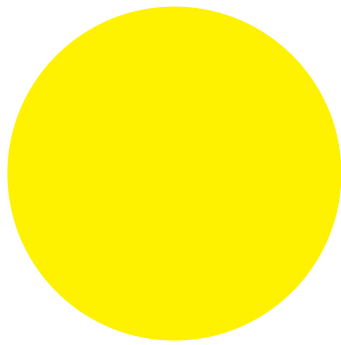


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Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi (R) and chief of the Patriotic Union of Iraq's Kurdistan region Bafel Talabani meet in Tehran, Iran on September 15, 2026. **TASNIM**

Two straits, one war: three paths ahead for Yemen battlefield

By Mohammad Sajad Kashani
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ANALYSIS EXCLUSIVE

Even as the Middle East is engulfed in turmoil, the war in Yemen stands out as one of the longest and most complicated conflicts of recent decades one that began as a domestic political crisis, escalated into a multi-sided civil war, turned into a regional rivalry, and ultimately, with the Red Sea crisis and the 2026 Iran war, took on international dimensions. The postponement of the Persian Gulf Arab states' meeting with Iran over the Strait of Hormuz meant to tie Bab al-Mandeb's fate to that of Hormuz has produced the most complex configuration the region has seen since 2014.

The roots of the crisis trace back to the Arab Spring. The 2011 uprisings against then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh led, under the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council mediation, to Saleh handing power to his deputy, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, meant to steer a transition toward stability. Instead, the transition was plagued by weak institutions, corruption, economic crisis, and discontent among marginalized groups.

The Houthis or the Ansarallah movement, rooted in the Zaydi-Shia community of Saada province, capitalized on this discontent. In August 2014, after the government removed fuel subsidies, they organized mass protests that quickly turned into an armed uprising, allying tactically with forces loyal to Saleh previously their rival and forcing the prime minister to resign. Hadi fled to Aden and reclaimed his legitimacy, but as Houthi-Saleh forces advanced south toward Aden, he took refuge in Saudi Arabia in March 2015 and appealed for international intervention.

On 26 March 2015, Saudi Arabia formed a nine-country coalition – including the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Sudan – and, with logistical support from the US, UK, and France, launched Operation Decisive Storm to restore Hadi's government and drive the Houthis from Sanaa and other major cities.

Years of attrition, humanitarian crisis

From 2015 until April 2022, the region was mired in militia chaos and the war in Yemen settled into a grinding stalemate, while Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and ISIS in Iraq also seized the opportunity to put down roots away from the spotlight.

With the outbreak of the 2026 US-Israeli war on Iran, the Houthis resumed attacks on 28 March 2026, with leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi declaring his group's "hand is always on the trigger." A Houthi strike on Abha airport in southern Saudi Arabia in July 2026 again raised the risk of full-scale civil war. In December 2025, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) attacked government forces and seized Hadhramaut and al-Mahra, but the central government recaptured the areas in January 2026 and the STC effectively dissolved; the UAE withdrew its remaining forces. In September 2026, fighting between the Houthis and Presidential Leadership Council forces intensified in Taiz, al-Jawf, and al-Bayda, and with the capture of Mokha and areas around Bab al-Mandeb, the Houthis took most of the western coast, further raising the risk of all-out war. Combined with economic collapse, shrinking aid, and food insecurity, this has deepened Yemen's humanitarian crisis: over 22 million now need assistance, roughly 5 million are displaced, and nearly 18 million face food insecurity.

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Iran's largest trade delegation in seven years in Russia, eyeing trade expansion

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