

THREAT CATEGORY: ARMED CONFLICT

YEMEN
ONE COUNTRY, TWO WARS

How two Yemens became one, who is fighting now, the tribes and foreign powers behind them, how the truce between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis broke, and who controls what on the ground.

DATA CUT-OFF
17 November 2026

COVERAGE
History · Fighting forces · Tribes · Geopolitics · Truce collapse · Control map · Outlook

Illustrative image

BOTTOM LINE

For the first time since 2015, the Houthis are on the offensive in the south

The coalition against them is fractured and the war is now tied to the regional conflict between Iran and its enemies. Anyone with staff, assets or shipping in Yemen, the southern Red Sea or southern Saudi Arabia should plan for a long escalation, not an early ceasefire.

80 km

from Houthi positions near Tur al-Bahah to Aden (Reuters, 15 November)

15 Nov

Government forces pull out of Bab al-Mandab to defend Aden

13 Jul

The 2022 truce between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis ends after the Sanaa airport strike

200,000+

people displaced by the fighting since early September (International Organization for Migration, IOM)

KEY FINDINGS

01 **The war has restarted in full.** The truce that kept Saudi Arabia and the Houthis apart since April 2022 ended on 13 July 2026, after a strike on Sanaa airport's runway.

02 **The Houthis hold the initiative.** Since September they have taken the whole Red Sea coast, including Mokha and Perim island, and on 15 November the Bab al-Mandab area.

03 **Taiz is encircled.** Yemen's third-largest city has been cut off since the Houthis took the Aden road and At Turbah on 4 October.

04 **Aden is now the target.** Houthi units are fighting in western Lahj, about 80 km from the government's seat.

05 **The anti-Houthi camp is weaker.** The split between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at the turn of 2026 ended the Emirati role and broke up the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

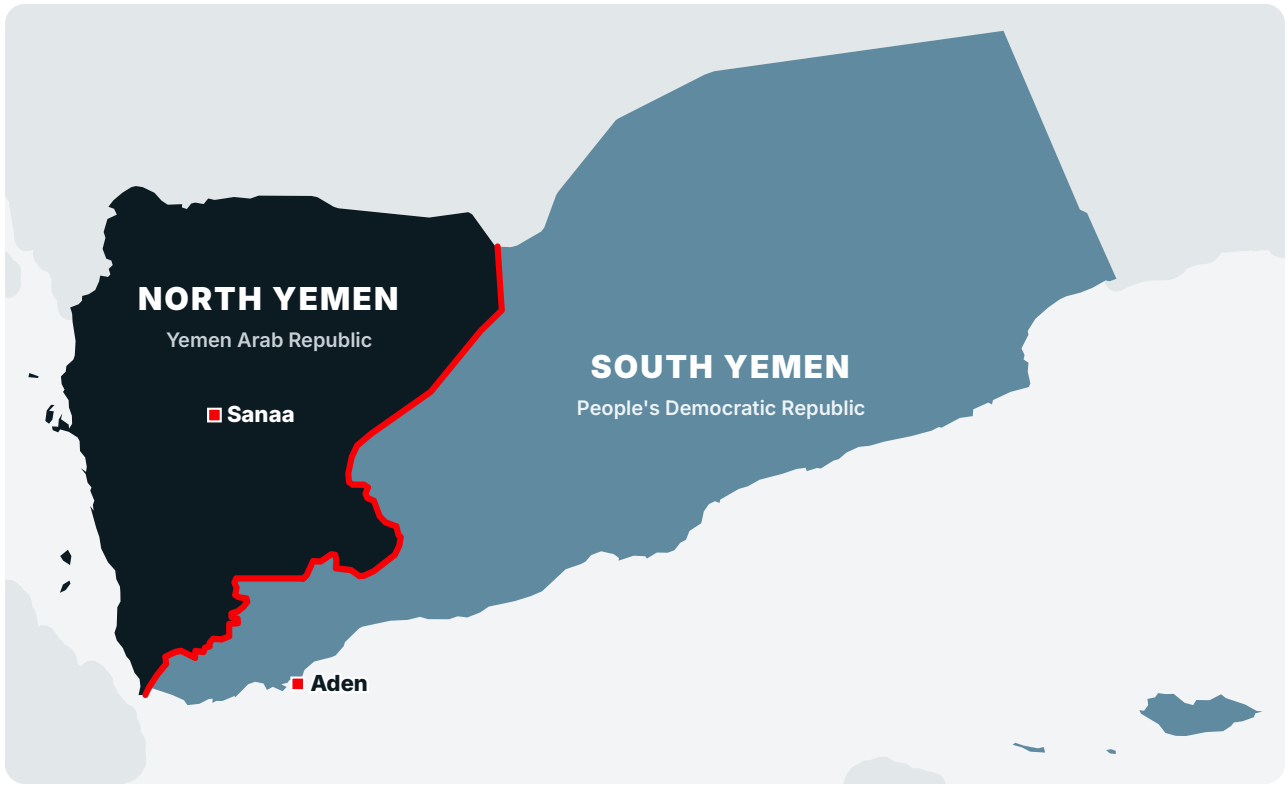
06 **Yemen is a front of the Iran war.** With Hormuz closed, Saudi oil leaves through the Red Sea, past Houthi guns.

07 **Riyadh carries the war alone.** Washington declined to strike. Turkey and Pakistan pledged troops to defend Saudi Arabia, not to fight in Yemen.

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BEFORE 1990

Two Yemens, two very different states



Former border shown approximately, on today's governorate lines.

North Yemen

RULERS	Zaydi imams, on and off, for about 1,000 years until 1962
STATE	Yemen Arab Republic from 26 September 1962
CAPITAL	Sanaa
WAR	Civil war 1962 to 1970: Egypt backed the republic, Saudi Arabia the royalists
LEADER	Ali Abdullah Saleh, president from 1978

South Yemen

RULERS	Britain held Aden from 1839 and ruled the sultanates around it as protectorates
STATE	Independent 30 November 1967; People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from 1970
CAPITAL	Aden
SYSTEM	The Arab world's only Marxist state, backed by the Soviet Union
CRISIS	1986 party war in Aden killed thousands

UNITY, THEN WAR

With Soviet support fading, the two states merged on **22 May 1990**: Saleh became president and southern leader Ali Salim al-Beidh vice president. In May 1994 al-Beidh declared secession, and on **7 July 1994** northern forces took Aden. Land seizures and forced retirements turned many southerners against unity, and in 2007 the Southern Movement (al-Hirak) was born.

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NORTH VERSUS SOUTH

A rivalry older than the state

The divide is old. Between 1904 and 1914 Britain and the Ottoman Empire drew and then fixed a line across south-west Arabia. North of it lay Ottoman Yemen, where Zaydi imams led the highland tribes. South of it lay Aden, a busy British port, and a patchwork of sultanates and sheikhdoms.

The two societies grew apart. Both claimed to stand for one Yemen, yet they fought border wars in **1972** and **1979**, and each war ended with a promise of unity that went nowhere. When southern leaders turned their guns on each other in Aden in January 1986, the losers fled north. Among them was an officer named **Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi**, who became Yemen's president in 2012.

Unity in 1990 joined two exhausted states without reconciling them. After the 1994 war, northern officials, officers and businessmen took charge in the South. Thousands of southern officers and civil servants were forced into retirement, and land and oil fields passed into northern hands. Those grievances produced the Southern Movement and the STC, and they still shape the war: southern units fight hardest when they defend the South.

North

Highland, tribal, conservative; power with sheikhs and army officers; Zaydi heartland in the far north, Shafi'i Sunni in Taiz, Ibb and the coast

South

Port city and sultanates under Britain, then a centralised Marxist state with secular courts and a professional civil service; Shafi'i Sunni

FLASHPOINTS

More than a century of division

1904 · 1914	Britain and the Ottomans draw, then fix, a line between the North and Aden's hinterland
1967	The South wins independence as a separate state
1972	First border war; the Cairo agreement promises unity
1979	Second border war; a summit in Kuwait renews the pledge
1986	Southern leaders fight in Aden; the losers, among them Hadi, flee north
1990	Unity under Saleh and al-Beidh
1994	Civil war; northern forces take Aden on 7 July
2007	Southern Movement protests begin
2017	STC founded
2019	STC seizes Aden from the government
2025	STC pushes into Hadramawt and Mahra

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TIMELINE

From Aden in 1839 to the war of 2026

North · South · United Yemen · War and conflict

1839 — Britain takes Aden

1918 — Imam Yahya rules an independent North

1962 — Revolution; civil war in the North

1967 — British leave; South independent

1970 — South becomes the Marxist PDRY

1972 · 79 — Border wars between the two

1986 — Party war in Aden

1990 — North and South unite

1994 — Southern secession crushed

2004 — First Houthi war in Saada

2007 — Southern Movement begins

2012 — Saleh hands power to Hadi

2014 — Houthis capture Sanaa

2015 — Saudi-led coalition intervenes

2017 — STC founded; Saleh killed

2022 — United Nations (UN) truce; Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) formed

2023 — Houthi Red Sea attacks

2026 — Truce ends; Houthi offensive

Division — 1839 to 1990

Two states, two systems, two patrons. Border wars in 1972 and 1979.

Uneasy union — 1990 to 2014

A northern-dominated state, a crushed southern secession and six Houthi wars.

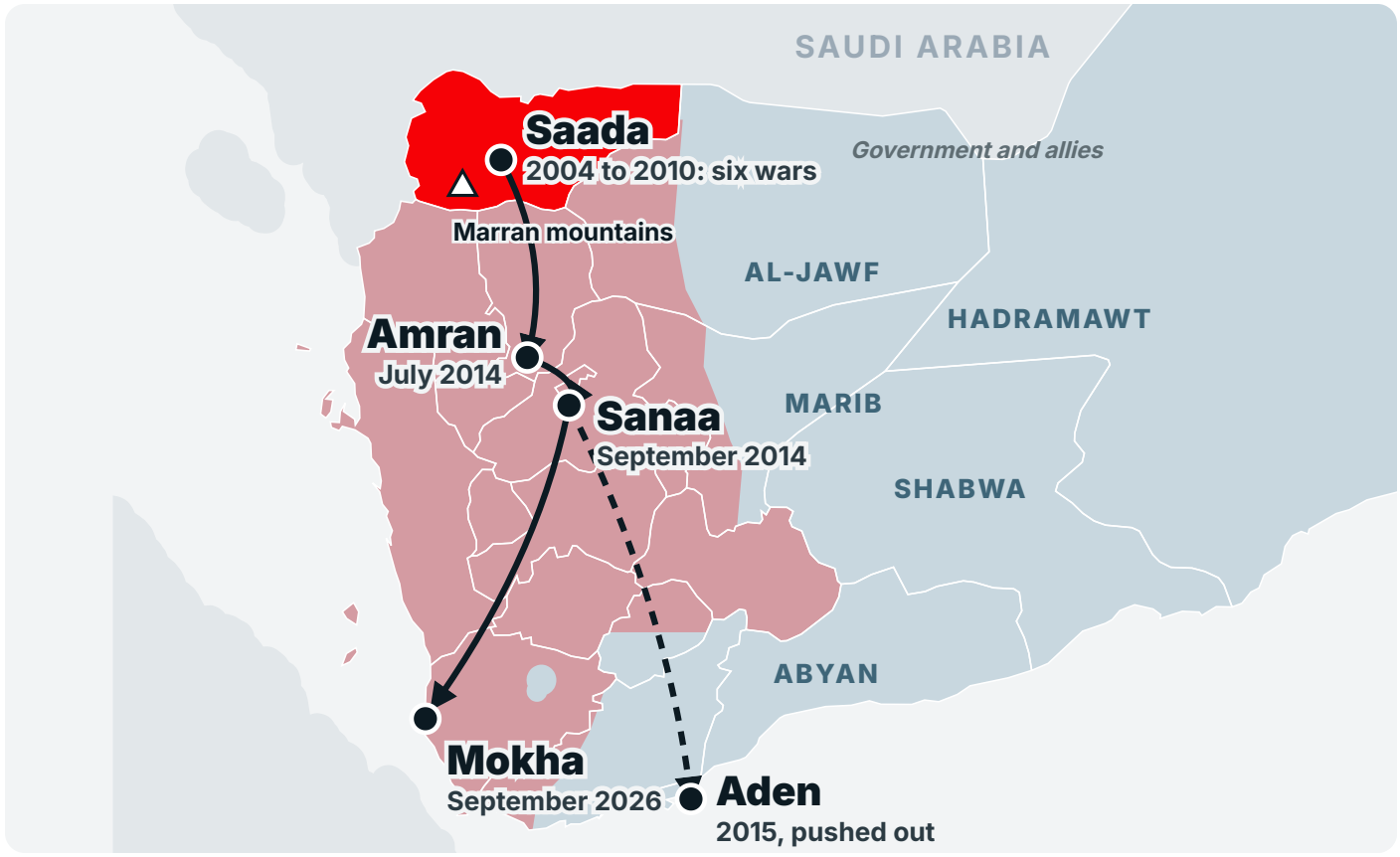
War — 2014 to today

Houthi takeover, Saudi intervention, southern separatism and now a regional war.

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WHERE THE HOUTHIS COME FROM

From Saada to the Red Sea



1990s

The Believing Youth revival movement takes root in Saada

2004

Hussein killed; the first of six wars with Saleh's army

2014

Houthis capture Amran in July and Sanaa in September

ORIGINS

The Houthis come from **Saada governorate**, in Yemen's far north on the border with Saudi Arabia. The movement takes its name from the al-Houthi family, whose stronghold was the Marran mountains west of Saada city.

Saada is the heartland of **Zaydism**, the branch of Shia Islam whose imams ruled the North until 1962. After the revolution, Zaydi religious families lost power, the province was left poor and neglected, and Saudi-funded Salafi preaching spread nearby.

In the 1990s a Zaydi revival group, the Believing Youth, grew up in Saada. By the early 2000s it was led by **Hussein al-Houthi**, a former member of parliament, whose anti-American and anti-Israeli slogan, chanted in mosques as far away as Sanaa, became an open challenge to Saleh.

Saleh sent in the army in 2004. Hussein was killed that September, and the wars that followed turned a local religious movement into a hardened militia led by his brother, **Abdul-Malik al-Houthi**.

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2011 TO 2026

From uprising to a national war

The 2011 uprising forced Saleh to hand power to his deputy, **Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi**, in February 2012. A national dialogue followed, but its plan to split Yemen into six federal regions angered both the Houthis and many southerners.

With help from army units loyal to Saleh, now their ally, the Houthis captured **Sanaa on 21 September 2014**. Hadi fled to Aden and then to Riyadh, and on **26 March 2015** a Saudi-led coalition intervened. Saleh turned on the Houthis in December 2017 and was killed by them two days later. The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, founded in 2017, seized Aden in 2019.

A UN truce on **2 April 2022** halted major fighting, and days later Hadi handed his powers to the Presidential Leadership Council. From November 2023 the Houthis attacked Red Sea shipping in what they called support for Gaza, drawing United States (US), British and Israeli strikes. Their **May 2025** ceasefire with Washington covered only American ships: in July 2025 they sank two more merchant vessels, the Magic Seas and the Eternity C.

Then the anti-Houthi camp split. When the STC swept into the oil-rich east in December 2025, Saudi Arabia struck back, and on 30 December the UAE said it would withdraw. Within two weeks the STC had been broken up, leaving the government dependent on Riyadh and on southern units whose first loyalty is to the south.

THE ANTI-HOUTHI CAMP SPLITS

December 2025 to February 2026

Dec 2025	STC forces seize Hadramawt and Mahra
30 Dec	Saudi strike on an Emirati shipment at Mukalla port
30 Dec	UAE announces it will withdraw its forces
4 Jan	Government retakes Mukalla
7 Jan	Al-Zubaidi flees and is charged with treason
9 Jan	STC dissolution announced in Riyadh
15 Jan	Al-Zindani named prime minister
9 Feb	35-member cabinet sworn in

Result: one patron, a weaker government and a south that distrusts Riyadh.

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WHO IS FIGHTING

Four armed camps, one main war

The Houthis (Ansar Allah)

ON THE OFFENSIVE

ORIGIN

Saada governorate, in the far north on the Saudi border; a Zaydi revival movement founded in the 1990s.

LEADER

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi. Mahdi al-Mashat heads the Supreme Political Council; Mohammed Abdulsalam negotiates.

BACKER

Iran: weapons and parts since at least 2009; advisers reported in 2026, which Tehran denies.

HOLDS

Sanaa, the northern highlands, most of the population and, since September, the whole Red Sea coast.

ARSENAL

Ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range drones, a large army built from old Republican Guard units and tribal levies.

REACH

Strikes on Riyadh, Mecca, Abha, Khamis Mushait, Jizan, Najran, Taif, Yanbu and the Eastern Province.

GAINS SINCE SEPTEMBER

Mokha, Hays, Al Khawkhah, Perim, Mayun, the Hanish islands, At Turbah and the Dhubab and Bab al-Mandab area.

Government (PLC) and allied forces

DEFENDING

LEADER

Rashad al-Alimi, chairman; Shaya al-Zindani, prime minister

BACKER

Saudi Arabia

HOLDS

Aden, the south and east, Marib, eastern al-Jawf, besieged Taiz

Southern Transitional Council (STC)

WITH GOVERNMENT

LEADER

Aidarous al-Zubaidi, in hiding abroad

STATUS

Dissolution announced in Riyadh, rejected by its leaders in Aden. Its fighters now defend Aden under government command.

Tribes and Popular Resistance

WHO

Popular Resistance in Taiz; tribal levies in Marib, al-Jawf, Lahj, al-Bayda

NOTE

Defend home ground fiercely; rarely fight far from it

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

EXPLOITING GAPS

LEADER

Saad bin Atef al-Awlaki

AREA

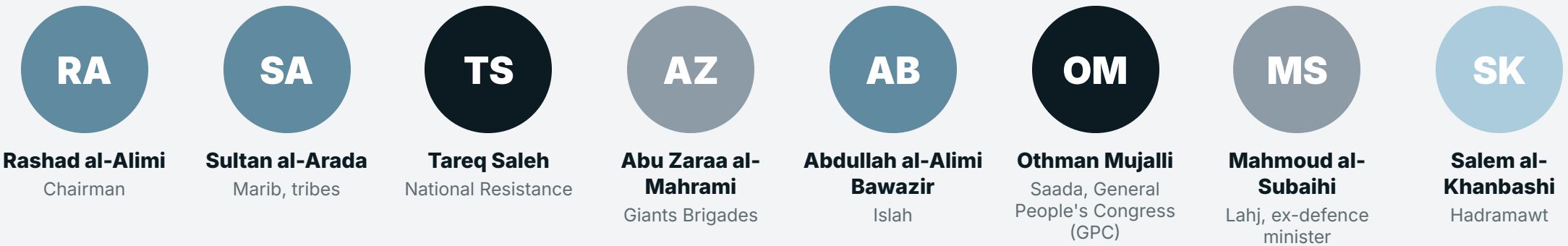
Abyan, Shabwa, Marib, Hadramawt, al-Bayda; fights both sides

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INSIDE THE GOVERNMENT CAMP

A council of eight, an army of many

THE PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL, NOVEMBER 2026



FORCES UNDER GOVERNMENT COMMAND

National Army and Islah-aligned units	Marib, eastern al-Jawf, Taiz city
Giants Brigades	Coast and western Lahj; Salafi-leaning southern units
Southern forces (former STC)	Aden, Lahj, al-Dhale, Abyan, Shabwa
National Resistance (Tareq Saleh)	West coast until the fall of Mokha on 10 September
Nation Shield (Homeland Shield)	Saudi-raised; retook the east in January 2026
Hadrami forces and Tribal Alliance	Hadramawt and its oil fields

Defence minister: Maj. Gen. Taher al-Aqili. Al-Zubaidi and Faraj al-Bahsani were removed from the council in January 2026 and replaced by al-Subaihi and al-Khanbashi.

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THE TRIBES

Where the great confederations lean

◀ WITH GOVERNMENT | DIVIDED | WITH HOUTHIS ▶

Hashid

Historically led by the al-Ahmar family; Saleh's base



Mostly under Houthi control since the al-Ahmars and Saleh were pushed aside

Bakil

Yemen's largest confederation; includes the Dahm of al-Jawf



Houthis courted Bakil sheikhs who resented Hashid dominance under Saleh; al-Jawf tribes are split

Madhhij and the Marib tribes

Murad (Marib); Qayfah (al-Bayda)



Marib's tribes, including Murad, Abidah, Jahm and Jadaan, have defended the city since 2020; al-Bayda is under Houthi control

Southern and Hadrami tribes

Subaiha (Lahj); Hadramawt Tribal Alliance



Fight with the government; the Hadrami alliance is backed by Riyadh

Positions are a ThreatRate assessment of where most of each confederation stands today, not a count.

HOW THE HOUTHIS WON THE TRIBES

Yemen is often called a nation of tribes that only sometimes has a state. More than 400 tribes trace their roots to a few great confederations.

The Houthis bought loyalty with money and posts, filled the gap left by the al-Ahmar family, and punished sheikhs who defected.

WHAT WOULD MOVE THEM

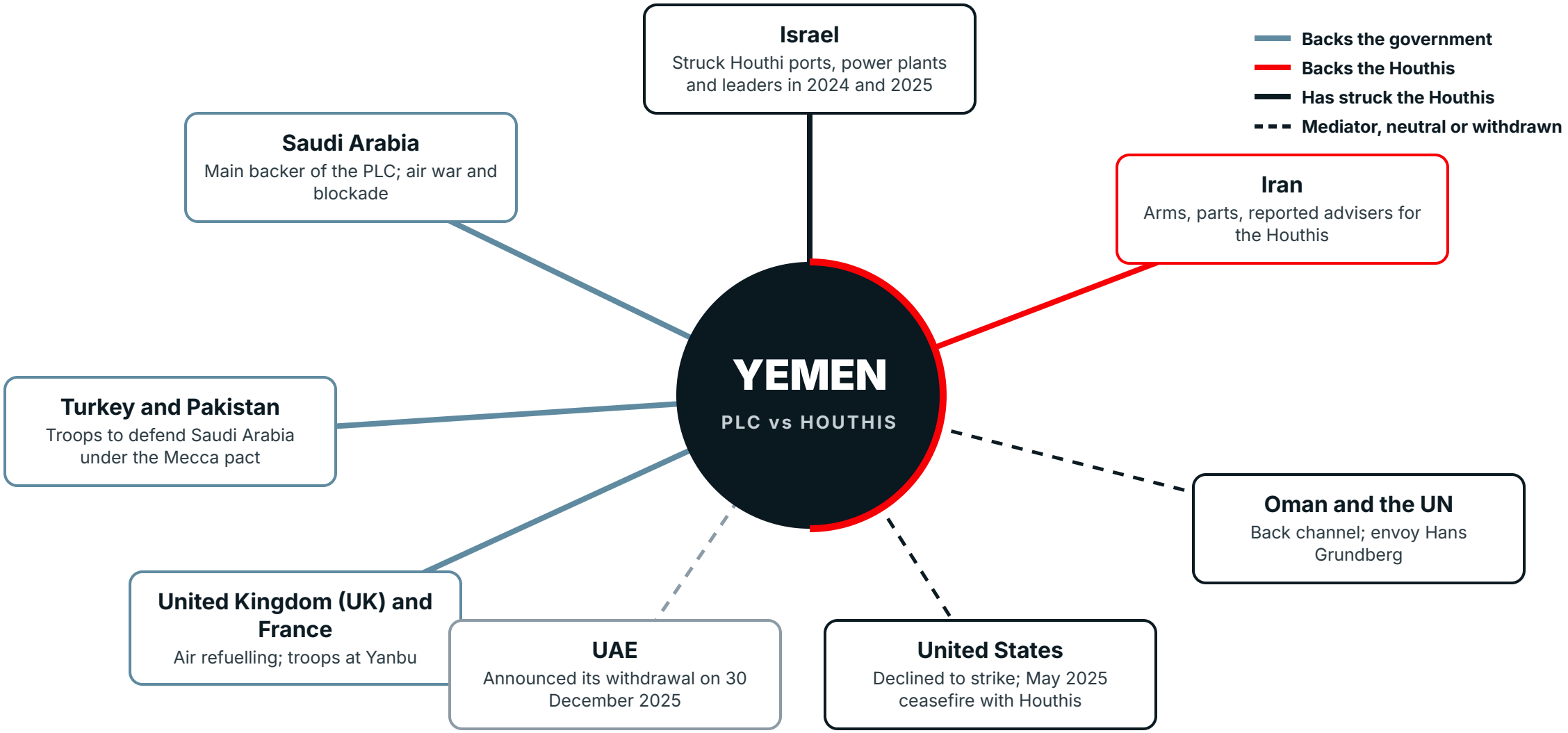
Tribes rarely commit for ideology. Many are waiting to see whether the government's **"Dawn of Yemen"** offensive brings lasting gains, and they can switch sides fast when the balance shifts.

> Discontent is rising in Houthi areas as casualties mount, one of the main limits on further escalation.

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FOREIGN POWERS

A Yemeni war with a regional engine



28 Feb

US and Israeli strikes on Iran begin; Yemen becomes a front

Hormuz

Effectively closed, so Saudi oil exports have shifted to the Red Sea

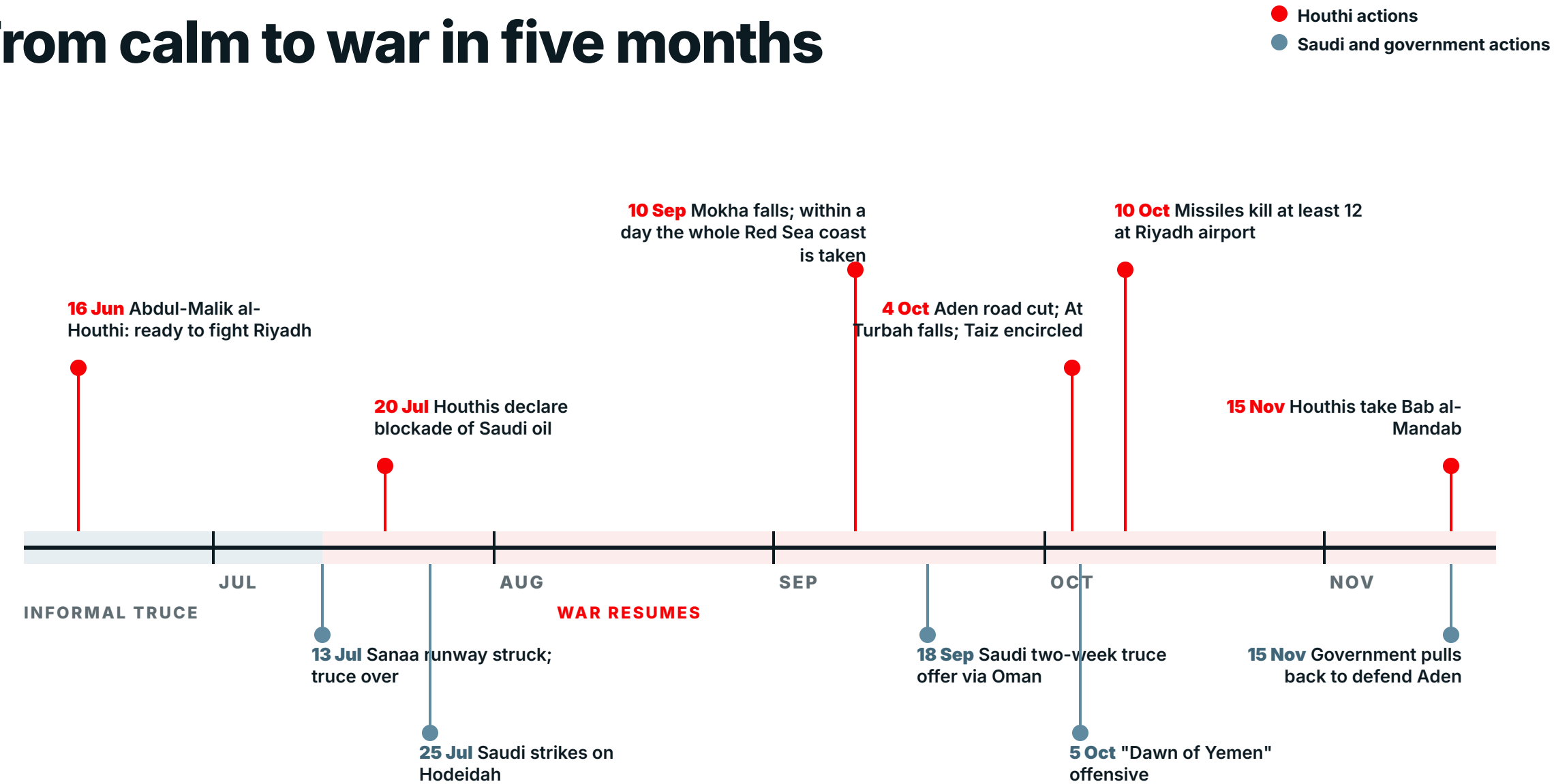
5 Oct

Turkey and Pakistan pledge troops under the Mecca pact

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JUNE TO NOVEMBER 2026

From calm to war in five months

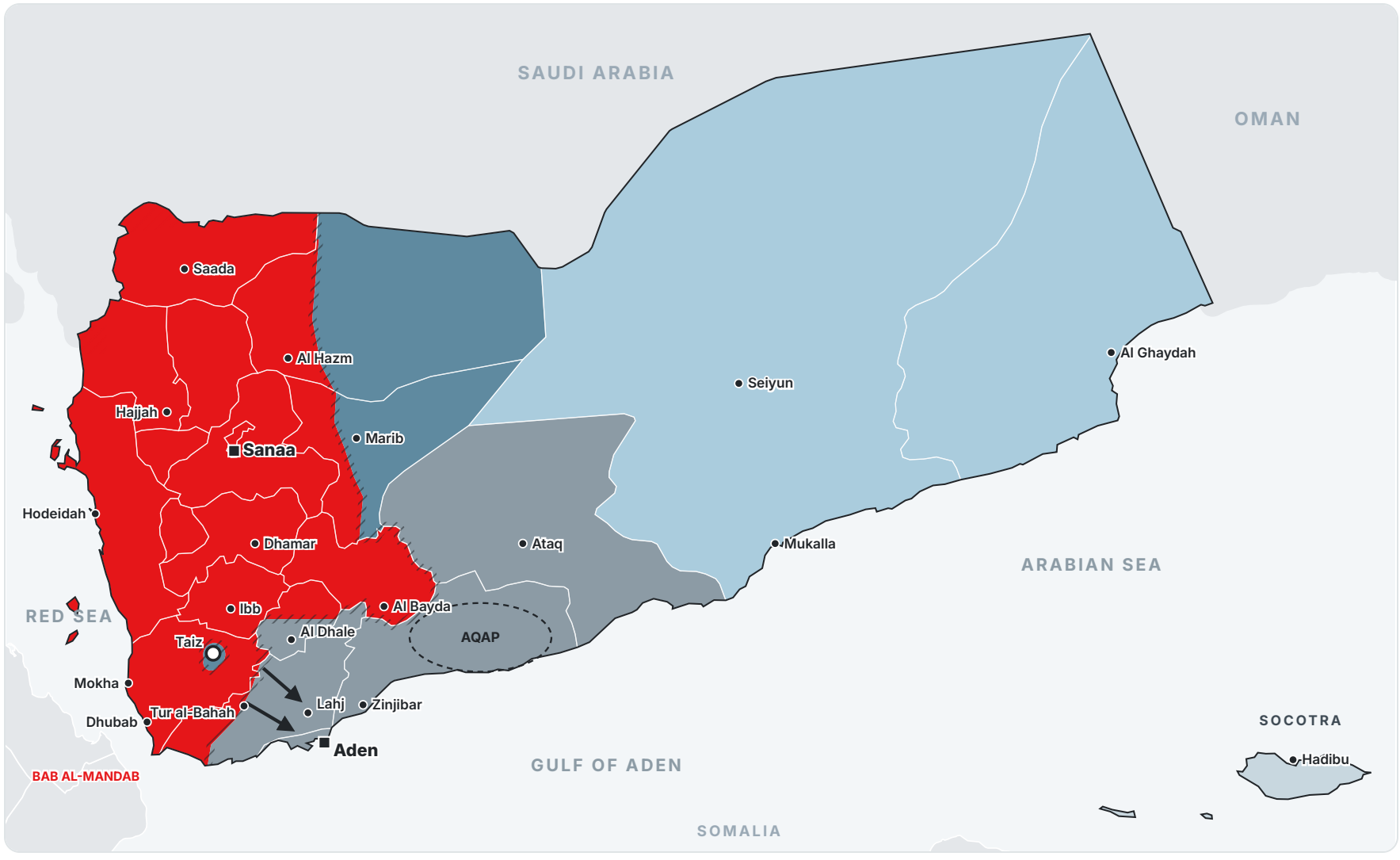


The 2022 truce lapsed on paper in October 2022 but held in practice for four years. It did not survive the Iran war: the strike that stopped a Houthi delegation flying home from Khamenei's funeral ended it in a single day.

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17 NOVEMBER 2026

Who controls what in Yemen



KEY

- Houthis (Ansar Allah)
- Government: army, Islah-aligned units, tribes
- Government: southern forces (former STC, Giants)
- Government: Nation Shield and Hadrami forces
- Socotra: local authority under the government
- Active front line
- AQAP area of activity
- Besieged city (Taiz)
- Seat of power

Approximate ThreatRate assessment. Lines are fluid and several claims are unverified.

RED SEA COAST

Houthi

from the Saudi border to Bab al-Mandab

TAIZ

Besieged

encircled since 4 October

ADEN

80 km

from Houthi positions near Tur al-Bahah

MARIB

Holding

city and oil fields with the government

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FRONT BY FRONT

Where the fighting is, and how close to Aden

FRONT	STATUS	SITUATION
Red Sea coast and Bab al-Mandab	HOUTHI GAIN	Houthi-held from the Saudi border to Bab al-Mandab, including Mokha, Perim, Mayun and the Hanish islands. Government forces left Dhubab airport on 15 November.
Lahj and the road to Aden	HOUTHI GAIN	Houthis are positioned just outside Tur al-Bahah district, about 80 km from Aden, and have fired missiles at government forces at Kharaz and Ras al-Arah.
Taiz	BESIEGED	City held by government forces but fully encircled since the Houthis cut the Aden road on 4 October.
Marib and al-Jawf	CONTESTED	Government holds Marib city and the oil fields; Houthis hold the west of both governorates and Al Hazm.
Al-Bayda and al-Dhale	STATIC	Al-Bayda is Houthi-held. The front north of al-Dhale town, held by southern forces, has changed little.
East and Socotra	GOVERNMENT	No Houthi ground presence; AQAP active in Abyan and Shabwa. Socotra quiet since the UAE pullout.

HOW CLOSE THE HOUTHIS ARE TO ADEN

Road distances are approximate. Other outlets have reported Houthi units closer, but those claims are not confirmed.



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THREATRATE OUTLOOK

What happens next

SCENARIOS, NEXT THREE MONTHS

Grinding advance

LIKELY

Houthis tighten the Taiz siege and gain ground in Lahj; Aden's perimeter holds under Saudi air cover.

Siege of Aden

POSSIBLE

A breakthrough at Tur al-Bahah or al-Musaymir puts Aden within Houthi artillery range.

Negotiated pause

POSSIBLE

An Oman-brokered truce freezes the lines, leaving the coast and Bab al-Mandab with the Houthis.

Government recovery

UNLIKELY

A coalition counteroffensive retakes the coast and lifts the Taiz siege.

Watch for: Houthi moves past Tur al-Bahah or al-Musaymir; missile fire on Aden port and airport; desertions or local truces by southern and tribal units; a new Saudi offer through Oman; any change in the US position on strikes.

RISK INDICATORS

OVERALL **EXTREME**

Aden	VERY HIGH	Missile and drone strikes on port, airport and government sites
Shipping	VERY HIGH	Bab al-Mandab under Houthi control; Saudi-linked ships declared targets
Saudi Arabia	HIGH	Strikes on airports, refineries and cities
Kidnapping	HIGH	Rising in the south as forces move to the front
Detention	HIGH	UN, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and local staff held in Houthi areas
Travel	DO NOT	All travel to Yemen should be avoided

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