



Policy Planning White Paper: Governance Under Ansar Allah

Prepared by the

**Public International Law & Policy Group
and
Resonate! Yemen**

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GOVERNANCE UNDER ANSAR ALLAH**

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POLICY PLANNING WHITE PAPER: GOVERNANCE UNDER ANSAR ALLAH

Executive Summary

Ansar Allah is a key political and military actor in Yemen, and controls areas containing the majority of Yemen's population. It has succeeded in creating a regional economy, containing violence, and remaking government institutions in its own image, albeit at a high cost to civic life. Below are five recommendations for policymakers to keep in mind while continuing to monitor and evaluate Ansar Allah's governance practices:

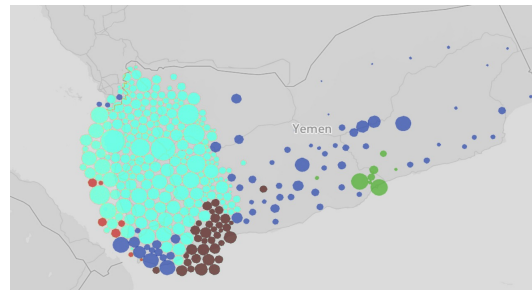
- A major contributor to Ansar Allah's support is its ability to control economic inflation within its territories and therefore, better protect its citizens from extreme poverty. The Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG), popularly known by Yemenis as the "Legitimacy" government, has not been able to control the economic impacts of the war. By supporting the ROYG to control inflation, policymakers may impact Yemeni acceptance of the government in areas outside Ansar Allah's control.
- Young people constitute 70% of Yemen's population, and are targeted by Houthi educational policies. Providing young people in Yemen with access to sustainable economic development and unbiased educational resources should be a high priority for those looking to halt the spread of the Houthi movement (and the proliferation of other armed groups).
- Policymakers should take steps to counter the targeted messages distributed through Ansar Allah's "cultural courses." In PILPG's experience, social media is an effective tool for spreading peacebuilding-related messages throughout Yemen.
- Security is a key concern for Yemeni civilians. The data shows that while individuals may not prefer Ansar Allah governance, they appreciate living in its territory for the general security. Concrete steps towards engaging with the Presidential Leadership Council and furthering a negotiated ceasefire is likely welcome and will lessen the appeal of Ansar Allah to Yemeni civilians.
- The data shows deep concern with corruption, arbitrary detention, abuses of power, and Ansar Allah's treatment of women and girls. Policymakers should consider these social issues when supporting civil society during, as well as after, a peace negotiation.

Statement of Purpose

Ansar Allah, more commonly referred to as the Houthis, is an Islamist political and armed group that began its rebellion against the government in the early 2000s and since then, has acquired sizeable territory, taking control of the capital city of Sanaa in 2014. Ansar Allah has operated as a pseudo-government for the majority of Yemenis and has had relative success in maintaining its territorial control. This white paper provides policy recommendations for the continuous observation of Ansar Allah’s policies and practices.

Introduction

Since April 2, 2022, Yemen’s conflict actors have (mostly) adhered to a United Nations (U.N.) brokered ceasefire that is designed to last until October 2, 2022.¹ Whether this will translate into a larger peace process remains to be seen, however it is clear that Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement, will remain a key player in Yemeni politics.² Understanding its governance practices is critical because, as shown in turquoise below, over 70% of Yemen’s population resides in areas that Ansar Allah controls.



International Crisis Group (January 2022).³

¹ Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, *Press Statement by UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg on a Two-Month Renewal of the UN-Mediated Truce*, (Aug. 2, 2022), available at <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/press-statement-un-special-envoy-yemen-hans-grundberg-two-month-renewal-un-mediated-truce>

² This paper uses the official name “Ansar Allah” and the more common “Houthi” interchangeably since interviewees frequently employed both terms

³ International Crisis Group, *How Yemen’s War Economy Undermines Peace Efforts*, (Jan. 2022), available at <https://yemenconflict.crisisgroup.org/>

The Houthis have benefited from their geographical distance from the frontlines to create a regional “economy, security network, and governance that function well,”⁴ especially compared to the situation in the ROYG-controlled South. While its governance is systematic and effectively implemented through the fear of state violence, it is highly organized around the al-Houthi family; the long-term effectiveness of Ansar Allah’s governance over time is therefore unknown.

This paper analyzes 67 in-depth interviews conducted in Ansar Allah territory in November and December 2021 to assess citizens’ opinions of its governance practices.⁵ Thirty additional informal interviews were conducted from December 2021 to January 2022 in Sana’a, Hodeidah, Dhamar, and Taiz.⁶ A total of 12 separate focus group discussions (86 participants) were carried out informally during *qat* chewing sessions.⁷ The large number of interviews and focus group discussions from an area in which it is difficult and dangerous to collect data, as well as isolated from the outside world, represents a rare and important set of civilian perspectives on Houthi governance for policymakers.⁸

Background

Although little is known about its internal organization, Ansar Allah’s governance is driven by the prerogatives of the al-Houthi family and their close confidants.⁹ The Houthi movement is an offshoot of Zaydi Islam.¹⁰ Unlike most Zaydis, the Houthi movement’s members are revivalists who believe they are

⁴ International Crisis Group, *Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen’s War of Narratives* Crisis Group Middle East Report N°233, (Apr. 29, 2022), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/233-truce-test-huthis-and-yemens-war-narratives>.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews were conducted in Phase 3. For more information on data collection and sampling, see Annex I, Methodology.

⁶ Information from the informal interviews was incorporated into this paper. By January 2022, data collection in Houthi-controlled areas had become extremely sensitive, and no information about participants was collected to avoid physical risk.

⁷ For the importance of *qat* chewing sessions in northern Yemeni culture, in which participants share information, make decisions, and reinforce cultural norms, see Paul A. Frye, “Form and function of North Yemeni *qat* sessions,” 292-304, *Southern Journal of Communication*, 55:3, (1990).

⁸ Note that although percentages are calculated as a means of conceptualizing trends in the data, representative generalized statements about population beliefs in the governorates surveyed cannot be inferred from the sample.

⁹ UN Security Council Report, *Letter dated 26 January 2018 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2018/68 (Jan. 26, 2018).

¹⁰ Alexander Weissenburger, “Zaydi Doctrine,” in *Conflict in the Modern Middle East: An Encyclopedia of Civil War, Revolutions, and Regime Change* (2020).

“pure” interpreters of Zaydi Islam and their existence is under attack by the dominant Sunni Muslim group.¹¹ Grievances including economic underdevelopment, political marginalization, and discrimination¹² led to Houthi protests, the Yemeni Government’s violent response, and the “Sa’ada wars” of 2004-2010 between the two entities. The government’s “repression and marginalization in official and popular spheres” of Houthi activists had the unintended consequence of invigorating their revivalist movement,¹³ and they garnered much support by critiquing governmental corruption.¹⁴ While its ideological doctrines can be vague and inconsistent, the Houthi movement has pursued a long term strategy of “entrenching its members in leading positions of the Yemeni state apparatus, which it has tried to transform in accordance with its requirements and ideas.”¹⁵

Since 2011 the Houthis have consolidated political and military control over northern governorates, taking the former capital, *Aminat al-‘Asima*, or Sana’a Municipality in 2015.¹⁶ In addition to the strength and discipline of its militias, Ansar Allah’s success is based on a combination of strategies including a cult of personality around al-Houthi family members and the late Hussein al-Houthi’s writings,¹⁷ public narratives of resistance to Sunni domination and the injustice of

¹¹ International Crisis Group, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, Middle East Report N°86 – (May 27, 2009), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-defusing-saada-time-bomb>.

¹² Tristan Dunning, “Yemen—the ‘worst humanitarian crisis in the world’ continues,” *Australian Parliamentary Library Research Paper*, (Dec. 2018), available at https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/6375089/upload_binary/6375089.pdf.

¹³ James Robin King, *Zaydī Revival in a Hostile Republic: Competing Identities, Loyalties and Visions of State in Republican Yemen*, 440, *Arabica*, vol. 59, no. 3-4, Brill, (2012).

¹⁴ Peter Salisbury and William Maclean, *Yemen on the brink as rebels oust the old guard*, Reuters, Oct. 14, 2014, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-insight/yemen-on-the-brink-as-rebels-oust-the-old-guard-idINKC N0I31XZ20141014>.

¹⁵ Marieke Brandt and Alexander Weissenburger, “Hūthīs,” in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*, Wilferd Madelung and Farhad Daftary, eds. (2022).

¹⁶ For an overview of the Houthi’s rapid rise to power, see International Crisis Group, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, Middle East Report No. 154, 1-2 (June 10, 2014), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/huthis-saada-sanaa>.

¹⁷ See Bernard Haykel, *On the Nature of Huthi Religious and Political Authority and its Relationship to Zaydism*, in *The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf*, (Abdullah Hamidaddin, ed., June 2022).

the official government,¹⁸ and its ability to maintain skillful tribal alliances.¹⁹ Notably, in an area where tribal structures are robust in regulating social life, the al-Houthi family has benefitted from strategic marriages of children to heads of important tribes and government patronage in the form of appointments to consolidate bonds.²⁰

Education has long been central to the Houthi movement, and the Houthi cultural program allows ambitious and practical recruits to signal their allegiance to Ansar Allah. For working adults (who are predominantly male), there are ideological indoctrination programs and paid “cultural courses.”²¹ Children and adolescents are central to recruitment, and even very young children are targeted by the movement through elementary education and summer camps.²²

Getting Things Done: Houthi Governance

This paper defines governance as the ability to make and enforce rules and deliver services to the civilian population.²³ While the process is not transparent, it

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives*, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°233, (Apr. 29, 2022).

¹⁹ Adel Ahmed Dashela, *Coercing Compliance: The Houthis and the Tribes of Northern Yemen*, Fikra Forum, (Nov. 2020), available at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/coercing-compliance-houthis-and-tribes-northern-yemen>. For an overview of tribes and Yemen's complex social strata, including the *sada* or religious elite of northern Yemen, see Helen Lackner, “Tribes in the neo-liberal era: transformation of Yemen's social structure,” in *Tribes in modern Yemen: an anthology* (2021).

²⁰ Luca Nevola, *From Periphery to the Core: A Social Network Analysis of the Hūthī Local Governance System*, VERSUS Working Paper, Jul. 2019, University of Sussex.

²¹ Ansar Allah's cultural courses focus on ideological mobilization and, in some cases, promotion of the Houthis' sectarian ideology. Informal interviewees in Sana'a, Dhamar, and Taiz (Jan. 2022) indicated that exclusively male officials, civil servants, private sector workers, and the self-employed participate in the courses, which last from one to three weeks. Ansar Allah provides participants with accommodations, meals, the culturally important mild stimulant *qat*, cigarettes and a monetary stipend upon completion of the course.

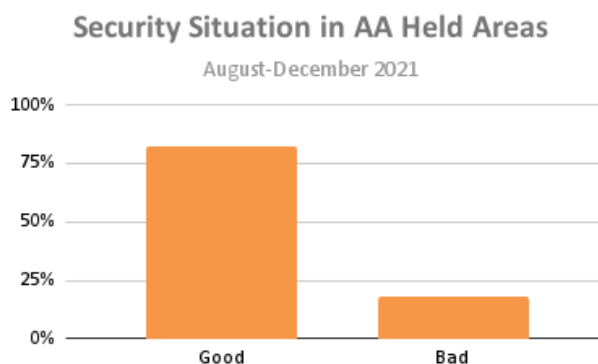
²² See, e.g., *Yemen's teachers' union accuses Houthis of indoctrinating children*, The Arab Weekly, Apr. 4, 2021, available at <https://theArabweekly.com/yemens-teachers-union-accuses-houthis-indoctrinating-children>; Shaker Lashuel, *Huthi Influence on Education: An Investigation of Interventions and Policies*, in *The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf* 113-138,, (Abdullah Hamidaddin, eds., June 2022). For the Houthi position on summer camps, see Hussein al-Huthi. “إقامة المراكز الصيفية 1440 هـ.” [For the Participants in the Establishment of the Summer Centers 1440 A.H.],” (Mar. 7, 2019), <https://www.huda.live/node/320>, and U.N. Panel of Experts, *Annex 10: Houthi cultural courses and summer camps as a threat to peace and security in Yemen, Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2140 (2014)*, (Jan. 26, 2022), available at https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2022_50.pdf.

²³ For an overview of social science definitions of governance, see Arthur Benz, “Governance – A Political Science Perspective,” 3-22, in *New Forms of Governance in Research Organizations*, D. Jansen, ed. (Springer: 2007). Note that governance as defined in this paper is not predicated on democracy. See Ari-Veikko Anttiroiko, “Democratic

appears Houthi rulemaking is highly centralized and restricted to a select group headed by Abdelmalek al-Houthi, Hussein al-Houthi’s brother; many of this “inner circle” were part of the former Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC). Although the Supreme Political Council replaced the SRC in 2016 as a legislative body, multiple authors indicate the SRC continues to operate, directing policy despite technically having been superseded by the theoretically more representative SPC.²⁴ As discussed below, Ansar Allah’s provision of security and its economic policy received a mixed reception among civilians grateful to escape the misery of frontline fighting and social chaos experienced in other parts of Yemen, but wary of the increasing economic strain, governmental corruption and violent repression of dissent.

Ansar Allah’s Security Service Provision

Interviewees reported that Ansar Allah’s ability to maintain physical security was a clear strength. With important exceptions,²⁵ the Houthis have effectively monopolized the violence in areas it controls, and 82% of interviewees described the security situation where they lived as “good.”



E-Governance,” *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology*, 2009. (Noting that public governance can and historically has been performed in various ways that are not democratic).

²⁴ See, ACAPS Yemen Analysis Hub, *The Houthi Supervisory System*, footnote 1, p. 5, (June 17, 2020), available at <https://tinyurl.com/24826mav>; Luca Nevola and Baraa Shibani, *The role of ‘coup forces,’ Saleh, and the Houthis*, pp. 233-251, in *Global, Regional, and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020.

²⁵ See, e.g., Andrea Carboni, *The Myth of Stability: Infighting and Repression in Houthi-Controlled Territories*, ACLED, (Feb. 9, 2021), available at <https://acleddata.com/2021/02/09/the-myth-of-stability-infighting-and-repression-in-houthi-controlled-territories/> and Andrea Carboni, Luca Nevola, *Inside Ibb: A Hotbed of Infighting in Houthi-Controlled Yemen*, ACLED, (Oct. 3, 2019), available at <https://acleddata.com/2019/10/03/inside-ibb-a-hotbed-of-infighting-in-houthi-controlled-yemen/>.

Interviewees pointed to the lack of violence in their areas as a sign of Ansar Allah's success. A male social activist from Bilad al-Rus district in southern Sana'a governorate explained that the relative security was due to "Ansar Allah's control over large areas of the country which has led to a lull in frontline clashes," adding that this allowed it to "extend its influence and impose the presence of the state."²⁶ A disabled woman from the Thawra District in northern Sana'a municipality noted that with "fewer wartime clashes, the situation is relatively calm, and the air raids on civilians and the defenseless have stopped."²⁷ A male intellectual from al-Khibt District in northern Mahweet governorate shared his belief that improved security was "evidence that Ansar Allah is in great control of the situation."²⁸ Some interviewees also fully approved of the Houthi security branch's aggressive approach to maintaining security. A man from Dhamar noted that Ansar Allah's security agents use "an iron hand in terms of crimes, assassinations and unrest."²⁹ A male worker in Hajja explained that there were no "explosions or assassinations" there, unlike areas "under the control of Legitimacy" because of Ansar Allah's tight security, adding that they had "arrested sleeper cells."³⁰

Internal Contradictions Among Interviewees Reporting "Good Security"

Sixty-two percent of the interviewees who described Ansar Allah's security as good, especially in comparison to the perceived lawlessness of the areas held by the ROYG/Legitimacy. These interviewees wholeheartedly endorsed the effectiveness of its repressive methods. However, the remaining 38% who acknowledged security was good also raised concerns about its durability, sustainability, and the social costs incurred. An evaluation of the main themes expressed by each group, below, allows policymakers a more nuanced understanding of public support for Ansar Allah.

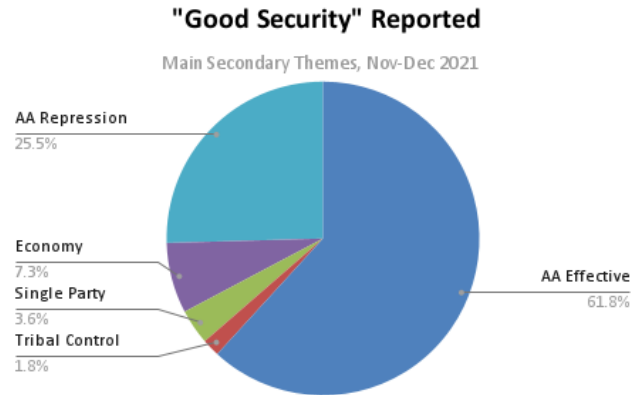
²⁶ SM06

²⁷ AF01

²⁸ HM01

²⁹ DM02

³⁰ JM02



Three main themes emerged among the troubled 38%: Ansar Allah’s single-party political control, its repression of free speech, and the economic crisis. A female government employee in Amran City explained that the security situation in her area was “safe because only one side is in control,” adding, “[e]veryone is used to it. There is no solution for us other than to get used to it.”³¹ A man in Sana’a governorate also noted that Ansar Allah “fully controlled the security situation,” using “their power to strike with an iron fist against any security destabilizers.”³² Interestingly, given the importance of tribal alliances to the Houthi’s military success, only one interviewee, a male social activist from the far northern district of al-Madan in Amran governorate, attributed regional security to the fact that many areas are “ruled by tribes, [Ansar Allah] security and police are present, but in a tribal manner.”³³

Public Safety for Silence

Interviewees further distinguished between general security and individual safety. A female worker in the Bani Matar district of Sana’a distinguished between public and personal security, saying, “[w]hat I call public security is stable, in a strong grip, but this grip is frightening to the ordinary citizen. I cannot say that I have personal security.”³⁴ A female social activist from Dhamar City explained that the persistence of interpersonal violence meant that while “In general [Dhamar] is considered the safest area, tribal clashes, thefts, and assassinations all occur,”

³¹ XF02

³² SM08

³³ XM02

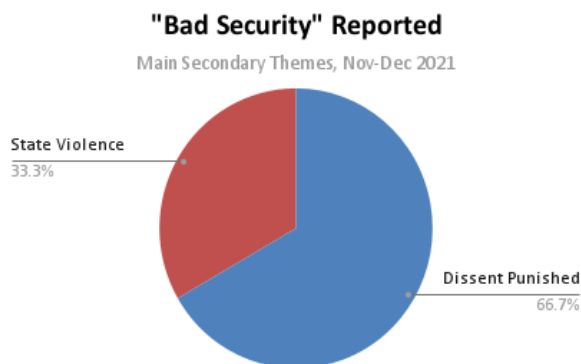
³⁴ SF01

adding that she lacked “psychological security because of different forms of violence against women.”³⁵

Criticism of Ansar Allah was considered to be dangerous. A woman in Mahweet observed that “[t]he security situation in my area is largely safe, but the concern is if there is opposition to the party that controls the region, namely the Houthis.”³⁶ A man from Mahweet said, “there is safety for those who are silent and far from politics, so many activists have gone silent,” adding that in areas controlled by the ROYG/Legitimacy, “[t]here is no safety, but they have the freedom to express their opinions.”³⁷

“Bad Security” and Violence

Only 18% of interviewees described the security situation as bad. Those who did so tended to employ a definition of individual freedom as basic to security, and cited punishment of free speech and uncontrolled state violence as main causes of insecurity.



Ansar Allah’s harsh punishment of dissent was a clear concern for individual safety. A woman from Rayma explained, “[t]he security situation is not safe at all. Pressure and control are exerted on the people. It is forbidden even to reveal our opinions.”³⁸ A male member of the historically marginalized Muhamasheen

³⁵ DF01. Ansar Allah’s cultural practices targeting women and girls have resulted in widespread repression. See Mwatana, *Ansar Allah (Houthi) Group Practices Gravely Undermine Women’s Rights*, (Mar. 8, 2022), available at <https://mwatana.org/en/undermine-women/>.

³⁶ HF02

³⁷ HM05

³⁸ RF01

group³⁹ added, “I do not feel safe here, since we cannot even speak, express ourselves, or call for peace.”⁴⁰

Ansar Allah has undertaken a practice of arbitrary detention and torture of perceived opponents, and has employed brutal violence against those it perceives as the enemies of its state.⁴¹ Its most compelling implementation strategy is therefore the threat of state violence. A male interviewee from Mahweet noted, “[n]o one here can object to anything without fear of being subjected to harm, arrest or murder. Even if we have security, we are under [unsafe] conditions and restrictions.”⁴²

Interviewees’ concerns about Ansar Allah’s corruption and abuse of power were pronounced, even when they acknowledged stable security. Ansar Allah has taken over local governance by appointing loyalists as supervisors or *mushrifeen* to oversee and monitor government officials at all levels.⁴³ First deployed in the Sa’ada governorate in March 2011,⁴⁴ under the Houthi supervisory system loyalists to “shadow” government officials are appointed at all levels and ensure adherence to Houthi ideology. The model doubles each administrative position, from cabinet Ministers to neighborhood leaders, to control, and if necessary, report back to the al-Houthi family on actions taken by non-Houthi officials.⁴⁵ Training and education are reportedly not required. In 2019 focus group participants in the government seat of Sana’a Municipality indicated that rebuilding trust among different groups in Yemen would require “removing supervisors and handing over state institutions

³⁹ For information on the Muhamasheen group, see Mohammed al-Shuwaiter, *The Impact of the War on Yemen’s Justice System*, ILAC, (Nov. 2021), 21, available at <https://ilacnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Impact-of-the-War-on-Yemens-Justice-System.pdf>, and Marta Colburn and Fatema Saleh, *Bringing Forth the Voices of Muhamasheen*, (July 13, 2021), available at <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14588>.

⁴⁰ SM03

⁴¹ *Yemen: Abusive Detention Rife Under Houthis*, Human Rights Watch, (Nov. 17, 2016), available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/17/yemen-abusive-detention-rife-under-houthis>.

⁴² HM03

⁴³ For a description of how citizens in Ansar Allah-controlled areas perceived Houthi government supervisors, see PILPG-Resonate Position Paper 6, *The Emergence of New Actors and Redefining Roles in Yemeni Society*. See also Noel Brehony, *War in Yemen: No End in Sight as the State Disintegrates*, 510-527, *Asian Affairs*, 51:3, (2020).

⁴⁴ Luca Nevola, *From Periphery to the Core: A Social Network Analysis of the Hūthī Local Governance System*, VERSUS Working Paper, (July 2019), University of Sussex.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Note that established patterns in the supervisory system may be changing. A close observer of local governance in Yemen believes that in some areas, Ansar Allah is moving “toward greater formalization, localization, and professionalization in the Huthi Movement’s control of local governance.” Joshua Rogers, “Becoming the State: How Ansar Allah Took Over and Adapted Formal Institutions at the Local Level,” p. 220, in *The Huthi Movement in Yemen: Ideology, Ambition and Security in the Arab Gulf*, (Abdullah Hamidaddin, ed., June 2022).

to competent people.”⁴⁶ A male community leader in Mahweet governorate, northwest of Sana’a, explained his belief that Ansar Allah’s government was illegitimate and had intentionally weakened state institutions:

The government should be elected by the people; this one was not. It [seized power] by force and at gunpoint. And although it takes the form of a government, it does not have [the ability to make] any proper decisions, because the minister cannot sign documents, so what is the benefit of his existence? Every minister has a supervisor who oversees him.⁴⁷

Corruption is perceived to be widespread among Houthi supervisors. In 2021 a male high level political activist in Hajjah governorate noted that “abuse and extortion is increasing, as the Houthis are unable to reduce the rate of corruption among their supervisors and recruits.”⁴⁸ A male intellectual in Ibb noted that though the security situation was stable, “in the event of a dispute between two people, the one closest to the authority [Ansar Allah]” will prevail.⁴⁹ The special relationship of the Houthi supervisors to the inner circle of Ansar Allah appears to trump even the security sector. A male member of the Muhamasheen minority group explained how a legal dispute with a Houthi supervisor, referred to as a “person of stature,” resulted in his family members’ imprisonment:

The security services can’t do anything against the supervisor or even summon him, and you will not be given redress. My relatives were arrested in a dispute with a person of stature, and they were not released until the supervisor finally arrived to receive their apology in front of the security services.⁵⁰

Overall, PILPG data collected in late 2021 suggests that most civilians in Ansar Allah-held areas appreciate the relative tranquility of living far from force-on-force clashes. However, a significant minority expressed concern about the high social cost of this security. An open question is how long educated and cosmopolitan northern urban elites, as well as key tribal confederations, will tolerate the Houthi’s punishment of free speech, corruption and lack of protection under the law.

⁴⁶ *PILPG-Resonate Focus Group Discussions Summary*, Part 1, (2019), on file with author.

⁴⁷ HM03

⁴⁸ JM03

⁴⁹ IM02

⁵⁰ SM03

Economic Policy: Cracks in the “Walled Garden”

The economic crisis in Yemen predated the current conflict but has worsened significantly during seven years of war. In July 2022 the U.N. conservatively estimated that 53% of Yemenis require lifesaving food aid.⁵¹ While Ansar Allah has had limited success compared to the ROYG in terms of currency stabilization, Saudi-affiliated militias including the Giants Brigades forced it out of the oil-rich governorates of Shabwa and Marib.⁵² Without control of Yemen’s oil it is unclear how the Houthi movement can provide enough economic stability to maintain power over its large and diverse subject population.

The economy is a key tool for Ansar Allah in strengthening its position against the ROYG. After the ROYG transferred the Central Bank of Yemen from Sana’a to Aden in 2016, Ansar Allah banned the use of ROYG riyal banknotes issued after 2018, effectively creating two monetary systems.⁵³ The different exchange rates and growing inflation in the less-populated South drove up the price of basic goods and increased economic insecurity for all Yemenis, but especially those in the South. This banknote policy also made money transfers between banks in the North and South exceedingly difficult or impossible, as informal interviewees indicated that Northern Yemenis were no longer able to receive financial support from family members in the South. Following the split in Yemen’s currency in 2019, Ansar Allah has maintained what some observers call a “walled garden” economy, allowing them to maintain considerable influence over everything happening within it.⁵⁴ Because of this approach, and along with significant humanitarian aid, Ansar Allah has somewhat insulated civilians from the very worst of the economic crisis.⁵⁵ However, as discussed below, interviewees remain concerned about increasing rents and decreasing wages, as well as their

⁵¹ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Yemen Humanitarian Update, July 2022 available at liefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-humanitarian-update-issue-7-july-2022.

⁵² For a discussion of Marib and its importance to controlling Yemen, see PILPG-Resonate Factual Report #5, *Marib Then and Now*. For discussions of the battles for Marib and Shabwa, see Luca Ristagno, *Yemen: the Giants Brigades*, Istituto Analisi Relazioni Internazionali (IARI), Apr. 1, 2022, available at <https://iari.site/2022/04/01/yemen-the-giants-brigades-al-weyat-al-amaliqa/>.

⁵³ Reuters Staff, *Yemen president names new central bank governor, moves HQ to Aden*, Sept. 18, 2016, available at <https://tinyurl.com/3t9xyhwx>; ContentEngine LLC, *Currency Dispute Deepens Crisis in War-Torn Yemen*, (August 22, 2021), available at <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/wire-feeds/currency-dispute-deepens-crisis-war-torn-yemen/docview/2563661019/se-2?accountid=11311>.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen’s Economic Conflict*, (Jan. 20, 2022), available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/231-brokering-ceasefire-yemens-economic-conflict>.

⁵⁵ For an overview of the split in the central bank and the ROYG’s economic policies, see PILPG-Resonate Policy Paper #7, *The Currency Crisis*.

overall economic futures. Government salaries were also an issue of contention. Regular ROYG salaries to government workers ended in 2016, and although Ansar Allah has created a system for more regular payments, civil servants in Hajjah in 2018 received the equivalent of one month's salary in a year.⁵⁶ Moreover, those working for the de facto authorities receive less than 25% of their previous salaries.⁵⁷ Lastly, also partially due to its "walled garden" economy in which all transactions are controlled by a single entity, Ansar Allah has been able to increase taxes and centralize government functions to control budgets and local politicians.⁵⁸

Although most interviewees expressed concern about the economic crisis, several were less fearful. A male worker in Hajja explained that his region's stability allowed him to "still live comfortably, despite the deterioration of the economy and living standards."⁵⁹ A male intellectual in at-Taffah district of south-central al-Bayda governorate noted, "[t]here has been improvement in [Ansar Allah]'s attitude towards agricultural development," although he added, "I'm pessimistic to a great degree."⁶⁰ Others volunteered that the ongoing economic crisis could destabilize Ansar Allah's control. A male intellectual in Ibb noted that the poor standard of living means that "people stop thinking about basic things like war and conflict, and focus on secondary things, like economic deterioration and livelihoods."⁶¹

When asked if they had seen improvements in the past six months, many interviewees were frank in their criticism. A female member of the Muhamasheen minority in the Tahrir district of Sana'a municipality said, "[t]here is not enough improvement. It has not returned to the way it was in the pre-war era."⁶² A displaced woman in Ibb explained, "I don't see any tangible improvement in the country in general." She added that despite a stable security situation,

Living conditions are very difficult. Rents were raised recently, which increased suffering for many people. The economic aspect has deteriorated

⁵⁶ UNDP, *Yemen Rapid Local Governance Diagnostic Results for Yemen: Main Findings Report*, 9, (Sept. 2019), available at https://yemenlg.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Local-Governance-Diagnostic_UNDP.pdf.

⁵⁷ Rogers, "Becoming the State," (2022).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ JM02

⁶⁰ BM02

⁶¹ IM02

⁶² AF01

significantly, not to mention the non-payment of [government] salaries. The deterioration of the currency has decreased the value of the salaries paid to us by Legitimacy to less than half due to the currency exchange difference. Worse than that, there is great marginalization of women in the region. Women have to fight for their projects against the community itself on the one hand, and the dominant party [Ansar Allah] and their financial demands at all times on the other hand.⁶³

Ansar Allah's increase in taxes has been widely reported on, including the despised khums tax that imposes a 20% tax on most natural resources, with revenues benefitting the Sada or religious elite.⁶⁴ Their zeal in collecting previously voluntary charitable contributions or *zakat* as state payments, in addition to high taxes on natural resources, have angered already impoverished citizens.⁶⁵ Others felt Ansar Allah decision makers would make no meaningful changes to the economy (or other policy areas). A female social leader in Mahweet district expressed her belief that “[t]here is no equitable improvement. There are steps taken by civil society organizations regarding the economy, development and increasing coexistence, but regarding political life at the highest level, there is no improvement.”⁶⁶

Ultimately, economic woes may prove fatal in the long term to Ansar Allah, in a country where an estimated 70% of the population is under thirty years of age and the youth are chronically unemployed. In Hajja, a male social leader characterized the security situation as “[o]kay,” but added that “70% of Yemenis suffer from extreme poverty, without a daily source of income. Young people are unemployed. The situation in general has become unbearable.”⁶⁷ A male social leader in Amran explained, “[w]e feel safe right now, but in terms of the future, as young people we do not feel safe,” adding that “[s]ixty percent of Yemeni youth are unemployed.”⁶⁸

⁶³ IF01

⁶⁴ Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, *Yemen Economic Bulletin: Tax and Rule – Houthis Move to Institutionalize Hashemite Elite with 'One-Fifth' Levy*, (Oct. 6, 2020), available at <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11628>.

⁶⁵ Joshua Rogers, *Becoming the State*, (2022).

⁶⁶ HF01

⁶⁷ JM04

⁶⁸ XM01

Yemen is facing one of the worst economic and humanitarian crises in recent history. But if one were to differentiate between the different areas of Yemen, it appears that Ansar Allah controlled territories might be slightly less awful than the ROYG controlled areas that are experiencing even worse inflation.

Conclusion

The Houthis will remain a dominant force in Yemeni politics, but their governance practices have reinforced or created structural social and economic inequality. Ansar Allah's military dominance seemed clear until early 2022, when Houthi forces failed to take the oil-producing regions of Marib and Shabwa. Ansar Allah is unencumbered by the fiction of a participatory political process, which allows it to make and enforce laws with relative ease. It implements laws and policies by offering government appointments to important tribal and political allies, and uses its security forces to crack down on dissent. It has succeeded in delivering relative economic stability and containing violence to its own forces. It faces internal problems related to corruption and abuse of power, and will be constrained by its inability to secure control of oil revenue.

PILPG data collected in late 2021 suggests that most civilians in Ansar Allah-held areas appreciate the relative tranquility of living far from force-on-force clashes. However, the data also indicates that to retain power the movement must provide not only security, but economic stability. In addition, Ansar Allah will have to manage serious issues related to the public's trust in its governance, including perceptions of corruption, illegitimacy, rigid social control, and violent repression of dissent.

While there are no simple answers for how policymakers should engage with Ansar Allah, they ignore the group at their peril. Below are five recommendations for policymakers to keep in mind while continuing to monitor and evaluate Ansar Allah's governance practices:

- A major contributor to Ansar Allah's support is its ability to control economic inflation within its territories and therefore, better protect its citizens from extreme poverty than the ROYG. By supporting the ROYG to

control inflation, foreign policymakers may impact Yemeni acceptance of the government in areas outside Ansar Allah's control.

- Young people constitute 70% of Yemen's population, and are targeted by Houthi educational policies. Providing young people in Yemen with access to sustainable economic development and unbiased educational resources should be a high priority for those looking to halt the spread of the Houthi movement (and proliferation of other armed groups).
- Policymakers should take steps to counter the targeted messages distributed through Ansar Allah's "cultural courses." In PILPG's experience, social media is a powerful tool for spreading peacebuilding-related messages throughout Yemen.
- Security is a key concern for Yemen civilians. The data shows that while individuals may not prefer Ansar Allah governance, they appreciate living in its territory for the general security. Concrete steps towards engaging with the Presidential Leadership Council and furthering a negotiated ceasefire is likely welcome and will lessen the appeal of Ansar Allah to Yemeni civilians.
- The data shows deep concern with corruption, arbitrary detention, abuses of power, and Ansar Allah's treatment of women and girls. Policymakers should consider these social issues when supporting civil society during, and after, a peace negotiation.

About the Public International Law & Policy Group Policy Planning Initiative

PILPG's Policy Planning Initiative supports the development of long term, strategic policy planning that is crucial to international accountability, global conflict resolution, and the establishment of international peace. The Initiative provides timely and accurate policy planning analysis and work product on pressing and future policy conundrums by leveraging PILPG's deep network of talent within the international legal and policy communities and experience with its *pro bono* clients globally. PILPG Policy Planning focuses on advising policymakers, policy shapers, and engaged stakeholders on pressing issues within the arenas of international law, war crimes prosecution, and conflict resolution efforts. This includes identifying and addressing gaps within existing policies, anticipating key conundrums and questions that will riddle future policy decisions, applying lessons learned from comparative state practice, and proactively producing and sharing work product to inform such policies and avoid crisis decision making.

Annex I: Methodology

Beginning in March 2019 and ending in December 2021, Yemeni civil society organizations that are part of the Civil Alliance for Peace (CAP), with support from Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG) and Resonate!Yemen, conducted quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) throughout Yemen. In total, there were two quantitative surveys with 5,750 respondents. The team conducted over 350 in-depth interviews and held 159 focus group discussions over all three years. (See Table 1).

In-depth Interviews

Phase III (July-December 2021)

In November and December 2021, PILPG and its partners carried out an additional 100 in-depth interviews (IDIs) in Arabic in nine Yemeni governorates currently controlled by Ansar Allah, including al-Bayda, Amran, Mahweet, Dhamar, Hajja, Ibb, Rayma, Sana'a Municipality (*Aminat al-'Asima*), and Sana'a. All formal interviews were conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thirty additional informal interviews were conducted from December 2021 to January 2022 in Sana'a, Hodeidah, Dhamar, and Taiz. A total of 12 separate focus group discussions (86 participants) were carried out informally during *qat* chewing sessions.⁶⁹ Because of the danger in collecting data, no identifying information was collected. The data from the informal interviews is cited as such where it is used in the paper.

Limitations

While the quantitative data provides rich insights into trends, it is limited by a number of factors. There was significant overlap in the subject matter of each survey instrument, and many questions were phrased differently in each phase. Some questions varied significantly, and sections of the data collection tools were added or removed across phases, making trend analysis challenging. The large number of IDIs represents an important source of qualitative insights, particularly in areas held by Ansar Allah. However representative generalized statements about

⁶⁹ For the importance of qat chewing sessions in northern Yemeni culture, in which participants share information, make decisions, and reinforce cultural norms, see Paul A. Frye, "Form and function of North Yemeni qat sessions," 292-304, *Southern Journal of Communication*, 55:3, (1990).

population beliefs in these governorates surveyed cannot be inferred from the sample.

Table 1: APPY Data Collection Sample, 2019-2021

APPY DATA COLLECTION 2019-2021		Phase I			Phase II		Phase III	
		March-July 2019			September-December 2020		July-December 2021	
Governorate		Survey	PH I IDIs	Focus Group Discussions	IDIs	Focus Group Discussions	IDIs	Survey
ROYG/STC Controlled Areas	Abyan	248	6	3	9	6	7	271
	Hadhramaut	470	20	12	16	23	15	513
	Lahj	260	6	3	8	5	7	210
	Marib	400	20	12	15	13	15	485
	Taiz	620	20	12	16	13	21	510
	al-Dhale'a	-	-	-	10	4	7	183
	Shabwa	-	-	-	7	7	7	230
	Socotra	-	-	-	5	3	5	131
	al-Mahra	-	-	-	4	2	-	60
	Aden	502	13	6	23	10	16	420
Ansar Allah Controlled Areas	Amran	-	3	10	-	-	5	-
	Dhamar	-	3	2	-	-	6	-
	Hajja	-	3	2	-	-	6	-
	Ibb	250	5	3	-	-	8	-
	Rayma	-	3	2	-	-	4	-
	Sanaa	-	3	2	-	-	15	-
	Amana Capital	-	-	-	-	-	10	-
	Al-Bayda	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
	Mahweet	-	-	-	-	-	8	-
	Hodeidah	-	3	2	-	-	-	-
	Saada	-	3	2	-	-	-	-