



# Violent extremist organisations in Yemen

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## Questions

*How have the structural drivers/enabling factors of violent extremism (e.g. poverty, unemployment, weak governance, state sponsorship, etc.) changed or developed with the conflict in Yemen?*

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# 1. Overview

Almost four years since the Houthis took control of Sana'a in 2014 and seven since initial protests against poor governance in 2011, Yemen remains engulfed in battles for power across the country, including within former alliances, such as the battle for control of Sana'a between the Houthis<sup>1</sup> and Saleh<sup>2</sup> loyalists which continued after his death in December 2017 (Salisbury, 2017). The extent of the divisions and battles for power across the country are demonstrated in Map 1.

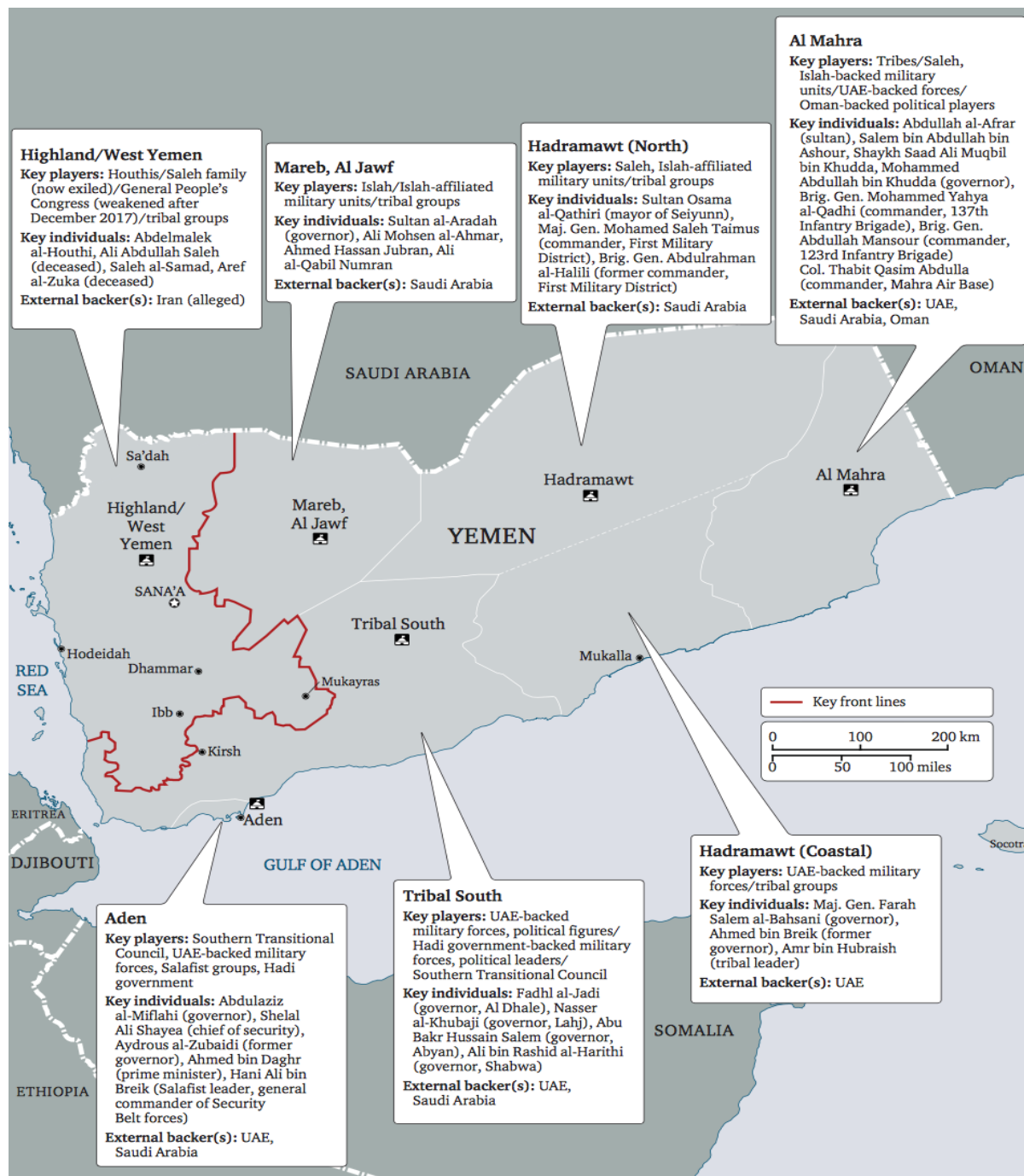
This rapid review synthesises data from academic, policy and NGO sources on the drivers of violent extremism in Yemen. It is a follow on from the earlier report 'Violent Extremism and terrorism in Yemen' (O'Driscoll, 2017) and as such focuses on the period between July 2017 and June 2018 rather than the entire conflict. However, it is important to briefly recap on the emergence of extremist groups in Yemen. Following the defeat of the Soviets in the 1979 Afghanistan War a number of foreign fighters (including Yemenis) moved or returned to Yemen, as Yemen openly welcomed these fighters whilst many were no longer welcome in their home countries. The consequence of this was that Yemen became a refuge for a multi-national community of Jihadi-Salifists. These groups were routinely supported and used by the government to fight political opponents, but ultimately they never received the Salafi state in the south of the country that they sought and were promised. Although Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) only formed in 2009, Al-Qaeda (AQ) operatives have been present in Yemen since the beginning of AQ. This report will not focus on the history of the organisation, but rather the drivers of extremism, thus it is suffice to say that Salifi extremists have been welcomed in Yemen since the early 1980s after the Afghanistan War and have been given a space to operate and recruit. An important aspect in AQAP's growth and support is that it delivered limited services in areas ignored by the government and it being seen as a key actor in the fight against the Houthis. AQAP has also focused less on implementing Shari'a Law, with it only covering civil disputes and criminal offences, making it easier for the population to accept. In contrast, the Yemen branch of the Islamic State (IS) entered far later (November, 2014) and has attempted to take advantage of the current conflict. IS, however, is not as strong or well-supported as AQAP, does not try to win over the population through delivering services, etc., and has focused on attacking mosques and government targets. These tactics, particularly the killing of civilians, have alienated them from the local population who view IS as foreign (McDonnell et al., 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> The Houthis, or Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), began as a theological movement in Yemen in the 1990s and represent the Shiite Zayidi community in Yemen. Since 2004 they have intermittently been involved in conflict with the government over power division and the constitutional status of their stronghold the Sa'dah Province.

<sup>2</sup> Ali Abdullah Saleh was president of Yemen until in November 2011, after months of protests for him to resign, he signed over power to his deputy, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, who took over power in February 2012.

**Map 1: Internal divisions in Yemen**



Source: Salisbury, 2017: 10.

In order to assess changes in the key drivers of extremism it is also important to highlight the key findings from the initial report. Key findings from the 2017 report were:

- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) first gained control of territory in Yemen in 2011 when it took advantage of political chaos; it once again managed to take control of territory following the current civil war, which began in early 2015.

- AQAP's aim is to create a number of smaller emirates, which will eventually link to form a caliphate when they deem the time is right.
- AQAP is extremely well financed and has carried out a number of successful bank raids, kidnappings, as well as receiving finances from taxes through controlling ports and from smuggling.
- Islamic State (IS) operations in Yemen are currently fairly minimal and it does not share the same support as AQAP, as IS' tactics of mass killings and mosque bombings are at odds with societal and tribal norms.
- The civil war against the Houthis has opened up a vacuum for extremist groups to operate in, as not only are the Houthis the main focus of the government and coalition forces, but the government and coalition have also often made alliances with extremist groups in the fight against the Houthis.
- Poor governance and instability have allowed extremist movements to embed politically and exploit the situation to gain support; AQAP has taken particular advantage of this by providing services in previously marginalised areas.
- The perception of the population towards governance, levels of corruption, and the ability of the government to deliver services and security is extremely low, thus creating dynamics favourable to the rise of extremism.
- Sectarianism has increased with the onset of the civil war, particularly as the Houthis make inroads into territories where Sunnis live. Extremist groups are able to take advantage of this increase in sectarianism and offer the Sunni population a means to take revenge or protect territory.
- The proxy nature of the conflict with Saudi-Iranian competition in the Gulf being played out in Yemen further amplifies the sectarian nature of the war and focuses the battle on a Sunni versus Shiite narrative, which in turn is used by extremists to gain supporters and justify violence.
- Poverty in Yemen is a serious issue and there are large regional disparities in poverty levels, thus creating marginalised communities. The connection between poverty and marginalisation are a key contributing factor to the rise of AQAP in Yemen.
- The 'hard' countering violent extremism (CVE) actions carried out by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and United States mainly against AQAP often negatively impact on the population, which in turn is used by AQAP for propaganda and recruitment purposes.
- The majority of the population does not share the ideologies of the extremist groups; motivations for supporting and joining these groups is rather found in the history of bad governance and the dynamics of the civil war.
- Although the tribes do not necessarily share the ideologies of the extremist groups, their allegiance with groups such as AQAP has been a source of legitimacy and recruits.
- Salafism in Yemen does not have a history of extremism, rather it was previously a factor in encouraging loyalty to the government; however, the dynamics of the civil war has pushed the support of the government more and more towards violence.

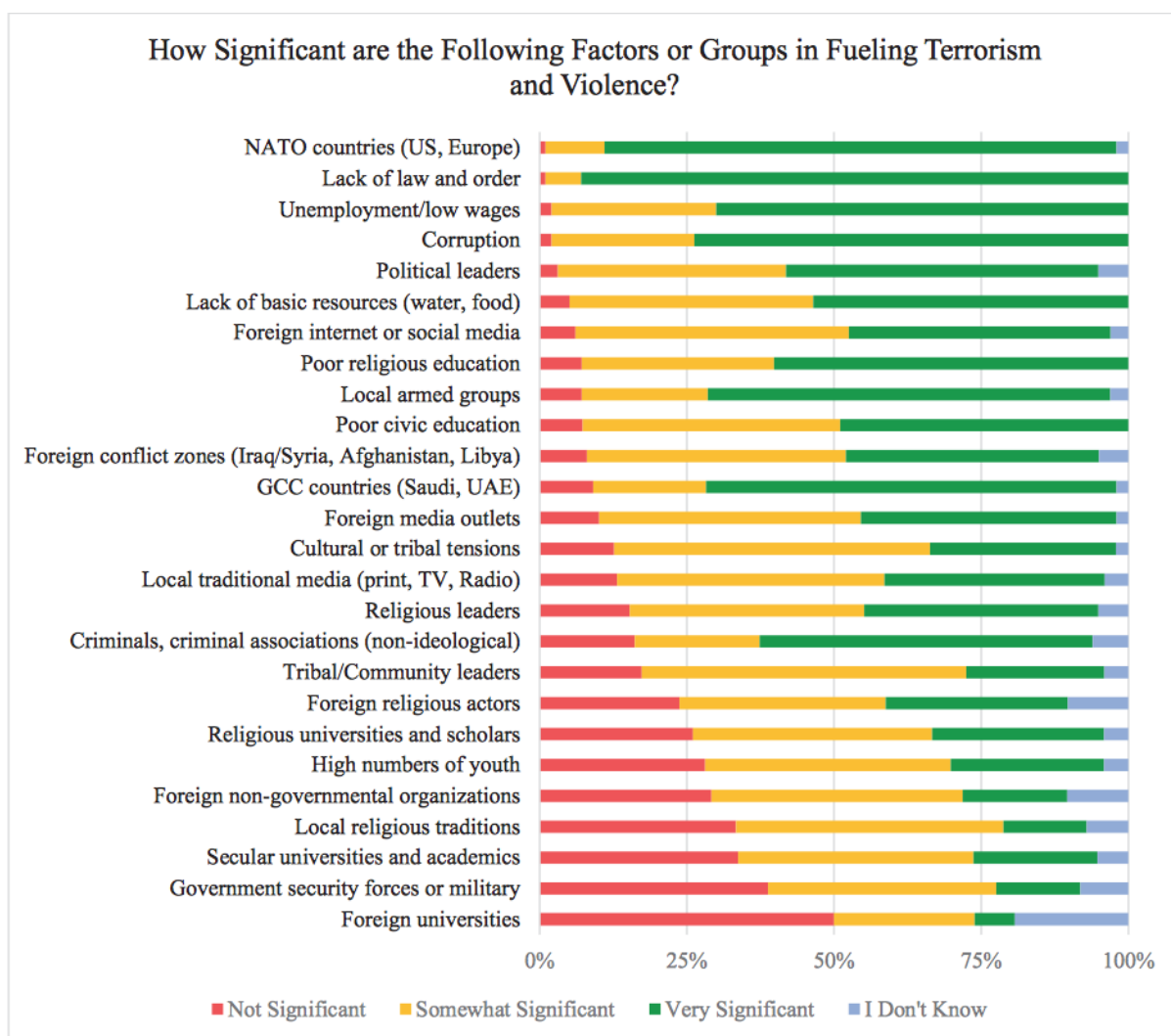
This report focuses on the key changes since June 2017 and it must be noted that much of the literature continues with these same themes – the wartime dynamics, poverty, poor governance, territory gained by the Houthis and ‘hard’ CVE actions remain key drivers of extremism. However, there have been some minor developments. Key developments are:

- Since the earlier report the Islamic State has still failed to gain significant traction in Yemen and AQAP remains the key Jihadi group.
- US drone strikes and the increased operations of the UAE, with US backing – particularly the accusations against the UAE of arbitrary arrests, torture and abuse of children – have acted to alienate tribes and further legitimise AQAP.
- US and UAE operations also often benefit the Houthis by targeting those fighting the Houthis, which in turn angers the local population and increases support for AQAP.
- The UAE tactic of arming, training, and financing well-organised Salafi groups is dangerous for the future of the country, particularly as some of these groups are as extreme as AQAP or IS. Not only does this increase sectarian divisions, but there is also a risk of them merging with Jihadi groups in the future.
- Based on survey data with Salifis, structural issues, unemployment, corruption, lawlessness and lack of basic resources are seen as key drivers of violent extremism, rather than religious or ideological factors.
- The government’s failure to deliver education across the country allows Salifis to have influence over the youth through education, prevents the youth from being taught critical thinking necessary to avoid extremism, and also fails to give them the skills necessary for employment.
- Insecurity across the country provides extremists with space to operate within.
- The lack of political means to affect change in Yemen results in many turning to violence.
- There is a sectarian nature to the rhetoric used by elites in the conflict and this has only acted to legitimise extremist groups and soften the public perception of them, particularly AQAP who are active in the fight against the Houthis.
- The lack of regulation or training for religious actors in Yemen can contribute to extremism, as sermons are often highly political in an already politically-charged atmosphere.
- AQAP has managed to recruit youth members through narratives of underdevelopment, corruption, and the negative consequences of Houthi and counterterrorism attacks, as well as by offering an alternative to disenfranchised youth, such as helping them build houses, get married and earn money.
- The civil war and fight against the Houthis has also strengthened AQAP’s ability to recruit tribesmen as they have a common enemy and the tribes aim to protect their land from the Houthis.
- Actions such as completely closing all airports, seaports, and land crossings, and targeting agricultural and food production sites only act to worsen the humanitarian situation for the wider population, which in turn allows extremism to grow.
- As key actors in the conflict are left out in international negotiations and the south is continually marginalised, conflict is likely to continue as local actors (and in turn drivers of conflict) are ignored. This also alienates the population, prevents inclusive negotiations, and allows AQAP to take advantage.

## 2. Local Perceptions

Based on 100 structured surveys with religious actors who were identified as being Salafi in Sana'a, Lahj, and Hadramaut, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) assessed the perception on the drivers of violent extremism in Yemen. The chart below maps the answers and demonstrates that structural issues, unemployment, corruption, lawlessness and lack of basic resources are key drivers rather than religious or ideological factors. Additionally, respondents placed considerable blame on both Western and Arab Gulf states for violence in Yemen.

**Figure 1: Yemeni Salafi Perceptions on the drivers of extremism**



Source: McDonnell et al., 2017: 8

Based on the surveys McDonnell et al. (2017) argue that there are three key factors that locals believe drive violence and extremism in Yemen. These are:

1. **Lack of state capacity:** Historically, governance in Yemen has been poor and state resources are limited and tend to focus on the capital and areas dominated by the ruling party. Thus, the southern region has been marginalised and is lacking development. Since the 2011 uprisings the provision of basic service along with living standards have



collapsed. Alongside displacement, malnourishment and an impending famine, government workers have not been paid, businesses have shut down and health facilities have been closed or destroyed. All of this opens up the path for AQAP in particular to fill the vacuum left by the government in meeting the basic needs of the population in the south of Yemen. The government's failure to deliver proper education across the country has not only prevented youths from receiving the education needed to find jobs, but this is also paired with them not being taught the critical thinking necessary to see through the Jihadi-Salafi message. Moreover, this gives Jihadi-Salafis an influence over the youth, as they often offer education where the government has failed to. Finally, the government lacks the capacity to provide security and secure the entire country, giving extremist groups space within to operate.

2. **Enabling environment:** Beyond poor governance, Yemen is also plagued by patronage within the political system, which has resulted in the same people in power, often through rigged elections. This has eroded the population's trust in the democratic process and is seen as a key driver of violent extremism. As political change was not possible through political or peaceful means, many turned to violence, which extremist groups took advantage of. Additionally, Yemen has witnessed significant exclusionary rhetoric often taking a sectarian line, which acts to further legitimise extremist groups and sow divisions in the country. This is evident in the rhetoric around Houthis as agents of Iran and alien to Yemen, which has legitimised AQAP and softened public perception of them and their fight against the Houthis. This rhetoric is picked up by community leaders and is even sometimes used in Friday sermons. Although much of this rhetoric is centred on fighting within the civil war, rather than support for AQAP or IS, the normalisation of violence only acts to strengthen extremist groups.
3. **Foreign import of extremism:** Many in Yemen blame the US and Arab Gulf countries for instability and the rise of extremism in the country. International actors have had a significant impact on local affairs, particularly countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However, local leaders often try to blame these international actors in order to deflect blame for their poor governance.

In Yemen, Friday sermons are also fairly political rather than focusing purely on religious aspects and can therefore be used to advance political agendas. Additionally, the process of becoming a religious authority in Yemen is loosely regulated. As a result, Imams in Yemen often lack training and as such do not necessarily have the skills to deliver sermons in the current highly politicised and divided atmosphere. Moreover, the government has very few formalised relations with the religious sector and as a result there is little collaboration between the two (McDonnell et al., 2017).

Qasem (2018) argues that there are little options for the youth in Yemen – the private sector has completely broken down since the war, the government does not pay salaries, political parties have declined and do not allow space for the youth, and finally civil society focusing on non-humanitarian issues has almost completely disappeared. This has led to the youth focusing on surviving rather than considering the consequences of their actions, which makes them more likely to fight or join violent extremist groups (Qasem, 2018). This is particularly relevant seeing as the Yemeni revolution was initially driven by students and unemployed graduates (Toska, 2018).





able to build a narrative of preventing local casualties, which again enables them to be seen as less dangerous to the local population than other actors (Farrukh, 2017). AQAP has also provided fuel and food, which are scarce in most of the country making areas where they operate, and in turn their presence, desirable (Kendall, 2018).

Due to the increased fragility and degradation of security in Yemen, there is a strain on tribal customs of conflict resolution and it is becoming difficult for them to contain violence, thus further negatively impacting on security and driving violence (Al-Dawsari, 2018). The war-time dynamics and the constant battle for power allow AQAP a space to operate and allows it to gain legitimacy as an actor against the Houthis (Farrukh, 2017).

## 4. Counterterrorism

According to Al-Dawsari (2018) US counterterrorism has been a key driver in violent extremism in Yemen. Firstly the US has invested a significant amount of funds in the Yemeni government, which has mainly been spent on security, rather than development. These funds have helped to prop up the government rather than target AQAP. Due to this tactic not working, the US moved to targeting AQAP themselves, mainly through the use of drones, and whilst these attacks have killed AQAP leaders, they have also killed many civilians – strengthening AQAP’s cause and further isolating the government. US counterterrorism operations are also seen by the tribes as being used by Yemeni government officials to rid themselves of tribal political opposition and there have been cases of tribesmen being killed due to poor Intel from the Yemeni government. Moreover, the US’ alliance with the UAE has resulted in a number of Yemeni civilians being killed in botched operations and the UAE’s heavy handed tactics – including torture to death of tribesmen and abuses against children – has only acted to further alienate the tribes (Al-Dawsari, 2018). The UAE is said to have up to 20 secret prisons where it holds those arrested, often without proof, and carries out human rights abuses (Kendall, 2018: 29). This also enables AQAP to target UAE forces and sell it to the local population as reprisals for human rights violations and thus gaining support from the local population.

Additionally, the counterterrorism operations, mainly led by the UAE or US, often benefit Houthi forces by targeting those leading the battle against the Houthis, thus increasing support for AQAP and anger against the US and UAE (Farrukh, 2017). Under these dynamics – and in light of civilian deaths at the hands of Houthis, the US, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – AQAP is able to actually portray themselves as a just force and a conduit for revenge – gaining support along the way (Kendall, 2018). As a result of the UAE tactic of arming and training groups in the south against AQAP, AQAP released many sermons saying they would target tribesmen that aligned with the UAE. AQAP has also switched their key target from the Houthis to UAE-backed forces, who in the latter part of 2017 accounted for 51% of AQAP’s operations (Kendall, 2018: 29). Nonetheless, cracks in AQAP have begun to show and there are contestations amongst the leadership about corruption and links to criminal smuggling networks. For instance, the Shari’a court in Taz issued a statement in October 2017 stating that they no longer acted for AQAP due to corrupt leadership and criminality. At the same time IS has suffered many losses and has lost the little influence they had, whilst many members have deserted to AQAP (Kendall, 2018).

The rise of Salafi militias is encouraged by international actors, such as Saudi Arabia and UAE, who want to take advantage of their willingness to fight Houthis in Houthi territory, as opposed to

the tribes who do not move outside of their own territory. However, they often fund and support Salafi militias without a clear understanding of their objectives or the potential outcome of the militarisation of these groups in an increasingly sectarian war (Bonney, 2018). Salisbury (2017) argues that the UAE tactic of arming, training, and financing well-organised Salafi groups is dangerous for the future of the country, particularly as some of these groups are as extreme as AQAP or IS. The rise of these Salafi groups risks fuelling violence and deepening the sectarian divisions in Yemen. Similarly, Bonney (2018) argues that the recent militarisation of Salafism is a concern for Yemen, as it opens up the opportunity for them to merge with Jihadi movements.

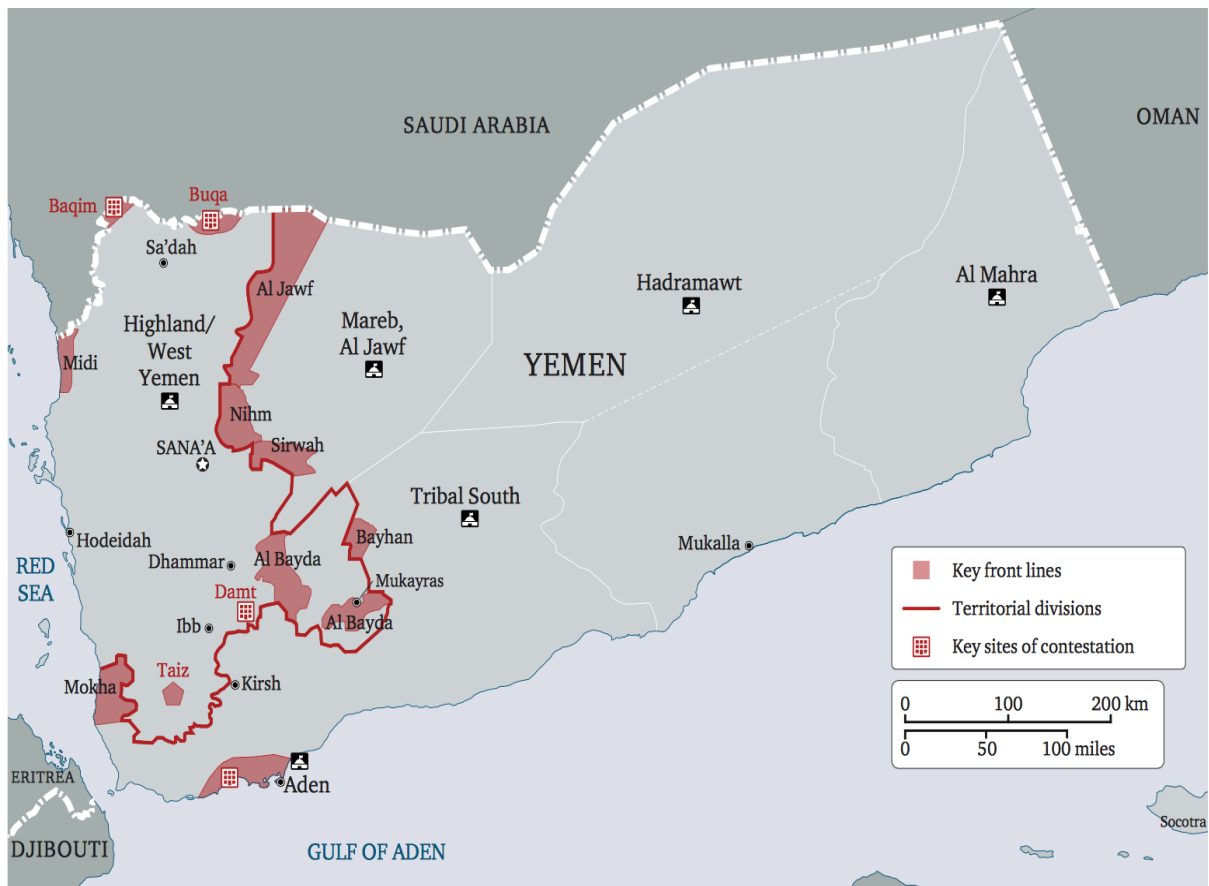
Since late 2017, and the missile from Yemen that reportedly hit the Saudi Arabian capital, the campaign in Yemen has intensified, worsening already terrible conditions. Carapico (2018) argues that the retaliation is collective punishment for the Yemeni population and this included completely closing all airports, seaports, and land crossings. Moreover, she argues that food insecurity in Yemen is manufactured by the coalition, as agricultural and food production sites are purposefully targeted and hunger is an intended consequence of the military campaign (Carapico, 2018). Moreover, Ulrichsen (2018) argues that neither Saudi Arabia nor UAE have the capacity to force a decisive military outcome and they also do not have a credible exit strategy. As such, the humanitarian situation and regional security continues to worsen creating conditions that allow extremism to grow.

Salisbury (2017) argues that Yemen is a 'chaos state' that exists on a map, but not in reality. For him, Yemen is a collection of mini-states at varying levels of conflict with each other, as well as with internal politics and conflict.<sup>3</sup> Thus, power is divided throughout the country with legitimacy earned at a local level and the actors that the international community negotiate with for peace do not maintain a monopoly over power. As a result, conflict is likely to continue as these local actors are ignored and correspondingly so are the key drivers of violent extremism. Moreover, Salisbury (2018) argues that the south of Yemen is continuously ignored by international actors in deciding and negotiating the country's future, and instead their only focus in the south is counterterrorism. This alienates the population, prevents inclusive negotiations, and allows AQAP to take advantage.

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<sup>3</sup> See Map 3 on the next page, as well as the [Chatham House interactive Yemen Map](#).

**Map 3: Yemeni conflict frontlines and areas of contestation**



Source: Salisbury, 2017: 22.

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## Key websites

- Chatham House Yemen: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/research/regions/middle-east-and-north-africa/yemen>
- Interactive Yemen Map: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/yemen-reconstruction-and-dialogue-project>
- POMEPS: <https://pomeps.org/category/pomeps-publications/>
- Yemen Poling Center: <https://www.yemenpolling.org>

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