

(Human) Insecurity in a Fragmented State

The brutal war and dire humanitarian crisis in Yemen has created a fragile security situation in the country. The public perception of safety reflects conflict dynamics and Yemen's fragmented state. In a recent Yemen Polling Center (YPC) survey, a fifth of the population was found to feel unsafe; 65 percent on the other hand feel mostly or always safe. Women generally feel less safe than men.¹ How people feel about their security varies widely by geographic area; determining factors are the nature of the de facto authority present in a given area and whether multiple authorities are in conflict for control. While Yemenis are united in their concern about living conditions, geography determines the way people feel about economic conditions and their physical security. In short, there are clear differences between the sentiments of the residents in areas held by Ansarallah (Houthis) and those in the rest of the country. The former endures more economic stress and fears the continuation of war and airstrikes; the latter fares slightly better in terms of living conditions, but fears militias, criminal gangs, armed groups and insecurity related to what residents perceive as the "absence of the state."

Livelihoods: What Yemenis Fear the Most

Over the last five years, Yemen's population has suffered from a civil war and military intervention that has devastated the country, sparking the world's worst humanitarian crisis. In 2019, the United Nations estimated that 24 million people needed assistance in Yemen; this included hundreds of thousands living in famine conditions.² Forty-eight percent of Yemenis cite living conditions as their primary concern, and this includes fear of poverty, disease and lack of public services. More than half of the sample stated that employment, the economy, public services, food and water accessibility, and human and women's rights are worse than one year ago. The war's primary aggressors exacerbate the poor living situation by fueling fears of hunger, disease and unemployment. While all Yemenis are affected by the worsening economic conditions, concerns about livelihood vary according to geography.

In Ansarallah-held areas, almost half of residents rated their families' general situation as "very bad," compared to 12 percent in the rest of the country. Residents of these areas are also more concerned about the economy (55 percent) than in the rest of the country (36 percent). Indeed, economic hardship is grave for families in the northwest. Sixty-nine percent of residents of Ansarallah-held areas have lost their jobs and with that their families' income, compared to 40 percent in other areas. Public servants in Yemen have spent extended periods without salaries since the central bank was relocated by the Hadi government to Aden in late 2016, with the withholding of salaries increasingly becoming a weapon in the war, affecting those living under Ansarallah control more than other Yemenis. With over 30 percent of the population employed in the public sector, 1.2 million public servants rely on these salaries each

¹ YPC nationwide representative survey, April–July 2019. Data cited in this paper is drawn from this survey unless otherwise indicated.

² UN News "Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN" Feb 2019. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811> (Accessed 3 March 2020).

month.³ These circumstances have left 82 percent of the population in Ansarallah-held areas in need of aid, with 61 percent in acute need. In areas outside of Ansarallah control, 68 percent of the population needs aid, including 52 percent severe cases in need of support.⁴ The Saudi-led coalition's sea, land and air blockade, as well as the indiscriminate bombing of vital infrastructure, has exacerbated the economic situation in Ansarallah-held areas. Behind the coalition's physical war effort is an indirect attempt to weaken Ansarallah by exerting economic pressure. Over the last few years, the UN Panel of Experts' reports have regularly outlined how both parties — the internationally recognized government (IRG) supported by Saudi Arabia, as well as Ansarallah — practice economic warfare.⁵ This economic pressure has had immediate effects on the population. With regard to the coalition, most notable is its blockade of major import hubs such as al-Hodeidah port, which not only impedes the importation of basic commodities, but humanitarian aid as well. Concurrently, Ansarallah has been found to misappropriate and withhold aid in their territories. Specifically, a survey conducted by the World Food Programme in late 2018, found that residents in these areas had not been receiving the aid to which they were entitled. The deterioration of the economy, loss of civil servant salaries and exorbitant taxes collected by Ansarallah, in addition to the hindrance of aid delivery, has left residents of these areas fearsome over their livelihoods.

The “Saudi Aggression” Against Ansarallah

Geographic location often determines which threats to physical security Yemenis cite. More specifically, the threats are related to the de facto authorities and conflict dynamics in respective areas. The second largest threat as per the population's perception is airstrikes at 16 percent. However, only 1.8 percent of respondents in areas outside of Ansarallah-held territory named airstrikes. The overwhelming majority of the people that fear airstrikes reside in areas controlled by Ansarallah. The airstrikes are conducted by the Saudi-led coalition as a primary strategy, in addition to the blockade, to force Ansarallah into political concessions. Ansarallah frames the airstrikes and Saudi's war against them as "aggression against Yemen" and an attack on the sovereignty of the Yemeni state. As such, the term "Saudi aggression," referring to the coalition and its airstrikes, has entered the everyday vocabulary of residents in Ansarallah-held areas. The airstrikes have been found to target vital civilian infrastructure, civilian gatherings, food processing plants, farms and pharmaceutical production facilities. These war crimes have led residents in the northern parts of Yemen to agree with Ansarallah's narrative of “Saudi aggression.” In Hajjah, where 56 percent of people viewed airstrikes as the main threat to their safety, 16 percent also cited “Saudi aggression” as their main concern.

³ Wadhah Al-Awlaqi and Maged Al-Madhaji, Rethinking Yemen's economy: Local governance in Yemen amid conflict and instability, July 2018. https://devchampions.org/files/Rethinking_Yemens_Economy_No2_En.pdf (Accessed 8 March 2020); Mansour Rageh, Amal Nasser, and Farea Al-Muslimi, "Yemen without a Functioning Central Bank: The Loss of Basic Economic Stabilization and Accelerating Famine," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 2016. <http://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/55> (Accessed 23 May 2018).

⁴ Data source: OCHA, "Humanitarian needs overview 2019: Yemen", December 2018.

https://yemen.un.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/2019_Yemen_HNO_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 11 March 2020).

⁵ Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, addressed to the President of the Security Council, January 2020.

<https://undocs.org/S/2020/70> (Accessed 11 March 2020).

Despite the dominant narrative of the Saudis as aggressor, a significant number of Yemenis within Ansarallah-held areas also fear Ansarallah. Many residents have expressed that Ansarallah and its security structures, including police institutions, are repressive; dissent is not tolerated. The reach of the Ansarallah police-state has infiltrated communities. According to focus group discussions conducted by the YPC with civil activists in Sanaa, al-Hodeidah and Ibb, people in these communities are afraid of one another because they do not know who supports Ansarallah and who does not, and thus, who is a potential threat when voicing opposing opinions. For example, one focus group participant in Ibb describes the state of the community: “We now live in a state of constant mental stress. No matter whose side you are on, you do not know which side the neighbors are on. Ultimately everyone suspects each other and the community is fragmented.” Twenty-seven percent of residents in Ansarallah-held areas fear visiting neighbors compared to 13 percent in the rest of the country.

Ansarallah has assigned supervisors (ar.: *mushrif*) to institutions and communities, including in police stations. A supervisor's role is to ensure the loyalty of institutions and communities to Ansarallah. Supervisors are said to arrest any opposition to the movement. They also collect intelligence and report to their superiors in the de facto government on anyone or anything suspected of being a threat.⁶ In police stations, the supervisors' role is similar: to oversee the local police and guarantee loyalty. Many interviewees reported that police have turned into a political tool for Ansarallah by arresting political opposition rather than investigating and preventing crimes.⁷ The YPC survey revealed that many people in Ansarallah areas do not trust the supervisors, with 49 percent citing a lack of trust or desire to altogether avoid supervisors. Sixteen percent trust the supervisors. In al-Hodeidah, trust in supervisors is even lower, with 67 percent citing lack of trust or claiming to altogether avoid supervisors as opposed to the minority who trust the supervisors (7 percent). When asked who should be in charge of security, the residents in Ansarallah-held areas further revealed their reservations toward the de facto authorities; only 7 percent favor Ansarallah, while the majority say the responsibility should be that of the police.

Caught Between the Frontlines: Civilians Amidst Clashes

Security concerns increase in areas affected directly by violence. This is apparent on the fringes of Ansarallah-held territory in governorates such as al-Baydha' and al-Hodeidah. In the south, al-Baydha' is tribal territory with multiple political actors competing for recognition and support from tribes, while the governorate is mostly under Ansarallah's control. The IRG claims territory near the Marib border in al-Baydha's north where clashes occur between the two de facto authorities. Furthermore, in the governorate's northeast, ISIS and Al-Qaeda compete with each other for control while also clashing with Ansarallah. Despite the presence of multiple actors, people in al-Baydha' fear Ansarallah the most, with 28 percent of survey respondents citing them as the main threat to their security, followed by fear of

⁶ Mareike Transfeld, “Implementing Stockholm: The Status of Local Security Forces in al-Hodeidah,” YPC Policy Report, Yemen Polling Center, Policy Report, November 2019. http://www.yemenpolling.org/Projects-en/ICSP_EU_HodeidahReport2019November30.pdf (Accessed 16 February 2020).

⁷ Mareike Transfeld and Shaima Bin Othman, “The State of the Police in Western Yemen”, YPC research debrief, Yemen Polling Center, Research Debrief, January 2020. <https://www.yemenpolling.org/4325/> (Accessed 16 February 2020).

tribal conflict at 27 percent. This complex political situation in al-Baydha' has created a worst case scenario, a multi-party conflict plagued with relentless clashes and ultimately, landmines, which were cited as the biggest fear of 9 percent of respondents — the highest in any governorate throughout the country.

Al-Hodeidah, in Yemen's west, is another Ansarallah-IRG conflict zone as the two sides battle for control of the region's port. In 2018, "the battle of al-Hodeidah" was launched as an attempt by the Arab coalition to pressure Ansarallah and make military progress toward Sanaa. Following an international outcry over the inhibition of aid into Yemen's largest port, the conflict was temporarily paused by a ceasefire after the fragile Stockholm agreement of December 2018. The ceasefire has not been respected and civilians have continuously been caught in the crossfire. This was confirmed by YPC researchers' observation in al-Hodeidah in early 2018.⁸ In turn, about 15 percent of Yemenis in al-Hodeidah cite clashes as the most substantial threat in the area, and 48 percent cite clashes as the biggest threat to their security. In addition, 11 percent of respondents have experienced injury or death in the family as a result of the clashes. Over one third of the population of al-Hodeidah feels unsafe, while roughly half feel mostly safe; only 3 percent always feel safe.

Taiz governorate was one of the main points of resistance against the Ansarallah expansion in 2015. For almost two years, Taiz was under siege by Ansarallah, and a brutal war played out between Ansarallah and the IRG in the governorate. Informal actors jostling for power also brought conflict to the region and the fighting in Taiz has been deemed the worst in all of Yemen. However, by the summer of 2019, the heaviest fighting had calmed, and 81 percent of Taiz residents told YPC that they feel always or mostly safe. A combination of IRG-Islah militaries working alongside informal actors, including the UAE-backed Abu Abbas brigade, had fought to restore the government's control. This alliance succeeded in pushing Ansarallah into small pockets in Taiz governorate's northeast a few years ago. Most informal actors were officially introduced into the security apparatus by the IRG. The diverse set of informal actors competed for recognition from the Arab coalition, with al-Islah eventually emerging as the leading player in the governorate. Although the informal actors provided security in a sense, their long-term intentions of securing political and military dominance over each another rendered them a threat to residents.⁹ In Taiz, the public cites Ansarallah as their primary fear followed by illegal armed groups, roadblocks and random shelling. Ansarallah is seen as the main threat because of the siege they forced on Taiz in their attempt to occupy Taiz city, and Ansarallah's continued presence leaves the door open for renewed clashes. Illegal armed groups, roadblocks and random shelling were also an issue with 10 percent of respondents citing them as a significant threats. A quarter of residents claimed they had a family member killed or injured. The same also claimed that their homes had been damaged, and 49 percent of Taiz residents had been displaced at one point during the war.

⁸ Amnesty International, "Yemen: Fierce new offensive displaces tens of thousands of civilians from Hodeidah" May 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/yemen-fierce-new-offensive-displaces-tens-of-thousands-of-civilians-from-hodeidah/> (Accessed 5 March 2020).

⁹ Maged Sultan, Mareike Transfeld and Kamal Muqbil, "Formalizing the Informal State and Non-State Security Providers in Government-Controlled Taiz City," YPC Policy Report, Yemen Polling Center, July 2019. https://yemenpolling.org/advocacy/upfiles/ICSP_EU_FinalTaizReport2019July19.pdf (Accessed 16 February 2020).

Absence of the State, Emerging Militias and Power Struggles

The areas where Yemenis feel the safest are those governed through a mix of local tribes and IRG loyalists, such as Hadhramout, Marib, al-Jawf and Shabwa. Conflicts over land and water, as well as “revenge killings,” are known to take place in these tribal areas.¹⁰ Also, tribes are known to be heavily armed. These threats continue to exist in tribal areas: in Marib (18 percent) and al-Jawf (23 percent) residents fear tribal, water and land conflicts, followed by Ansarallah at 8 percent. In Shabwa, residents cite tribal conflict as their biggest fear at 27 percent, followed by al-Qaeda at 21 percent. When war becomes a threat in these areas, part of tribal culture dictates that tribes put their differences aside to focus on external danger. Tribes have been found to move clashes away from civilians, only fighting on the frontlines as opposed to conflict in a city like Taiz where war is waged in civilian areas. Tribes have also facilitated prisoner swaps through mediation between warring sides.¹¹ Particularly in Marib, tribes cooperate closely with state security actors, contributing positively to overall security.

Areas in which the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the IRG are struggling over power, such as Aden, Lahj and Abyan governorates, people feel among the least safe in Yemen. The STC was founded in 2017 by leaders of the southern movement as a quasi-government for what the STC hopes will be an independent south in the future. Ansarallah’s attempt to gain control of Aden and its surroundings in early 2015 created a security vacuum, giving rise to local resistance fighters, most of whom were associated with the southern movement. Although these elements were later incorporated into the IRG military, no unified security sector emerged. Instead a power struggle was created between the IRG and STC. More specifically, state security hierarchies of the IRG military and the STC-loyal Southern Belt Forces began to overlap.¹² Frequent clashes between IRG militaries and STC forces put civilian lives at risk, and created the impression that state structures were absent. The Security Belt Forces have been documented to commit human rights violations, and are thus also viewed critically by many in the south. Although the STC is considered to be a positive actor by 16 percent of people in Aden, 15 percent also view them as a negative entity. In Lahj, they enjoy a more popular support base, with 35 percent viewing them as positive as opposed to 3 percent who view them as negative. In Aden, the most cited fear at 35 percent is illegal armed groups and bullying. The second most cited fear that respondents described is the spread of major crimes, kidnapping and murder, as well as the spread of terrorist element such as Al-Qaeda at 8 percent each.

¹⁰ Nadwa al-Dawsari , “*Tribal Governance And Stability In Yemen* “, The Carnegie papers, Carnegie endowment (April 2012). https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_tribal_governance.pdf (Accessed 5 March 2020).

¹¹ CIVIC, “*We Did Not Know If We Would Die From Bullets Or Hunger*” Civilian Harm and Local Protection Measures in Yemen “, Jan 2019, https://civiliansinconflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/YEMEN_BulletsorHunger_FINAL_PROOF.pdf (Accessed 5 March 2020).

¹² Fatima Saleh and Ahmed al-Sharjabi “*Institutional Prerequisites for the STC “Coups” in Aden and Perspectives on the Jeddah Deal*”, research debrief, Yemen Polling Center, Oct 2019. <https://www.yemenpolling.org/institutional-prerequisites-for-the-stc-coup-in-aden-and-perspectives-on-the-jeddah-deal/> (Accessed 16 February 2020).

Improving Security in a Fragmented State

Economic warfare waged by both sides of the conflict has affected the livelihoods of Yemen's population. Those living in Ansarallah-held areas have greater concerns about their living conditions. They fear airstrikes the most, while residents of the remaining parts of the country fear most the consequences of the state's absence. Meanwhile, civilians become caught in the crossfire of various actors struggling for influence. This problem has been reduced notably in some tribal territories via mediation.

Finally, people also fear the very authorities meant to protect them, mostly in Ansarallah-held areas, but also in other regions. Lack of accountability is what allows this situation to persist. Security sector reform and projects supporting security institutions must be aimed at making residents feel safer. The fragmented perceptions with regard to security must therefore be taken into account in a localized approach to security sector reform.

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