their pride in “embedding themselves in Yemeni history and a notion of Yemeni traditional culture” (Mohammad 2020).

A series of foreign interventions, after the GCC ‘peace initiative’ with its attempts to re-divide the country, have tried to block this revolution. From 2015 onwards most interventions have relied on Saudi-led air attacks and the use of large proxy armies.

US troops have directly intervened in Yemen several times since 2015, under the pretext of anti-terrorist operations. Of course, this is the same pretext used for simultaneous interventions in Syria and Iraq. In fact the chief US target, the Ansarallah led revolutionary government, is the most established anti-al Qaeda force in the Arabian Peninsula. Ansarallah has been “staunchly opposed to al-Qaida and Sunni Salafist movements”. Indeed the Saudi support for sectarian salafism in Yemen’s north is cited as “one of the key factors in the emergence of the Houthi movement” (Popp 2015). From 2015 Ansarallah forces fought with and carried out prisoner exchanges with Saudi and Emirati backed al Qaeda groups (Sanaa Centre 2021).

Yemen is not a marginal, backward country, naturally divided, but a key nation subject to big power machinations. As the key country at the entrance to the Red Sea and opposite the Horn of Africa, Yemen remains at the centre of U.S. CentCom ambitions. It is also a key location in China's Belt and Road Initiative (See Graphic 1). Of course in character these are quite different phenomena. The US 'New Middle East' project (Anderson 2019: Ch.1) is one of military-led imperial style domination. China's new trade route infrastructure has no such coercive features.

Yet the US-led blockade divides Yemen into three parts: (1) the more populated North and West, controlled by the revolutionary Ansarallah-led Government, (2) Marib and the eastern desert, still controlled by the Saudi based regime and al Qaeda groups, and (3) the South, controlled by a UAE/Emirati backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), which also controls the port city of Aden (ICG 2021). Israel and the UAE/STC also occupy Yemen's UNESCO listed Socotra island (Werleman 2021).

Washington based analysts speak of twin wars against the Ansarallah led de facto government based in Sanaa and against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Green 2019), even though the latter is largely sustained by major US ally Saudi Arabia. The Trump administration designated Ansarallah (and some of its leaders) as a terrorist group in January 2021, but this was reversed just weeks later by the Biden administration (Blinken 2021).

Let's look in a little more depth at the history of the post-2011 revolution, then the role and responsibility of the 'international community' and foreign interventions.

1. Yemen's 'unfinished revolution'

This section will demonstrate that the Ansarallah led government (NSG) springs from a genuine, indigenous Yemeni revolution. Attempts to designate the uprising of 2011 as the 'revolution' and dismiss the subsequent 'Houthi rebel takeover' as something else are disingenuous. The foreign intervention by the USA, the Saudis, the UAE, Israel and others aims at overthrowing this revolution and keeping the nation weak and divided, as it was before unification in 1990.

The Ansarallah party was created by the Houthi clan-led group, originally from the northern province of Saadah, at the start of the revolutionary process in 2011. Its slogan remains "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, a Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam". 'Death to America' has been explained to various western writers as a rejection of the US government and its practices, rather than aimed at the North American people. 'Death to Israel' is a demand for an end to the colonial regime. While westerners more often distinguish between Zionists and Jewish people, most Arab references to "the Jews" typically is to the western colonisers of Palestine, who called themselves "the Jews" and regard their colonial state as one belonging to "the Jews" (Wells 2012). So the Ansarallah 'curse' is for the colonisers.



Image 2: Rally with Ansarallah slogans

Ansarallah made common cause from 2011 onwards with a range of other Yemeni factions, and began an outreach in the Arab world to Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syrian Government (Wells 2012). By late 2022 it seemed that Iran and Syria were the only states which recognised the NSG government in Sanaa. But these relations were not fundamentally based on religion. Zaidi revivalism in Yemen “cannot be reduced to just a religious sect, it is [more broadly] the legacy of the Zaidi Hashemite Imams”, a governance tradition which informs Yemeni social values today (Mohammad 2020).

Badr al-Din Houthi and his son Hussein launched his ‘Faithful Youth’ initiative in 1995, borrowing some ideas from the Salafis but opposing their vicious sectarianism. This more inclusive movement stressed “the patriotic education of the young generation” by studying Yemeni Zaydi doctrine (Issaev 2018: 12).

A wider range of Yemeni Youth did participate in the 2011 uprising, but many were already politically committed. A poll showed 77% as “politically active prior to 2011”. Chair of the Muwatana Organisation for Human Rights Radhya Almutawakel concurred: “there were many independent youth in the square [in 2011], but the majority of them were Islah, Houthi or something else first” (Toska 2018).

And there is the doctrinal fracture. The ‘Faithful Youth’ responded to Saudi-backed salafi/wahhabis by calling them “true terrorists” who wanted “to sow enmity and hatred and to impose their ideas on young Muslims” (Issaev 2018: 12). From this ideological split the movement led by Hussein al Houthi – and after his death in 2004, by his younger brother Abdul Malik al Houthi – gained support from Houthi clan allied groups and from those alienated by the sectarian Islah movement and its associated al Ahmar clan (Issaev 2018: 13).

Salafism and wahhabism in Yemen have older, traditional roots; but they were reinforced by the Saudis. The Salafi centre at Dar al-Hadith “acted as a breeding ground for extremism in Yemen” often based on foreign funding (Issaev 2018: 15). Nevertheless, several currents of salafism had developed in Yemen, currents which have been variously described as ‘traditional’, ‘new’ and ‘jihadi’ salafism, the latter “represented by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Khoshafah 2021). After Ali Saleh resigned as President the Islah group backed the creation of another salafist movement, al Nusra, “led by Sheikh al Zindani and the Yemeni cell of the Muslim Brotherhood” (Issaev 2018: 14). It has been said that the Ansarallah idea is to “resurrect Zaydi leadership” so as to counter “encroaching Sunni ideologies” (Nagi 2019); but this really

means countering sectarian Sunni ideologies, in particularly the Salafism sponsored by the Saudis and – until the 2017 split between Riyadh and Doha – the similarly sectarian Muslim Brotherhood network, promoted by Qatar.

By late 2011 the ouster of Saleh led to a Gulf Council Cooperation (GCC) proposal, headed by the Saudis. Mansour Hadi, a weak figure, was to be a transitional president (2012-2014) while a National Dialogue Conference (NDC) took place. From a European perspective, sympathetic to Saudi tutelage, it was said that this GCC initiative, to which Saleh had agreed, was a transition process which prevented a looming civil war. Saleh ceded power to Hadi, who appeared as the only candidate on the ballot and won more than 99 per cent of votes cast in February 2012 (Popp 2015).

Meanwhile Ansarallah pursued the revolution, taking over several provinces around the capital and removing the sectarian Salafi presence in the north. That included controlling clans loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood aligned Islah Party in Saadah and Amran provinces. The slogans used were those of anti-extremism and anti-sectarianism (Nagi 2019).

Several authors agree that there is little basis for “the accusation that the Houthis are controlled from Iran and just a tool of Tehran’s expansion policy”, in part because “the Iranians supplied only very moderate assistance and had even tried to dissuade the Houthis from making a bid for power” (Popp 2015). A Yemeni journalist in Sanaa says that Iran’s nominal support is unlikely to have a decisive role in AnsarAllah’s “ultimate success or failure” (Abdulla Mohammed 2020). Iran certainly now provides “moral support” for the Ansarallah government. Yet that relationship is reinforced by the fact that the NSG opposes Riyadh and its sectarian, anti-Shia Wahhabi mission. It might be the case that Hezbollah has assisted in advisory role, for similar reasons (Khan 2016). Even those analysts who place emphasis on sectarian political divides say that “Tehran’s influence is likely limited, especially since Iranians and Houthis adhere to different schools of Shiite Islam” (Robinson 2021). Ansarallah led Yemen has made common cause with Palestine, Iran and Syria, for strategic and not sectarian reasons.

In any event, debates at the NDC lasted from March 2013 to January 2014, but Ansarallah rejected the NDC/GCC proposal for federal partition of the country into six regions. Instead, they allied with Saleh’s GPC and, in September 2014, took over the capital. The exclusion of “important political forces from the negotiations that cast doubt upon the legitimacy of the GCC initiative” (Popp 2015). Support for the NDC and the Hadi transitional regime evaporated. Hadi was a weak figure who had also alienated the sectarian groups: the Islah Party, the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and salafist groups. His interim mandate of two years was extended for one year by the House of Representatives (Issaev 2018: 16, 21). But the Ansarallah-led revolution of 2014-2015 changed everything.

The Saudi-UAE group intervened in March 2015 to prevent the Ansarallah coalition taking Aden (Nagi 2019). With this Saudi-led war the broader youth movement and the al Watan nationalist party fractured. Al Watan, established in 2011, had enjoyed 8 of the 40 youth representatives at the NDC and some al Watan figures participated in Hadi’s transitional regime (Toska 2018).

With the decline in support for Saudi styled Wahhabism, and while Islah denounced all other groups (including the southerners) as ‘atheists’, the al Ahmar clan linked itself to the masses of masses of mercenaries brought in to fight the Ansarallah coalition. That became a core part of the Saudi operation ‘Decisive Storm’ (Issaev 2018: 14).

The Saudis and Emiratis hired militias backed with western weapons. What the Sanaa government calls a “coalition of aggression” came to include the USA, the Saudis, Jordan, France, UK, Morocco, Pakistan, UAE, Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea and even Colombia (Stevenson 2019). Its breadth has a lot to do with successful US-led moves at the United Nations to designate the exile Hadi regime as the perpetual “government” and the de facto Ansarallah government in Sanaa as perpetual “Houthi rebels”.

Thousands of foreign mercenaries have been deployed by UAE in South Yemen, to prop up the Southern Transitional Council (STC). This has included US and German militia using contracted western, Saudi, Eritrean, Sudanese, even Colombian and poor Yemenis as their foot soldiers. It is said that “up to 15,000 Sudanese mercenaries” – just from that one country – have been fighting for foreign occupation powers in Yemen (Issa 2022).

Nevertheless, in July 2016 Ansarallah and the GPC formed a revolutionary government, the Supreme Political Council, which soon after became a National Salvation Government (NSG) (Rezeg 2016; Nagi 2019). This political alliance in the capital arose because of the convergence of interests. After the Ansarallah coalition took Sanaa the General People's Congress Party, by itself, “suffered from marginalization” (Al Hadaa 2017).

In December 2017, fearing Saleh would betray them to the Saudis, Ansarallah assassinated the former President as he tried to leave the country. The NSG interior ministry reported the “killing” of “Saleh and his supporters .. after he and his men blockaded the roads and killed civilians in a clear collaboration with the enemy countries of the coalition” (Al Jazeera 2017b).

2. Security Council betrays the Yemeni people

The appalling war against Yemen, leading to what has been called the world’s ‘worst humanitarian crisis’ (WFP 2022) has been promoted, rather than resolved, by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The UN sanctioned, genocidal siege takes advantage of poor recognition of the revolution, eight years on.

A serious revision of UNSC Resolutions is necessary, in particular Resolution 2216, which artificially pits the “legitimate power” of the exiled puppet regime against the “Houthi rebels” who are said to have carried out a “coup” (Issaev 2018: 5, 28). In reality, the UNSC sanctions imposed on Yemen’s de facto government are inflicted on most of the Yemeni population, while it is openly acknowledged that the country suffers a humanitarian crisis (Bell 2022).

Set up with a supposed primary purpose of preventing war, the UNSC over the past decade has effectively and repeatedly backed the US-Saudi led military repression of the only genuine revolution arising from the so called ‘Arab Spring’ (Ahmed 2021). Washington got its way at the U.N. from the beginning, as destroying the Ansarallah-led revolutionary coalition was part of its broader aim to remove all independent regimes and create a ‘New Middle East’ under US tutelage (Bransten 2006).

The Pentagon delegated the task of destroying the new Ansarallah-led Yemeni coalition (‘the Houthis’) to the Saudis as Washington convinced the Security Council to rubber stamp Saudi attacks on those parts of central Yemen (including the capital) controlled by the new government. This repression has been carried out under Chapter VII powers of the UN Charter and in the name of fighting al Qaeda terrorism and defeating a supposed threat to ‘international peace and security’. The war and siege involves direct U.N. intervention in the sovereign affairs of the Yemeni people, while siding with the Saudis, key sponsor of all the regional al Qaeda groups.

A recent study by the Yemen Centre for Human Rights (YCHR 2022) exposes the links between the systematic violence imposed on the Yemeni people and successive UNSC resolutions from 2011 to 2021 (CCHS 2022). In summary, the UNSC sought to defend an interim regime which arose during the democracy struggles between 2011 and 2015. It then demonised and sanctioned the merging revolutionary government while consistently backing a Gulf Cooperation Council (i.e. Saudi) ‘initiative’ to defend a Saudi puppet.

We might understand the involvement of three of the five permanent members of the UNSC (NATO members USA, UK and France), as they have initiated at least eight wars against the independent states and peoples of the region. But what of Russia and China? Those two counterweights backed the use of Chapter VII powers against Libya in 2011 (UN 2011) but, when NATO abused the ‘no fly zone’ pretext to destroy the little African country, they seemed to have learned a lesson. Russia and China opposed a similar U.N. authorised intervention against Syria the following year, in 2012 (Reuters 2012).

So what was different about Yemen in 2014? We could say that Syria was a recognised state under NATO attack, whereas Yemen was a society undergoing a genuine revolutionary transition (Tharappel 2021). In any case, as with Libya, Russia and China were simply not paying attention. Only in April 2015 did Russia abstain from the sixth UNSC resolution (2216), which enhanced sanctions against certain parties in Yemen (UN 2015).

That abstention was too little too late. The Yemen Centre for Human Rights study (CCHS 2022) shows that UNSC resolutions #2014 of 2011 (UNSC 2014b) and #2051 of 2012 (UNSC 2012) “paved the way” for misleading the international community, by claiming that the upheaval in Yemen was a “threat to international peace and security”. That broader threat was the means to later - in Resolution #2140 of February 2014 (UNSC 2014a) - invoke Chapter VII coercive powers.

In successive resolutions (2014, 2051, 2140, 2201, 2204, 2216 and even 2564 of 2021) this alleged “threat to international peace and security” was linked to citations of al Qaeda groups in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), gangs notoriously backed by the Saudis (WION 2020) and some other GCC members. Even U.S. sources recognise that al Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen oppose the Ansarallah-led Coalition (Robinson 2022). In other words, properly understood, any wider threat to peace from international terrorism clearly did not come from the new Yemeni revolutionary government, but from what the Yemenis call the UNSC backed ‘coalition of aggression’ (Civil Conglomerate 2021).

The Yemen Centre for Human Rights says resolution 2216 of April 2015 “shocked the world” by turning “a blind eye” to the atrocities committed by the US-Saudi coalition. From 2014 onwards the UNSC maintained the fiction that Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the interim president in 2012, remained the legitimate president of the country (Press TV 2021). On the other hand, those in Yemen’s National Salvation Government (Jonkers 2021), under Resolution 2216 of April 2015, were sanctioned and subject to travel bans and arms embargoes, for supposedly engaging in “acts that threaten the peace security or stability of Yemen”.

In successive resolutions (2014, 2140, 2201, 2216 and 2564) the UNSC promoted an ‘initiative’ by the Saudi dominated Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its linked (and now defunct) ‘National Dialogue Conference’ while paying lip service to ‘all parties’ in Yemen.

Never mind what the Yemeni people had said or done since 2012. Never mind that from early 2015 Hadi was in exile and subsequent house arrest in Saudi Arabia (al Jazeera 2017a). This extreme partisanship by the UNSC sought to freeze Yemen's political processes in time. Even the western media recognised that U.N. backing of the war was futile and disastrous, with a 2016 Time magazine headline crying: 'The U.N. failed Yemen's Children' (Offenheiser 2016).

No U.N. agency could function properly under this hopeless, interventionist regime. The UN's Human Rights Council wrung its hands, crying "we have failed Yemen", while impotently trying to blame 'both sides' for violations (Reuters in Geneva 2021). In late 2021 U.N Special Envoy Hans Grundberg filed a near useless report, speaking of his "frustration and despair" and urging an end to the fighting (Grundberg 2021).

The New York Times, which had backed every US-led war in the region for decades, also resorted to moral equivalence arguments, claiming that war crimes were committed by "both sides" (Cumming-Bruce 2019). But where were the U.N. Charter principles of sovereignty and non-intervention?

The defeat of Saudi led forces in Yemen, quietly backed by Washington, had become obvious by 2017 (Najjar and Al-Karimi 2017), even though the New York Times kept complaining this was all the fault of "the rebels" (Al-Mouallimi 2017).

With several years of defeat and humanitarian crisis the UNSC was left 'carrying the can' for this failed war and still backing a 'government' with an exiled 'President' who has barely seen Yemeni soil since early 2015. This was a great betrayal of the Yemeni people on the part of the U.N. Security Council.

3. Futile Foreign Intervention

As with Washington's dirty war on Syria, the war and siege imposed on the people of Yemen has been futile. The foreign intervention can certainly kill thousands and impose starvation and suffering on millions, but there is little likelihood of an outcome favourable to the USA and its 'coalition of aggression'.

The large scale foreign military intervention, beginning in early 2015, is best understood in terms of the threat an independent Yemen poses to Washington's regional ambitions. The Saudis certainly have their own ambitions on the Arabian peninsula, but for a century they have served as loyal agents of the British and then the USA. The war on Yemen is carried on principally because an independent Yemen – like an independent Syria and an independent Iran – pose a threat to Washington's 'New Middle East' plan. That imperial strategy is reinforced by Pentagon doctrines of eliminating 'disconnectedness' from its rule and achieving 'full spectrum dominance' in this designated 'Centcom' zone, by which Washington arrogates to itself much of the 'Middle East' as its "area of responsibility" (Anderson 2019: Ch.1; CentCom 2022).

Yemen sits on a key sea route between Washington's two principal agents in the region: the Israelis and the Saudis, and between the US designated CentCom zone and its Africom zone. Created in 2007, 'Africom' pretends to supervise all the African states except Egypt, which remains within CentCom (Africom 2022). The sea route past Yemen is also important for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which, however, does not advance by way of military conquest.

During the war the USA has relied on Saudi-led regional forces, only directly intervening from time to time. Their main target since the revolution is the Ansarallah-led coalition. In May 2017 a

US group entered the desert area of Marib and claimed to have killed “seven al Qaeda” operatives (Cronk 2017). That claim is highly suspect as Washington, at this time, was consistently supporting al Qaeda groups in Iraq and Syria (Anderson 2016: Ch.12). More likely the U.S. groups were trying to reinforce the Saudi grip on Marib city.

The British have also played a role in supporting the war on Yemen, as they did in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Both the US and Britain point out that they have ‘given’ several billion dollars in aid to Yemen; but this mostly goes through the exile regime and the minority areas inside Yemen that it controls. While Yemen’s economy is crippled by sanctions, secret British operations assist in destabilisation and billions in arms are pumped into the Saudi regime (Bell 2022). Iran says that the British government “as a U.N. pen-holder on Yemen, has absolutely failed to progress peace ... [and] has happily followed U.S. foreign policy, while selling over £22 billion of military equipment to the (Saudi) Coalition” (IRNA 2022).

The Saudi regime itself “successfully lobbied for its removal from the UN’s list of violators of children’s rights”, despite its atrocities against Yemeni children (Bell 2022). Yet the Saudi attacks on Yemen have revived “long standing territorial disputes” over three provinces, Jizan, Najran and Asir, which the Yemenis “consider to be occupied territories”. If the war persists, it is possible that Yemen may seek to reclaim these territories. Failure of the Saudi intervention in Yemen undermines their role in the Arabian peninsula (Issaev 2018: 28). After eight years the power play moved against the Hadi regime and its successors in Riyadh. Time, it has been said, “plays in favour” of the Ansarallah-led government in Sanaa (Issaev 2018: 5, 21).

What proportion of the population is under NSG control? To assess this we have to look at the population of each of the 21 governorates and put that together with best estimates of governorate control. The last census of the Yemeni population, by governorate, was in 2013 (CSO 2015). Many sources indicate that the NSG government controls the highly populated north and western provinces.

In early 2022 Qatar’s Al Jazeera recognised that “the bulk of Yemen’s northern highlands, as well as Sanaa, remain under the control of Houthi rebels”. They indicated that all or most of the following provinces “under the control of Houthi rebels”: Saadah, al Jawf, Amran, Sanaa, Hajjah, Mahwit, Hodeideh, Dhamar, Raymah, Ibb, al Bayda; and parts of Taiz and Dhale (Haddad 2022). Much of this is accepted by other media which are mostly hostile to Ansarallah (Glenn, Nada and Rowan 2022).

There are no accurate, independent measurements of control of the contested areas, which are almost 40% of the country. However, as at December 2022, sources in Sanaa (MS 2022) give the following estimates of governorates which are entirely, majority or partially under NSG control. This broadly fits the Al Jazeera estimates. Detail is in Table 1 below and includes assessments that the NSG controls 75% of Marib, except for the capital city and 2 districts, more than 50% of Taiz and 45% of Dhalea (MS 2022). If we assume ‘majority’ control means 50% to 80% that would mean from 16.9 to 20.5 million (of 28.2 million) or from 60% to 73% of the population is under NSG control. Population numbers are based on the last census in 2013 (CSO 2015).

Table 1: Control of Yemeni Governorates, Dec 2022	
Total population: 28.174m (2013)	Yemen Governorates (Popn in 2013)
Entirely under (National Salvation Government/Ansarallah-led) NSG control	Sanaa (2.279), Dhamar (1.697), Mahweet (0.732), Amran (1.123), Raymah (0.502),

[11.079 million]	Baydha (0.835), Ibb (3.911), Saadah (0.987)
Majority under NSG control [10.878 million] if NSG 50%/80%: 5.44/8.7 million	Hajjah (1.887), Jawf (0.663), Hodeidah (3.774), Taiz (4.554) [50-80%]
Minority under NSG control [1.757 million] if NSG 20-40%: 0.35-0.7 million	Mareb (Riyadh: 0.504), Dhalea (STC/UAE:0.602), Shabwah (Riyadh 0.651)
Control by foreign backed groups: STC / UAE and Riyadh [4.46 million]	Aden (STC/UAE: 1.087); Abyan (STC/UAE: 0.658), Al Mahrah (Riyadh: 0.400), Hadramaut (Riyadh: 1.329), Lahij (STC/UAE: 0.926), Socotra (STC/UAE: 0.060)
Sources: MS 2022; Haddad 2022; CSO 2015	

The foreign intervention has not advanced Saudi hegemony, it just maintains the killing and mass suffering through a UNSC backed siege. On the other hand, the US-led war has reinforced the Ansarallah slogan ‘Death to America’, ensuring that the effective government in Sanaa allies itself more closely to Iran, Syria and other independent states of the region.

When the situation stabilises it is highly likely that Yemen, like post-Washington Afghanistan, will seek to engage with the Chinese BRI-based trade route. China has a long history of supporting infrastructure development in Yemen, going back to the 1950s Chinese construction of a 266km road between Sanaa and the port city of Hodeidah. Over 2012-2013 China agreed to build three gas powered power plants and to expand container terminals in Aden and Mokha (Tekingunduz 2019). Like most of the world, China has maintained links with the exile Hadi regime, but has also had “routine meetings” with “all parties”. Aden remains particularly important for them (Tekingunduz 2019). Chinese pragmatism will eventually lead it to engage with the actual government of Yemen.

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