ISSUE BRIEF

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# YEMEN IN FOCUS: AN ENDURING CRISIS

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***(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)***

**On 2 December 2025, forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen launched a coordinated advance across multiple southern governorates, rapidly expanding territorial control in areas that include key coastal and inland nodes. By 8–9 December, the STC had consolidated control across much of southern Yemen, a development that carried implications for political authority, security coordination, and access to strategic infrastructure. As the situation evolved, Saudi Arabia issued a public statement in mid-December expressing concern over the pace and direction of developments in the south. The statement underscored the importance of preserving stability, avoiding unilateral actions, and maintaining adherence to agreed political frameworks designed to prevent further fragmentation at a sensitive juncture in the conflict. Saudi messaging emphasised coordination and restraint, reflecting concern that sudden shifts on the ground could complicate broader efforts toward de-escalation.**[1]

The UAE responded publicly shortly thereafter, reiterating that its engagement in Yemen had been guided by security priorities, including counter-terrorism and the protection of maritime routes. Emirati statements highlighted the role of local actors in shaping recent developments and

1 "Separatists Claim Broad Control of Southern Yemen." Reuters, December 8, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/separatists-claim-broad-control-southern-yemen-2025-12-08/

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reaffirmed support for political dialogue and arrangements that ensure functional governance and local stability. Abu Dhabi's response framed the unfolding situation as a product of evolving internal dynamics rather than an escalation of regional competition.

The situation entered a more sensitive phase on 30 December 2025, when Saudi-led coalition air operations targeted facilities at the port of Mukalla.[2] Saudi officials described the strikes as precautionary measures linked to specific security and procedural concerns surrounding port activity. The port, located along the Arabian Sea, is a critical commercial and logistical hub for eastern Yemen, and its targeting underscored the strategic importance of coastal infrastructure in a region already burdened by prolonged conflict, economic disruption, and humanitarian vulnerability. On the same day, the UAE announced the conclusion of its remaining counter-terrorism mission in Yemen, characterising the move as a voluntary and planned repositioning consistent with its earlier drawdown decisions. Emirati statements stressed that the redeployment reflected an assessment of operational requirements rather than disengagement from Yemen's stability.[3] The announcement coincided with heightened diplomatic activity involving Yemeni political actors and regional stakeholders.

2 "Saudi-Led Coalition Strikes Yemeni Port over 'Unauthorised Weapons Shipment'." Al Jazeera English, December 30, 2025. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/30/saudi-led-coalition-strikes-yemeni-port-over-unauthorised-weapons-shipment

3 "UAE Says It Ends Mission of Counter-Terrorism Units in Yemen Voluntarily." Reuters, December 30, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-says-it-ends-mission-counterterrorism-units-yemen-voluntarily-2025-12-30/

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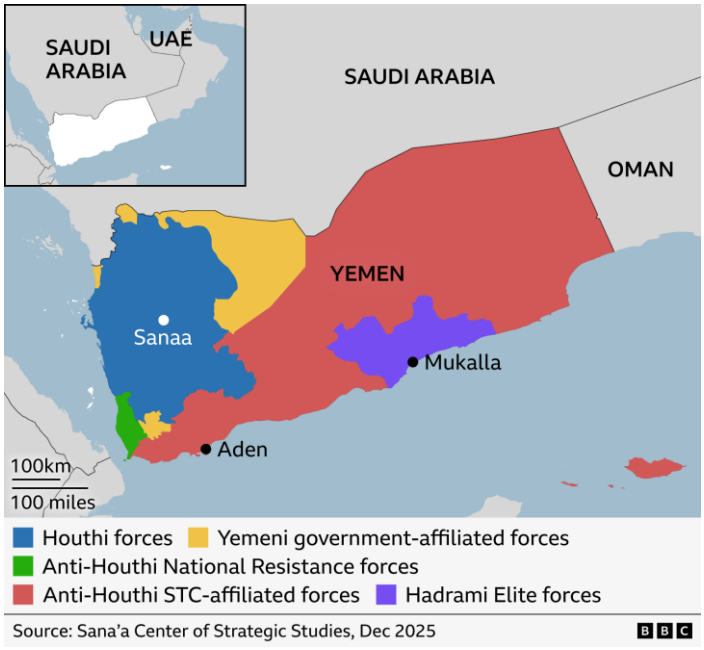


In early January 2026, Yemeni government forces initiated counter-operations in parts of the south, supported by air activity aimed at reasserting administrative control. On 2–3 January 2026, Saudi Arabia welcomed indications from multiple Yemeni actors of readiness to engage in dialogue, positioning itself as a facilitator of political engagement and de-escalation.[4] These developments unfolded alongside public declarations by southern political groups outlining longer-term political aspirations, adding further complexity to the evolving landscape. The sequence of events from 2 December 2025 to early January 2026 brought Saudi–UAE policy differentiation into clearer public view. Importantly, this differentiation was articulated through official statements and calibrated actions rather than confrontational rhetoric. Both states continued to affirm the importance of coordination and regional stability, even as their public messaging reflected differing assessments of how best to manage Yemen's complex local realities.

Saudi Arabia announced on 3 January, 2026 that it would host a forum in Riyadh to bring together Yemen's southern factions with the aim of discussing the "southern issue" and advancing dialogue among key parties. In an official statement, the Saudi Foreign Ministry welcomed a request from Yemen's Saudi-backed Presidential Leadership Council for the forum and called on all relevant southern groups to participate constructively in the planned event, emphasising the importance of

4 "Saudi Arabia Welcomes Request from Yemen to Help Resolve Southern Battle." Al Jazeera English, January 3, 2026. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/3/saudi-arabia-welcomes-request-from-yemen-to-help-resolve-southern-battle

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inclusive engagement. The initiative was presented as part of broader efforts to encourage structured political discussions alongside ongoing diplomatic and security measures.[5]

Yemen's current phase of instability must be situated within a longer trajectory of political fragmentation that predates the regional intervention. Following the 2011 uprising and the subsequent GCC-brokered transition, the Yemeni state struggled to consolidate authority amid economic collapse, elite rivalries, and unresolved north–south grievances. By late 2014, the rapid expansion of the Houthi movement and the breakdown of central governance transformed Yemen into a multi-actor conflict arena, drawing in regional stakeholders concerned with security, stability, and maritime access. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates joined the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015 with converging short-term objectives centred on restoring order and preventing further state collapse in Yemen. Over time, however, the protracted nature of the conflict and the emergence of distinct local power centres necessitated differentiated approaches, shaped by evolving threat perceptions and operational realities.

The importance of Yemen extends well beyond its domestic political landscape. Geographically, Yemen sits at the intersection of the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, adjacent to the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a critical maritime chokepoint linking the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal and onward to European markets. Stability in Yemen therefore carries implications for international shipping, energy flows, and regional trade connectivity. Historically, Yemen has also functioned as a buffer zone in Gulf security calculations, with developments inside the country closely watched by neighbouring states concerned about border security, maritime access, and the spillover effects of instability. As a result, Yemen's internal dynamics have repeatedly drawn in regional and international actors seeking to prevent prolonged disorder in a strategically sensitive corridor already exposed to wider geopolitical pressures.[6]

At the same time, Yemen has become emblematic of how prolonged conflict erodes social resilience and economic capacity. Years of political fragmentation, institutional collapse, and recurring cycles of violence have severely weakened food systems, public health infrastructure, and basic service delivery. Malnutrition has emerged as one of the most acute consequences of this sustained instability, driven not by a single factor but by the cumulative effects of disrupted supply chains, reduced household incomes, limited access to healthcare, and persistent insecurity. Large segments of the population, particularly children and vulnerable communities, have faced chronic food

5 "Saudi Arabia Welcomes Request from Yemen's Presidential Council for Forum to Resolve Southern Issue." CGTN, January 3, 2026. https://news.cgtn.com/news/2026-01-03/news-1JD3jjHkuHK/p.html

6 "The Yemen Security Complex in the Middle East." *International Relations Publishing*, 2025. https://internationalrelations-publishing.org/articles/5-31/pdf

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insecurity as conflict has constrained both domestic production and humanitarian access. Yemen's humanitarian situation thus reflects the broader costs of extended conflict in fragile states, where political disputes and security challenges gradually translate into long-term social and developmental crises.

The southern Yemeni theatre remains of particular strategic importance due to its proximity to major maritime routes connecting the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Red Sea. Prolonged instability in this region risks exacerbating humanitarian pressures, disrupting trade, and deepening fragmentation in a country already affected by more than a decade of conflict. Within this context, the recent exchange of statements and actions should be understood as part of an adaptive policy response by regional actors navigating a highly fluid and constrained environment. Overall, the developments did not signal a rupture in Saudi–UAE relations, nor a shift toward regional confrontation. Rather, they illustrated how long-running conflicts can expose differing policy emphases among partners as conditions on the ground evolve. Yemen's experience continues to underscore the difficulty of aligning external strategies within a fragmented state, while reinforcing the need for sustained diplomatic engagement to prevent further destabilisation in an already fragile region.

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