



MALCOLM H. KERR  
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER

**XCEPT**

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

OCTOBER 2022

# The Pitfalls of Saudi Arabia's Security-Centric Strategy in Yemen

Ahmed Nagi



---

# **The Pitfalls of Saudi Arabia's Security-Centric Strategy in Yemen**

Ahmed Nagi

---

© 2022 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. All rights reserved.

Carnegie does not take institutional positions on public policy issues; the views represented herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie, its staff, or its trustees.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without permission in writing from Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center or the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Please direct inquiries to:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: + 1 202 483 7600  
F: + 1 202 483 1840  
CarnegieEndowment.org

Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center  
Emir Bechir Street, Lazariah Tower  
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.  
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061  
Riad El Solh, Lebanon  
P: + 961 1 99 15 91  
F: + 961 1 99 15 91  
Carnegie-MEC.org

This publication can be downloaded at no cost at [Carnegie-MEC.org](http://Carnegie-MEC.org)

Cover photo: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank.



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

# CONTENTS

<b>Summary</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>A Historically Aggrieved Yemen</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Saudi Arabia Determines that Yemen Is a Security Problem</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>What Saudi Arabia's Security-Centric Approach Has Wrought—and How to Reverse It</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>13</b>



## Summary

Saudi Arabia's security-oriented approach to Yemen has foundered. The Saudi-led coalition has failed to defeat the Houthis militarily or to restore the government the group toppled. Moreover, Saudi militarization of the border with Yemen has damaged the Yemeni economy—with negative consequences for Saudi Arabia. Crucially, Saudi Arabia's security is contingent on Yemen's stability and economic prosperity. As such, Riyadh should contribute to reviving Yemen's moribund economy, both in the borderlands and in the inland agricultural sector.

## Key Themes

- Yemenis have long nursed historical grievances against Saudi Arabia. The loss of Asir, Najran, and Jizan occurred nearly a century ago but continues to breed resentment today. The Houthis have proven adept at capitalizing on such resentment as well as on that generated by Saudi Arabia's military campaign and related policies.
- The Saudi tendency to view Yemen through a security lens increased following the Houthis' capture of Sanaa in 2015. The subsequent Saudi-led military intervention failed to achieve its goals and hastened the collapse of the Yemeni state.
- Riyadh's militarization of areas on either side of the Saudi-Yemeni border, restrictions on the entry of Yemeni goods into Saudi territory, and clampdowns on Yemeni nationals in Saudi Arabia have disrupted cross-border communal and economic life, and done little to improve Saudi domestic security. Divorcing the Yemeni border areas from their hinterland, which the Saudis are attempting to do, is futile.

## Recommendations

- Instead of continuing or even intensifying its failed all-consuming security approach, Saudi Arabia should pivot toward a strategy that has as its aim the economic revival of the borderlands. Reactivating and strengthening the economic committees that were formed when the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000 would make for a good start, as would the creation of a free-trade zone.
- Investing in Yemen's agricultural sector is imperative. It would serve the triple purpose of propping up the Yemeni economy, encouraging Yemeni farmers and skilled workers to remain in their country, and providing the Saudi market with goods that are more affordable than those imported from elsewhere.
- If Yemen's agricultural sector is revitalized and once again employs a significant portion of the population, Riyadh can afford to ease entry requirements for Yemenis, as those who would want to move to Saudi Arabia would be unskilled, not skilled, laborers. Riyadh relies on unskilled foreign workers for construction, of which massive projects are underway, and there is no reason why Yemenis cannot once again fill the jobs in this sector.



## Introduction

In February 2022, Salem, a twenty-five-year-old man from Yemen's Ibb Governorate, returned to his family in a coffin.<sup>1</sup> Salem was killed in action; his unit had engaged in battle with the Saudi military in the borderland governorate of Al-Jawf, where he and others had been deployed by Ansar Allah, an Iran-backed Zaydi Shia rebel group better known as the Houthis. Following his burial, several members of Salem's immediate community, among them one of his brothers and six other men from his family, joined the Houthis.

At first blush, Salem comes across as an unlikely candidate for recruitment into the ranks of the Houthis. Ibb Governorate, in west central Yemen, is far from the Houthis' heartland in the country's northwest, and Salem, like most of the governorate's inhabitants, was a Shafi'i Sunni. Yet he was hardly alone. Houthi inroads beyond the Zaydi community and its traditional areas of influence make for a significant, albeit little-known, dimension of the ongoing conflict in Yemen, which erupted in 2014 and drew in regional actors the next year. The Houthis often tailor their narrative to appeal to Yemenis who, irrespective of their areas of origin and religious persuasion, are angered by the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, Riyadh's militarization of Yemen's border regions, and even Saudi Arabia's historical encroachment on Yemeni territory. This narrative eschews the sectarian slogans that the Houthis employ when targeting Zaydis, and focuses instead on the issue of defending Yemen's sovereignty, thereby feeding into patriotic sentiment shared by all.

Indeed, recent stringent Saudi security policies coupled with historical Yemeni grievances over Saudi Arabia's decades-old perceived usurpation of Yemeni territory have generated deep resentment, resulting in thousands of young Shafi'i Sunnis joining the Houthis. This has complicated Riyadh's strategy for bringing the Houthis to heel, and appears to have played a role in convincing the Saudis to settle for a ceasefire in spring 2022 and seize a chance to extricate themselves, at least partially, from a quagmire.

But the larger picture is even more important to take in. There are several indications that Saudi Arabia's security-centric strategy has failed. The most obvious sign is the condition in which Yemen finds itself today. Yemen is very nearly a failed state, and Saudi Arabia is one of the parties that bears responsibility for this development. A failed state on its doorstep hardly guarantees security for Riyadh. Moreover, with the latter's Yemeni adversaries armed with missiles and drones, any attempt by the Saudis to protect their country by creating buffer zones or building border walls is unlikely to have the desired effect. In order to achieve true security, Saudi Arabia should stop thinking about militarization, all the more so as its policies in this regard are generating pushback from Yemenis, and start thinking about shoring up what little political stability exists in Yemen and supporting economic projects in the country that benefit both Yemenis and Saudis. This is the only way to bring lasting security to Saudi Arabia's border regions with its neighbor, and to Saudi Arabia itself.



At the time, the Saudis' actions did not go unchallenged. The Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, which claimed the three territories, resisted the encroachment, and engaged its larger neighbor in a series of military confrontations.<sup>2</sup> These ceased with the Treaty of Taif of 1934, which called for the demarcation of the border and regulated border relations between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> (Around the same time, the Anglo-Saudi Agreement delineated the border between Saudi Arabia and South Yemen, which was still under British rule.)<sup>4</sup> The Taif Treaty was heavily tilted in Saudi Arabia's favor, particularly when it came to the matter of contested territory, something that was confirmed when, in line with the treaty's provisions, the demarcation of the border took place in 1937, and Asir, Jizan, and Najran were considered to lie within Saudi Arabia's territory.

The loss of Asir, Najran, and Jizan angered Yemenis, particularly those from adjoining areas that remained within Yemen. Communities and even families were divided by a border, even if it had yet to become a hard one. Moreover, two of the areas in question are inhabited by large numbers of Shia Muslims; Ismailis are the majority in Najran,<sup>5</sup> while significant communities of Zaydis live in Najran and Jizan.<sup>6</sup> After the border delimitation, the Ismailis and Zaydis of these regions found themselves in Saudi Arabia, whose religious establishment took a dim view of Shiism and whose ruling monarchy was politically hostile to the Zaydi-dominated Kingdom of Yemen. From a societal standpoint, the loss of Jizan was especially difficult to accept for Yemenis in the north, most of whom are Zaydi. The plight of the Zaydis and Ismailis in a repressive Saudi Arabia would later figure prominently in the Houthis' ideology.<sup>7</sup>

At the time, to deflect criticism of its conduct, the Kingdom of Yemen's government, which had negotiated the Taif Treaty from a position of weakness, maintained that, according to the treaty itself, it was not envisioned as final.<sup>8</sup> This was true. Article 22 stated that the agreement would remain subject to renewal every twenty years.<sup>9</sup> The first renewal took place in 1953. However, Saudi Arabia subsequently refused to renew the treaty, insisting that the border demarcation was final and that the renewal clause related to other provisions of the agreement.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, the border remained a festering issue. And not just between Saudi Arabia and Zaydi-majority North Yemen (the Kingdom of Yemen's successor state, which was established in 1970). In 1969, Saudi Arabia fought and defeated South Yemen in a war over the border town of Wadiyah, which the Saudi military had snatched from South Yemen as soon as the latter gained its independence from Britain in 1967. Following the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, a development that gave a great boost to Yemeni nationalism, the border dispute (which even included a maritime dimension) occasionally led to skirmishes between the Saudi and Yemeni armies. To prevent matters from escalating, the two countries' governments sought to reach a comprehensive and durable accord, and signed the Treaty of Jeddah in 2000.<sup>11</sup>

The Treaty of Jeddah led to a proper demarcation of the border, one considerably more detailed than that of the Taif Treaty, and officially resolved the border dispute between the two countries. However, given that there was no question of Saudi Arabia's ceding control of Asir, Najran, and Jizan, it ended up consecrating much of Taif even as it cleared up its ambiguities. Indeed, Article 1 stipulated that Taif was an essential part of the Treaty of Jeddah.<sup>12</sup> This did not sit well with many Yemenis, particularly as successive Yemeni governments had long maintained that the Taif Treaty was not final. This time, in a bid to placate its citizens, the government promised that the new agreement with Saudi Arabia would inaugurate an era of economic prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Yet most Yemenis appeared unconvinced.<sup>14</sup>

Yemen's borderlands did witness economic growth. This was due in large part to the proliferation of border markets, which sprang up organically during the second half of the twentieth century and expanded greatly during this century's first decade and a half.<sup>15</sup> Yet, however welcome, such a development did not change many minds. Just over a decade after the signing of the Treaty of Jeddah, during the popular uprising against then president Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime in 2011, many Yemenis raised slogans calling for the reversion of the lost territories to Yemeni rule.<sup>16</sup> In the decade since, the issue of usurped Yemeni land has continued to feature in popular discourse, and has become a mainstay of the Houthi historical narrative.<sup>17</sup>

## **Saudi Arabia Determines that Yemen Is a Security Problem**

In the Gulf, Yemen stands out in more ways than one. To begin with, it is a republic among monarchies and principalities. It is also a country with more democratic features than its neighbors—particularly Saudi Arabia. As a result, the latter has long viewed Yemen with suspicion. It is no coincidence that Yemen is not a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which includes all the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula.

For decades, Saudi Arabia relied on what was known as the Special Committee, a broad spectrum of Saudi-affiliated Yemeni tribal leaders and politicians, to preserve its interests in Yemen. The existence of such a body signified Saudi Arabia's belief that it had the right to meddle in Yemeni affairs. The Special Committee's actions often laid bare Riyadh's priorities, which were to contain and redirect political trends, whether democratic or other, that threatened the pro-Saudi political order in Yemen. This elitist, top-down approach to dealing with Yemeni society was resented by many Yemenis.<sup>18</sup>

In 2011, Saudi suspicion turned into apprehension. That year, the Arab Spring spread to the Gulf. Riyadh squelched protests in Saudi Arabia and, at Manama's request, intervened militarily to do the same in Bahrain. In Yemen, Saleh's regime was unable to quash growing protests and called on Riyadh to help mediate with the Yemeni opposition. The Saudis responded by presenting an initiative to transfer power to a new government, with Saleh retaining control of 50 percent of its members. Saleh would also receive full immunity from prosecution. Additionally, the initiative called for a national dialogue between the major Yemeni political forces.

The initiative proved largely ineffective amid much squabbling between Yemeni factions whose regional backers were angling for more influence. More and more, Riyadh began to fear that developments in Yemen might lead to a popular takeover of government and, worse yet, reignite protests in Saudi Arabia. Eventually, with Saudi backing, Saleh forcefully suppressed the Arab Spring-inspired unrest.<sup>19</sup>

Yet not long thereafter, Saleh had to contend with the eruption of a long-simmering problem. In 2014, the Houthis, who had clashed on and off with the government for years, launched a full-fledged insurrection. In September, they captured Sanaa, dislodging the Yemeni government from its seat of power. For the Saudis, this was the final straw. Riyadh concluded that Yemen, mired in its crises, was no longer safe and even constituted a security risk to Saudi Arabia. Much of the country was now in the hands of an armed militia backed by a regional power, Iran, with which Saudi Arabia was at loggerheads. Deprived of the ability to

manipulate the Yemeni political scene through the likes of the Special Committee, which had receded in influence following the rise of the Houthis and their capture of Sanaa, Riyadh decided to resort to force.<sup>20</sup>

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, at the head of a military coalition consisting of forces from several Arab countries, intervened in Yemen. The Saudis also began militarizing much of their border with the country. At first, this consisted of a heavy deployment of security forces and a further tightening of restrictions governing entry into Saudi Arabia via border crossings.<sup>21</sup> Shortly thereafter, measures expanded to include the recruitment of thousands of Yemenis to help Saudi forces patrol the border. Simultaneously, Riyadh began placing tight restrictions on a large number of Yemeni products normally destined for its markets. The main function of all these measures was to prevent smuggling and human trafficking networks from breaching the border. Notably, the Saudis did not enact such measures only opposite areas controlled by the Houthis, but also parts of the border that were controlled by Saudi Arabia's ally, the internationally recognized government of Yemen.<sup>22</sup>

The security strategy was not limited to the border. In the southern Saudi cities of Jizan, Najran, Abha, and Khamis Mushait, among others, the Saudi authorities sought to reduce the number of Yemeni workers. Given their proximity to these cities and their familiarity with their culture and traditions, tens of thousands of Yemenis have historically preferred to work there. Now, however, many of them were caught up in a security dragnet. Some were deported for residing and working in Saudi Arabia illegally (previously an offense the authorities tended to overlook when it involved Yemeni nationals), and others for flimsier reasons, such as suspicion of sympathy for the Houthis. Riyadh also raised the fees that law-abiding Yemenis had to pay to obtain and renew residence permits. This obliged many cash-strapped Yemenis to leave Saudi Arabia, even if it meant returning to a Yemen that was descending into war.<sup>23</sup>

The Saudi all-security approach even entailed demographic engineering of its own population in the border regions. The practice began before Riyadh's intervention in Yemen in 2015, but grew in scope afterward. In mid-2015, Abha, a city in Asir, was hosting Saudis from Asir's border villages whom the authorities had relocated.<sup>24</sup> According to one report, that same year, and coinciding with the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, Riyadh evacuated 15,000 inhabitants of 96 border villages.<sup>25</sup>

When the inhabitants of a Saudi village in the border region are evacuated and relocated to places farther inland, the official reason for such a measure is their protection; the Saudi authorities announce that they are concerned that the village in question lies within the Houthis' range of fire.<sup>26</sup> The real reason, however, has to do with the fact that, over the years, some Saudi Zaydis (and a lesser number of Ismailis) have crossed into Yemen and joined the Houthi movement.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the Saudi authorities have sought to physically distance their Shia communities from those on the Yemeni side of the border.

## What Saudi Arabia's Security-Centric Approach Has Wrought—and How to Reverse It

In the politico-military sense, the Saudi-led coalition's intervention has been demonstrably unsuccessful. The coalition's dual aim was to defeat the Houthis and restore to power the internationally recognized Yemeni government. However, in the seven years since the coalition launched its campaign, the Houthis have enlarged the territory under their control, and the internationally recognized government has yet to return to Sanaa. Today, the Houthis govern approximately 30 percent of the country, which is home to 65 percent of the population of Yemen, while the internationally recognized government retains control of the rest of the national territory through an assortment of groups, some of whose loyalty to the government is nominal.<sup>28</sup>

In fact, the irony is that the Saudi-led coalition's campaign served to solidify and subsequently strengthen the bond between the Houthis and Iran.<sup>29</sup> Iran viewed the war as an opportunity to expand its agenda in Yemen through providing the Houthis with weapons and military expertise. This enabled Tehran to undermine Saudi border security and settle scores with Riyadh. The Houthis had their own reasons for increasing their cooperation with, and ultimately their reliance on, Iran. Following their seizure of Sanaa and the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition, the Houthis found themselves isolated from almost all the countries in the region, making it imperative for them to enhance their relationship with Iran. Today, most of the weapons the Houthis use are provided or financed by the Iranians. It is these weapons that have enabled the Houthis to launch drone and missile attacks on Saudi territory, which at once raise the group's military stature and demonstrate Iran's growing reach. In addition, Iran has directed its media outlets, diplomatic corps, and political lobbies abroad to support the Houthis, thereby granting them international political exposure.<sup>30</sup>

The coalition's dual failure, which has included sustaining substantial military casualties, was in large part an outcome of the conflicting agendas its two pillars, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had had from the campaign's first day. Whereas Saudi Arabia emerged as a strong backer of the Yemeni government, the UAE helped to form a separatist force in the south with a military arm called the Southern Transitional Council (STC) to serve as a proxy-of-sorts for Abu Dhabi.<sup>31</sup> To complicate matters further, conflict erupted between coalition proxies in Aden, Shabwa, Socotra, and other areas, weakening coalition operations and giving the Houthis an excellent opportunity to expand in several areas, including Marib, Shabwa, and the western coast.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, tensions between pro-government forces and the STC escalated in July 2019, when the UAE announced its withdrawal from Yemen. In April 2022, the Saudis and Emiratis agreed on the formation of a Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), which is supposed to bring under its wing all the groups sponsored or aided by either country, and direct their combined energies against the Houthis.<sup>33</sup> However, it is far from certain that the PLC will prove able to unify the conflicting agendas of its disparate members and roll back Houthi advances.

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, one of the most alarming failures of the country's security-centric policies is that the Houthis have capitalized on anti-Saudi sentiment, both old and new, among Yemenis. This is particularly evident in the inroads the Houthis have made outside their traditional heartland. To drive up recruitment among Sunnis, with whom Zaydi-infused religious rhetoric has little chance of resonating,

the Houthis have relied on a mix of historical grievances and contemporary resentment.<sup>34</sup> The latter is generated not just by the Saudi-led military campaign itself, but also by Riyadh's border security policies and its deportation of Yemenis for reasons related to either domestic security or Saudization of the workforce.

This is where Salem, the young man from Ibb Governorate who joined the Houthis and was killed in battle, enters the picture. Salem was familiar with many if not all of the reasons for Yemeni resentment of Saudi Arabia, and was animated by some of them. For example, according to his family, he had long felt strongly that Yemen should take back those of its territories that had become part of Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> That said, historical grievances alone were not enough to motivate him to take up arms. What caused Salem's simmering resentment to explode was contemporary Saudi policy, both border-related and domestic. On the domestic side, there was Salem's own bitter experience in Saudi Arabia; he had worked there for two years before the authorities deported him to Yemen in 2014 for having entered Saudi Arabia illegally. Returning to Yemen, Salem found his homeland falling apart. And, for him, the Saudi role in Yemen's disintegration was clear. Not only were the Saudis at the head of the coalition that was carrying out attacks on the ground and raining down bombs from the air, but Riyadh was spatially and demographically reengineering regions within Yemen, particularly in the borderlands, through a project of militarization.<sup>36</sup>

Salem began looking around to see if any of his compatriots were resisting the Saudis and their actions in Yemen. The Houthis fit the bill. From the very start of the Saudi-led intervention in 2015, they had begun distributing motor vehicle license plates for Najran, Asir, and Jizan, listing the three as Yemeni governorates. At the time, some Yemenis who did not espouse the Houthis' ideology had found such an initiative heartening, taking it as evidence that the group had transcended its parochial and sectarian origins and assumed a Yemeni nationalist stance.<sup>37</sup> By 2017, two years into the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention, more Yemenis from beyond the Houthi heartland, many of them Sunnis, had gravitated toward the Houthis, viewing them as a national resistance movement.<sup>38</sup> Salem was one such Yemeni. In 2017, he joined the so-called Houthi People's Committees, which are groups of volunteer local fighters. Five years later, he was killed in battle.<sup>39</sup>

Riyadh's military intervention, with its singular focus on defeating the Houthis, also had another effect that almost immediately proved detrimental to Saudi national interests. In intensifying the struggle between the Yemeni state and the Houthis, the Saudi-led campaign drew everybody's attention away from other actors in an increasingly fragmented Yemen and emboldened them to strike. In April 2015, the month following the intervention, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) achieved an unprecedented military success when it attacked and quickly seized control of the city of Mukalla. AQAP is a sworn enemy of Saudi Arabia, whose monarchy it aims to overthrow.<sup>40</sup> Riyadh now had to contend with the group having gained control of a significant port city and its environs. The Saudis and their allies had to divert significant resources from their anti-Houthi campaign to the matter of dislodging AQAP from Mukalla.<sup>41</sup> This objective was achieved in April 2016. Paradoxically, however, because this successful campaign was led by the UAE and the Yemeni forces it had helped form, the Emiratis were able to further their influence in Yemen, a development that unsettled Saudi Arabia.<sup>42</sup>

On the humanitarian side, the Saudi-led campaign has had catastrophic consequences, with several regions of Yemen perpetually on the brink of famine.<sup>43</sup> It has also devastated Yemen's economy. Airstrikes have destroyed many commercial facilities and disrupted the economy in several Yemeni governorates. Over a quarter (26 percent) of all small businesses in Yemen have closed since March 2015. Most of the businesses that closed (95 percent) did so because they were physically damaged.<sup>44</sup> In addition, military operations targeted and rendered inoperable much transport-related infrastructure, including main roads, bridges, and gasoline stations. The indirect consequences were extensive. The war made it very difficult for many private companies to export their products, due to logistical reasons as well as a declining appetite among foreign importers to risk dealing with companies in a war-ravaged country. This pushed a large number of Yemeni businesspeople to leave the country and seek opportunities abroad. The outflow of capital associated with such an exodus made the economic situation even worse, leaving thousands of Yemenis jobless during the most trying of circumstances.<sup>45</sup>

The fate of the famed Yemeni border markets, which had made once desolate areas adjacent to Saudi Arabia economically prosperous, typifies the failure between the two countries. The markets, which in the first decade of this century became a magnet for both Yemenis and Saudis—whether entrepreneurs, migrant workers, or customers—fell victim first to Houthi expansion and then to Riyadh's militarization of the borderlands. Today, the border markets no longer exist. The war obliged dozens of them to close. Most of these were located in the northwest, where military confrontations between the Saudi-led forces and the Houthis were especially fierce. Other markets relocated inland and obtained a new lease on life—but in the process lost their key characteristic as cross-border trade hubs.<sup>46</sup>

As though this were not enough, Riyadh is toying with a plan to revive a long-stalled border barrier project in Jizan, just opposite Yemen's Saadah Governorate, and even carve out a buffer zone within Yemen's Hajjah Governorate.<sup>47</sup> Such moves would breach Saudi-Yemeni border agreements, notably the Treaty of Jeddah, which stipulates that both sides of the border should remain free of militarization and that livestock herders have the right to cross back and forth. More significantly, however, it would have little effect on border security itself. Buffer zones and border walls cannot deter drones and missiles. What they can do, particularly in the Saudi-Yemeni case, is damage the social fabric among border communities and deepen their grievances, which the Houthis or others might subsequently harness for their own purposes.

Notably, the loss of the border markets and other changes to the border economy did not affect Yemeni border communities only. These developments shattered the economic ecosystem of many Saudi border communities. With opportunities for legal trade greatly diminished, members of Saudi border communities, like their counterparts in Yemen, turned to smuggling, often building on business relationships they had forged with Yemenis over the years, and undermining Saudi Arabia's security by smuggling arms and much else into Saudi territory.

Additionally, the security restrictions imposed by Saudi Arabia on the Yemeni border and on Yemeni workers did not succeed in stopping the flow of Yemenis into Saudi Arabia. More than ever before, the labor market in Yemen could not alleviate the unemployment problem, which was increasing across virtually all segments of Yemeni society. This contributed to the migration of many Yemenis to Saudi Arabia, despite the risks involved in what had become an illegal undertaking. The prevalence of human trafficking, the number of people on both sides of the border engaged in the business, and the relative ease with which they smuggle

people across have caused costs to plummet. In interviews, several border inhabitants recalled that, before the war, the cost of smuggling a person from Yemen to Saudi Arabia was 2,000 Saudi riyals (\$533). As a result of the war, this figure has declined to 700 riyals (\$186).<sup>48</sup>

Yet Saudi Arabia continues doggedly pursuing its security-centric strategy, which has accelerated the fragmentation of Yemen and its division into different spheres of influence. Measures Riyadh enacts along or just over the border directly disrupt the lives of local communities, indirectly affect the economy of Yemen as a whole, and do not enhance Saudi domestic security. Divorcing the Yemeni border areas from their hinterland, which is what the Saudis are attempting to do through militarization and the buffer zone project, is virtually impossible. At the time of writing, and despite the emergence of the PLC, the collapse of the Yemeni state was ongoing. If Riyadh does not redirect its efforts toward effecting political and economic reform in Yemen, the latter's collapse will continue and even gain pace, an outcome that would further threaten Saudi Arabia's security.

Because Saudi Arabia's security-centric security approach to Yemen has sown economic devastation, a humanitarian crisis, widespread resentment, and, perhaps most damning of all, greater instability, a new policy framework is required. The clearest win-win option would entail adopting a program of economic revitalization, as Saudi Arabia would stand to benefit almost as much as Yemen, including on the security front. In fact, given the Saudis' apparent intention to scale back their military operations in Yemen in return for the Houthis ending attacks on Saudi soil, this becomes the only reasonable option. A Saudi withdrawal that does not include some kind of agreement or at least tacit understanding with the Houthis could embolden the latter to try to take over more of the country, thereby plunging Yemen into another spiral of conflict. It is in Riyadh's interest to avert such an outcome. To this end, the Saudis should work with any number of Yemenis, starting with their allies and eventually with the Houthis themselves, to place the country on the road to recovery.

Riyadh could begin by reestablishing and strengthening the joint Saudi-Yemeni economic committees that were formed when the Treaty of Jeddah was signed in 2000, but that were never particularly active. To begin with, the committees' recommendations for economic recovery projects in the borderlands can go into effect in areas controlled by the Yemeni government—with which Saudi Arabia maintains close ties. Later, if the Saudis reach an understanding with the Houthis, they can be implemented elsewhere.

Although resurrecting the border markets should stand as the ultimate goal of the economic committees, this is admittedly an ambitious undertaking. In the interim, the committees might consider taking on more modest projects that would reap economically beneficial results, albeit on a smaller scale. One such project would entail the creation by Saudi Arabia of a (single) free-trade zone within its territory, but somewhere along its border with Yemen. The Saudis could take their cue from the Mazunah Free Zone, established by Oman on its southwestern border with Yemen's Mahra Governorate. The inhabitants of Mahra and beyond have benefited greatly from such an economic lung. Should Riyadh launch a similar scheme on its soil, it would retain supervision of security matters while stimulating trade between Yemenis and Saudis.

Investing in certain economic sectors in inland Yemen would also help to stabilize communities deracinated by war and cast adrift, particularly if this is accompanied by a lifting or easing of restrictions on the importation of Yemeni goods. The most significant of these sectors is agriculture. Yemen boasts vast tracts

of agricultural land in the approximately 65 percent of the country's territory that is not under the control of the Houthis, and where Saudi Arabia and its local allies or proxies hold sway. Agricultural enterprises in these areas could provide work for thousands of farmers and laborers, as was the case before the war. At the time, western and southern areas of the country exported a variety of agricultural products, including fruits and cereals. This could become reality once again, but only with investment as well as a reopening of Saudi markets to Yemeni agricultural produce.

If Yemen's agricultural sector is revitalized and once again employs a significant portion of the country's farmers and experienced agricultural workers, such skilled laborers would have a strong incentive to remain in the country. As a result, Saudi Arabia could afford to ease entry requirements for Yemenis without fear of inadvertently encouraging them to stream out of Yemen, where they are much needed, and into Saudi Arabia. Those Yemenis most likely to jump at the opportunity to move to Saudi Arabia would be unskilled laborers: the very people Riyadh relies on for construction. Traditionally, Yemenis have made up a significant portion of the workforce in this sector, particularly in southern Saudi Arabia. Today, Saudi Arabia has a number of large-scale economic projects that require tens of thousands of workers, and there is no good reason why Yemenis cannot once again fill the jobs on offer.

What Saudi Arabia must realize is that its security is in large part contingent on Yemen's stability and economic prosperity. Perhaps ironically, a blinkered security-only approach results in precious little security, as evidenced by developments thus far. Continuing to pursue such an approach, which has already had wide-ranging negative effects, would cause yet more chaos, generate even greater resentment, and lead to a further increase in recruits for the Houthi movement.

## Conclusion

As the conflict in Yemen enters its eighth year, it deepens existing divisions, creates new ones, and sucks more and more Yemenis into the warring military camps. Continued war within Yemen following the anticipated Saudi withdrawal would further drive the state toward collapse, which in turn would threaten neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia itself, in any number of ways. Resentment of Saudi Arabia is unlikely to dissipate simply because the Saudis decide, after a years-long military campaign in Yemen and an even longer history of meddling in Yemeni affairs, to withdraw their army from the country.

Indeed, much more will be required to assuage the Yemenis alienated by Saudi political, military, and economic policies, particularly those of the past few years. And the onus will fall on Riyadh to do the assuaging. Otherwise, Yemen might turn into another Afghanistan, a country abandoned by outside powers and left to implode. It behooves Saudi Arabia to take action now, before it is too late, to reach an understanding with the Yemeni factions, including the Houthis, and thereby contribute to stabilizing Yemen and propping up its battered economy.



## About the Author

**Ahmed Nagi** is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where his research centers on Yemen.

## Acknowledgments

This publication was produced with support from the X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) X-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program, funded by UK aid from the UK government. The X-Border Local Research Network—a partnership between the Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, and the Rift Valley Institute—carries out research work to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this publication are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center or the UK government.

## Notes

- 1 This is a pseudonym.
- 2 Issam al-Sayyid, *Asir fi al-Alaqa al-Siyasiyya al-Sa'udiyya al-Yamaniyya: 1919-1934* [Asir in Saudi-Yemeni Political Relations: 1919-1934] (Cairo: Al-Zahra Publishing House, 1989), 208.
- 3 Treaty of Islamic Friendship and Arab Brotherhood (Treaty of Taif), United Nations Peacemaker, May 20, 1934, [https://peace-maker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SA%20YE\\_340520\\_Treaty%20of%20Islamic%20friendship%20and%20Arab%20brotherhood%20%28Treaty%20of%20Taif%29.pdf](https://peace-maker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SA%20YE_340520_Treaty%20of%20Islamic%20friendship%20and%20Arab%20brotherhood%20%28Treaty%20of%20Taif%29.pdf).
- 4 Jacob Goldberg, "The Origins of British-Saudi Relations: The 1915 Anglo-Saudi Treaty Revisited," *Historical Journal* 28, no. 3 (1985), 693–703, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2639145>.
- 5 Human Rights Watch, "The Ismailis of Najran: Second-Class Saudi Citizens," *September 22, 2008*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/09/22/ismailis-najran/second-class-saudi-citizens>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 "Al-Houthiyyounm fi Watha'iq Khassa (4) ... Khara'it Houthiyya Qadima wa Haditha Tudih al-Takhtit li al-Saytara ala Manatiq Yamaniyya wa Saudiyya wa Kayfiyyata al-Tawaghghul al-Askari wa al-Fikri fiha" [The Houthis in Special Documents (4) ... Houthi Maps Old and Recent Clarify the Plan to Control Yemeni and Saudi Regions, and the Military and Intellectual Incursion into Them], *Almasdar Online*, April 30, 2020, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/180890>.
- 8 Fadel Al-Maqhafi, "More than Just a Border Dispute: The Regional Geopolitics of Yemeni-Saudi Relations," PhD Thesis, 2012, School of Oriental and African Studies SOAS, University of London, 130.
- 9 Treaty of Islamic Friendship and Arab Brotherhood (Treaty of Taif), United Nations Peacemaker, May 20, 1934, [https://peace-maker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SA%20YE\\_340520\\_Treaty%20of%20Islamic%20friendship%20and%20Arab%20brotherhood%20%28Treaty%20of%20Taif%29.pdf](https://peace-maker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SA%20YE_340520_Treaty%20of%20Islamic%20friendship%20and%20Arab%20brotherhood%20%28Treaty%20of%20Taif%29.pdf).
- 10 Fadel Al-Maqhafi, "More than Just a Border Dispute: The Regional Geopolitics of Yemeni-Saudi Relations," 170.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 "Yemen, Saudi Arabia Sign Border Deal," BBC News, June 12, 2000, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/788153.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/788153.stm).
- 13 "Muqabalat Sahifat Okadh ma' al-Akh Ra'is al-Jumhuriyya" [Okaz Newspaper's Interview with the Brother President of the Republic], Yemen National Information Center, June 29, 2000, <https://yemen-nic.info/presidency/detail.php?ID=6114>.
- 14 "Al-Sa'udiyya wa al-Yaman Tuwaqi'an Ittifaqan Niha'iyyan wa Da'iman li'l Hudood," [Saudi and Yemen Sign Final and Permanent Border Agreement], *Al-Bayan*, June 13, 2020 <https://www.albayan.ae/last-page/2000-06-13-1.1068543>.
- 15 Ahmed, Nagi, "Yemeni Border Markets: From Economic Incubator to Military Frontline," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, June 14, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/06/14/yemeni-border-markets-from-economic-incubator-to-military-frontline-pub-84752>.
- 16 "Nashitoun Yutliqoun Harakat 'Asir' (Asir wa Najran wa Jizan) min al-Ihtilal al-Sa'udi" [Activists Launch 'Asir' Movement to Recover Yemeni Lands (Asir, Najran, and Jizan) from Saudi Occupation], *Yemen-Press.com*, June 6, 2012, <https://yemen-press.net/news9920.html>.  
See also "Harakah Huqooqiyya Yamaniyya Tutilib bi Isti'adat Aradin 'Ihtallatha' al-Sa'udiyya" [Yemeni Rights Movement Demands Return of Lands "Occupied" by Saudi], *AlBalad News*, June 7, 2012, <https://www.albaladnews.net/more-46257-2-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9%20%D8%AD%D9%82%D9%88%D9%82%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%20%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6%20%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9>.
- 17 "Nashitoun Siyasiyyoun fi Sahat al-Taghyeer Yushhiroun Munadhama li Isti'adat al-Siyada ala al-Arady al-Yamaniyya fi al-Mamla-ka al-Arabiyya al-Sa'udiyya" [Political Activists in Change Square Announce an Organization to Restore Sovereignty over Yemeni Lands in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia], *Mareb Press*, June 12, 2011, [https://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=34550](https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=34550).  
See also "Harakat Asir min Ajl Isti'adat al-Arady al-Yamaniyya min al-Sa'udiyya Tusdir Bayanan" [The Asir Movement for the Recovery of Yemeni Lands from Saudi Arabia Issues a Statement], *Yemen-Press.com*, September 25, 2012, <https://yemen-press.net/news12792.html>.

- 18 “Watha’iq Siriyya Muharraba.. Al-Jazeera Net Takshuf Haqiqat al-Mawaqif al-Sa’udiyya min Abraz al-Milaffat al-Yamaniyya” [Leaked Secret Documents.. Al Jazeera Net Reveals the Truth of Saudi Positions on the most Important Yemeni Files], Al Jazeera, August 2, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/8/2/%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%B3%D8%B3%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84>.
- 19 Guido Steinberg, “Leading the Counter-Revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring,” German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Research Paper, June 2014, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2014\\_RP07\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2014_RP07_sbg.pdf).
- 20 “Saytarat al-Houthiyyeen ala San’a... Thawra Mudadda wa Ajanda Kharijiyya?” [The Houthis’ Takeover of Sanaa: A Counter-revolution and a Foreign Agenda?], Qantara.de, September 29, 2014, <https://ar.qantara.de/content/l-yn-ysrtfq-lslm-wlshrk-lwtny-fy-lymn-sytr-lhwthyyen-l-snthwr-mdd-wjnd-khrjy>.
- 21 Eleonora Ardemagni, “The Saudi-Yemeni Militarized Borderland,” *Sada* (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 9, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/80745>.
- 22 Ghamdan Al-Yusufi, “Madha Khalf Tajneed Yamaniyyeen ala al-Hudood al-Sa’udiyya?” [What is Behind the Military Conscriptation of Yemenis on the Saudi Border?], *Daraj*, September 3, 2019, <https://daraj.com/21299/>.
- 23 Ali Al-Dailami, “Yemenis in Saudi Arabia: Less Money to Send Home, More Pressure to Leave,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, September 3, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11448>.
- 24 Author observation based on field visit to the area in May 2015.
- 25 Lebanese Forces Official Website, “Al-Hayat: Al-Sa’udiyya Sharra’at bi Ikhlā’ 96 Qarya fi Jazan ‘ala al-Hudood ma’ al-Yaman” [Al-Hayat: Saudi Arabia Has Begun Evacuating 96 Villages in Jazan on the Border with Yemen], April 5, 2015, <https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2015/04/05/ksa-yemen-jazan-border/>. Note: Jizan is also known as Jazan.
- 26 “Qura Mahjura ala al-Hudood al-Sa’udiyya ma’ al-Yaman Mira’t li In’ikasad al-Harb” [Abandoned Villages on Saudi’s Border with Yemen are a Mirror of the War’s Repercussions], Swissinfo.ch, October 8, 2017, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%89-%D9%85%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A2%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B9%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8/43580074>.
- 27 Author interview with three residents of Hajjah (via phone), March 11, 2022.
- 28 “Kharitat al-Nufoudh fi al-Yaman: Man Yusaytir ala madha ba’d Amayn min al-Harb?” [Map of Influence in Yemen: Who Controls What After Two Years of War?], Monte Carlo Doualiya (MCD), March 26, 2017, <https://www.mc-doualiya.com/articles/20170326-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B0-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%9F>.
- 29 Trevor Johnston et al., eds., *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hezbollah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2020), 63, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2551.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2551.html).
- 30 Benoit Faucon and Dion Nissenbaum, “Iran Navy Port Emerges as Key to Alleged Weapons Smuggling to Yemen, U.N. Report Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 9, 2022, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-navy-port-emerges-as-key-to-alleged-weapons-smuggling-to-yemen-u-n-report-says-11641651941?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos4](https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-navy-port-emerges-as-key-to-alleged-weapons-smuggling-to-yemen-u-n-report-says-11641651941?mod=hp_lead_pos4).
- 31 Gregory D. Johnsen, “The UAE’s Three Strategic Interests in Yemen,” Arab Gulf States Institute, February 2022, <https://agsiw.org/the-uaes-three-strategic-interests-in-yemen/>.
- 32 Ahmed Nagi, “Empowering the Separatists,” *Diwan* (blog), Carnegie Middle East Center, July 9, 2020, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82263>.
- 33 Ibrahim Jalal, “The Riyadh Agreement: Yemen’s New Cabinet and What Remains to Be Done,” Middle East Institute, February 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/riyadh-agement-yemens-new-cabinet-and-what-remains-be-done>.
- 34 “‘Taqrir Khas’ Yakshuf an Arqam al-Murahhaleen al-Yamaniyyeen min al-Sa’udiyya wa Waqi’ al-Mughtarib al-Murr” [Special Report Reveals the Numbers of Yemeni Deportees from Saudi and the Bitter Reality of the Expatriate], *Al-Mushahid*, March 13, 2018, <https://almushahid.net/27528/>.

- 35 Author interview with Salem's brother (via phone), March 4, 2022.
- 36 Author interview with Salem (via phone), January 19, 2021.
- 37 "Shahid bi al-Soura al-Houthiyyoon Yusaytiroon ala Najran wa Yuhawwilooha ila al-Muhafadha al-Yamaniyya Raqam "23" [See the Picture, the Houthis Control Najran and Turn it into the Yemeni Governorate No. '23'], Sahafah, July 13, 2015, <https://sahafaa.net/show1986289.html>.
- 38 Author observation based on several visits to areas in under the Houthis' control in 2016 and 2017.
- 39 Author interview with Salem's father and brother (via phone) on March 2 and 4, respectively, 2022.
- 40 Aisha Aljaedy, "Before Kabul, a Yemeni City Was Taken Over by Al Qaeda. This is its story," Open Democracy, October 1, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/before-kabul-a-yemeni-city-was-taken-over-by-al-qaeda-this-is-its-story/>.
- 41 Author observation.
- 42 Eleonora Ardemagni, "Two Hadramawts' Emerge in a Fractured Yemen," Middle East Institute, April 22, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/two-hadramawts-emerge-fractured-yemen>.
- 43 UN News, "Yemen Facing 'Outright Catastrophe' Over Rising Hunger, Warn UN Humanitarians," March 14, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1113852>.
- 44 United Nations Development Programme, UNDP SMEPS Rapid Business Survey, November 16, 2015, [file:///C:/Users/farra/Dropbox/My%20PC%20\(LAPTOP-GM7E0KDO\)/Downloads/UNDP-SMEPS-Rapid-Business-Survey.pdf](file:///C:/Users/farra/Dropbox/My%20PC%20(LAPTOP-GM7E0KDO)/Downloads/UNDP-SMEPS-Rapid-Business-Survey.pdf).
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ahmed Nagi, "Yemeni Border Markets: From Economic Incubator to Military Frontline," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2021/06/14/yemeni-border-markets-from-economic-incubator-to-military-frontline-pub-84752>.
- 47 Aziz El Yaakoubi, "Saudis Seek Buffer Zone with Yemen in Return for Ceasefire – Sources," Reuters, November 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-saudi-usa-int-idUSKBN27X20B>.
- 48 Author interview with three borderland inhabitants from Abs and Wadiyah districts (via phone), February 17, 2022.



**MALCOLM H. KERR**  
**CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER**

Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.  
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon  
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

[Carnegie-MEC.org](https://Carnegie-MEC.org)