

V. Armed conflict and peace processes in Yemen

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The roots of the current conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen are complex and contested.¹ The Houthi insurgency began in 2004 when Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a leader of the Zaidi Shi'a, launched an uprising against the Yemeni Government. Al-Houthi was killed in that uprising, and the insurgents have been known as the Houthis since then (the official name is Ansar Allah).² In 2014 after several years of growing violence, the country descended into a new phase of civil war between the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and an uneasy alliance of Iran-backed Houthis and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdallah Saleh that controlled the capital, Sanaa, and large parts of the country.

Since March 2015 a coalition led by Saudi Arabia has been intervening militarily on the side of President Hadi, although the coalition itself is divided by conflicts and rivalries. In addition to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the coalition has included Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Qatar (until 2017), Senegal and Sudan, either supplying ground troops or carrying out air strikes.³ The coalition has also received substantial international support. United States assistance has included intelligence, training and arms sales, while several European countries, including France and the United Kingdom, have also been key suppliers of major weapon systems to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴

¹ See Davis, I. et al., 'Armed conflict in sub-Saharan Africa', *SIPRI Yearbook 2018*, pp. 80–82. See also e.g. Orkaby, A., 'Yemen's humanitarian nightmare: The real roots of the conflict', *Foreign Affairs*, Nov/Dec. 2017.

² On the goals of and divisions within the Houthis, see Al-Hamdani, S., 'Understanding the Houthi faction in Yemen', *Lawfare*, 7 Apr. 2019.

³ On the role played by the UAE, see Abdul-Ahad, G., 'Yemen on the brink: How the UAE is profiting from the chaos of civil war', *The Guardian*, 21 Dec. 2018. On Saudi Arabia's framing of the intervention, see Clausen, M., 'Justifying military intervention: Yemen as a failed state', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2019), pp. 488–502.

⁴ On US and EU member states' assistance to the coalition, see International Crisis Group, *Ending the Quagmire: Lessons for Washington from Four Years of War*, US Report no. 3 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 15 Apr. 2019); Bachman, J. S., 'A "synchronised attack" on life: The Saudi-led coalition's "hidden and holistic" genocide in Yemen and the shared responsibility of the US and UK', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2019), pp. 298–316; Cochrane, P., 'EU countries approve arms sales to Saudi, UAE worth 55 times aid to Yemen', *Middle East Eye*, 12 Nov. 2018; Merat, A., "'The Saudis couldn't do it without us': The UK's true role in Yemen's deadly war", *The Guardian*, 18 June 2019; and Made in France, 'Yemen papers', [n.d.]. On arms transfers to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, see also chapter 9, sections I and II, and chapter 14, section IV, in this volume. On the United Nation arms embargo on Yemen, see chapter 14, section II, in this volume.

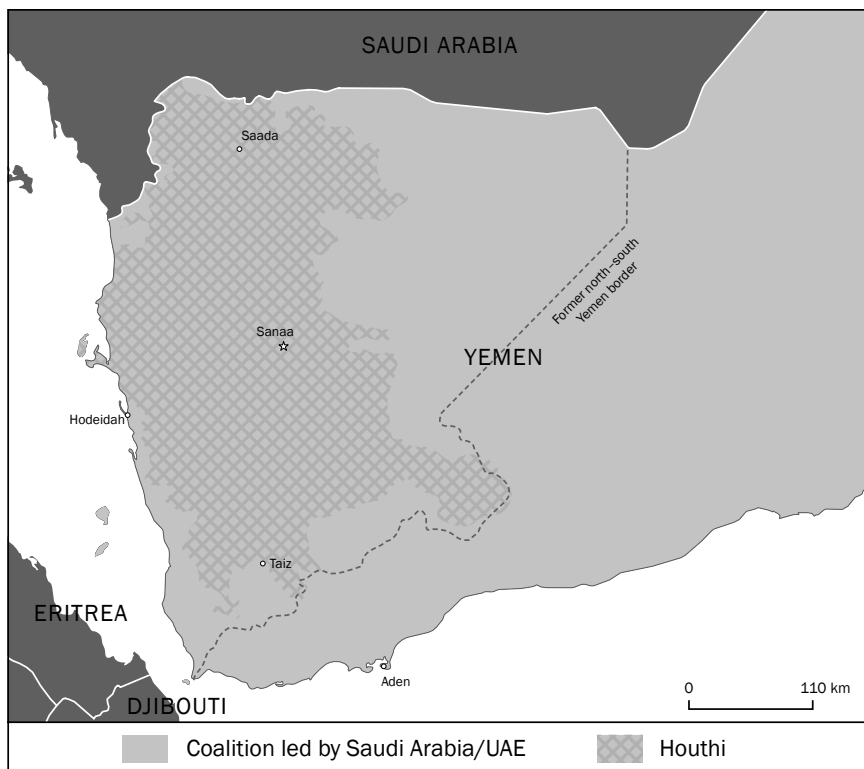


Figure 6.4. Areas of control in Yemen, August 2019

UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Source: *The Economist*, ‘Southern separatists are tearing Yemen apart’, 15 Aug. 2019.

Armed conflict in 2019 and allegations of war crimes

At the end of 2018 there were at least four separate but interlinked armed conflicts in Yemen: (a) the main civil war, with a focus on the Red Sea coast, where government forces backed by the UAE pushed up from the south and threatened Hodeidah, the fourth largest city in Yemen and its principal port on the Red Sea for importing food—although a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations centred on Hodeidah agreed on 13 December 2018 provided fresh grounds for optimism; (b) the Saudi Arabia–Yemen border, including increased Houthi missile strikes targeting cities in Saudi Arabia and retaliatory air strikes; (c) a secondary civil war within the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE—between the central government (normally based in the north) and the Southern Movement, a fragile coalition of separatist groups operating in Aden, Hadramaut and Shebwa in the south, and represented politically by the Southern Transitional Council (STC); and (d) a US-led counterterrorism campaign against radical Islamist groups,

including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).⁵ A UN panel of experts on Yemen concluded that many of the armed groups were trying to achieve two primary objectives: ‘a monopoly over armed violence within the territory under their control and control over revenue streams’.⁶ Figure 6.4 shows areas of control within Yemen in late 2019.

The main civil war between Houthi and government forces

While the Hodeidah-wide ceasefire agreed in Stockholm in December 2018 continued to hold and the warring parties took initial steps to implement the agreement (see the discussion on implementation of the Stockholm Agreement below), fighting occurred in other areas not covered by the agreement, including among supposed allies: in the north between Houthi rebels and the Hajour tribe and in the southern city of Taiz among nominally allied pro-government groups.⁷ Factional clashes within the Houthi–Saleh alliance were a regular occurrence during 2019, especially in Ibb governorate.⁸ The Houthis continued to suppress dissent in areas under their control.⁹

The Saudi Arabian–Yemeni air war

Houthi forces have been carrying out missile attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia since late 2016. Between June and September 2019 the pace of cross-border Houthi–Saudi Arabian attacks intensified. The Houthis launched multiple unmanned aerial vehicle and cruise missile attacks into Saudi Arabia, including against regional airports. In turn, the coalition intensified bombing of Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, including Sanaa.¹⁰ In September Yemen risked becoming further embroiled in the wider regional Iranian–Saudi Arabian/US conflict, when the Houthis claimed responsibility for an attack on Saudi Arabian oil facilities, which was more widely attributed to Iran.¹¹ In response, forces led by Saudi Arabia launched air strikes close to Hodeidah.¹² The situation de-escalated when the Houthis suspended cross-border attacks and the Saudi Arabians reduced air strikes in Yemen.¹³

⁵ On developments in Yemen in 2018, see Davis, I., ‘Armed conflict and peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019*, pp. 108–14. On conflicts in Yemen in 2019, also see UN Security Council, ‘Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen’, S/2020/70, 27 Jan. 2020, pp. 6–8.

⁶ UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), p. 6.

⁷ International Crisis Group, ‘Crisis Group Yemen update no. 7’, Briefing note, 8 Mar. 2019; and al-Deen, M.S., ‘The Houthi–Tribal conflict in Yemen’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 Apr. 2019.

⁸ Carboni, A. and Nevola, L., ‘Inside Ibb: A hotbed of infighting in Houthi-controlled Yemen’, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 3 Oct. 2019.

⁹ UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), pp. 10–12.

¹⁰ *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, ‘Yemeni rebels unveil cruise missile, long-range UAVs’, 8, July 2019; and UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), pp. 19–21.

¹¹ See section I in this chapter and chapter I, section I, in this volume.

¹² Wintour, P., ‘Saudi-led forces launch airstrikes on Yemeni city of Hodeidah’, *The Guardian*, 20 Sep. 2019.

¹³ Reuters, ‘Saudi-led coalition air strikes in Yemen down 80%: UN envoy’, 22 Nov. 2019.

Yemen's fractured south

On 10 August after fighting that killed at least 40 people, UAE allies seized the city of Aden from the government of President Hadi that was backed by Saudi Arabia.¹⁴ The rivalry within the anti-Houthi coalition risked escalating into a fully fledged civil war within a civil war.¹⁵ However, in October, control of the city was handed back to the government after the withdrawal of UAE forces.¹⁶ A peace deal was concluded between the two sides in November (see the discussion on the Riyadh Agreement below).

The counterterrorism campaign against radical Islamist groups

The USA has been carrying out regular air strikes against AQAP, or its antecedents, in Yemen since at least 2009.¹⁷ From 2009 to 2019 the USA carried out more than 336 air strikes, causing between 174 and 225 civilian deaths.¹⁸ A US air strike on 1 January 2019 reportedly killed Jamal al-Badawi, a Yemeni al-Qaeda operative accused of leading the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole* that killed 17 US sailors.¹⁹ However, the frequency of US air strikes against AQAP decreased, with only nine reported in 2019.²⁰ In June Saudi Arabian special forces captured the Islamic State leader in Yemen, Abu Osama Al-Muhajir.²¹

Allegations of war crimes

All parties to the conflict have faced allegations of crimes under international law over the past four years, and fresh allegations surfaced in 2019.²² In particular, the air strikes by the coalition led by Saudi Arabia have been repeatedly criticized for targeting civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and detention centres.²³ A report by the international Group of

¹⁴ On the various patterns of political violence and the different actors in the south of Yemen, see Roy, E. and Nevola, L., 'Yemen's fractured South: Aden, Abyan, and Lahij', ACLED, 18 Dec. 2019.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, 'After Aden: Navigating Yemen's new political landscape', Middle East Briefing no. 71, 30 Aug. 2019; Bianco, C., 'Cracks in the Saudi-Emirati alliance?', European Council on Foreign Relations commentary, 13 Sep. 2019; and UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), pp. 14–15.

¹⁶ Yaakoubi, A. E., 'Saudis take control of Yemen's Aden to end stand-off between allies', Reuters, 14 Oct. 2019.

¹⁷ Kendall, E., 'Contemporary jihadi militancy in Yemen: How is the threat evolving?', Middle East Institute Policy Paper 2018-7, July 2018.

¹⁸ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 'Drone strikes in Yemen', [n.d.].

¹⁹ Youssef, N. A. and Ballhaus, R., 'US kills al Qaeda figure accused of leading 2000 attack on USS Cole', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 Jan. 2019.

²⁰ Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 'Yemen: Reported US covert actions 2019', [n.d.].

²¹ Al-Sulami, M., 'Revealed: How Saudi special forces captured Yemen's Daesh chief in daring 10-minute raid', *Arab News*, 27 June 2019. On other AQAP and Islamic State leaders arrested in 2019, see UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), p. 16.

²² See e.g. Amnesty International, 'Yemen: Four years on, fears of further violations with no end in sight to brutal conflict', 25 Mar. 2019; and UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), pp. 36–44.

²³ See e.g. Fox, G., 'Seven killed in Saudi-led coalition airstrike on hospital in Yemen, says Save the Children', *Independent*, 27 Mar. 2019; and Agence France-Press, 'Red Cross says more than 100 people killed in airstrike on Yemen prison', *The Guardian*, 1 Sep. 2019.

Eminent Experts on Yemen (created by the UN Human Rights Council in December 2017) detailed a wide range of possible war crimes committed by various parties to the conflict over the past five years, including air strikes, indiscriminate shelling, snipers, landmines, arbitrary killings and detention, torture, sexual and gender-based violence, and preventing access to humanitarian aid.²⁴ The group of experts also identified individuals involved in the conflict who may be responsible for international crimes.²⁵

The humanitarian crisis

According to the UN the humanitarian crisis in Yemen remained the worst in the world in 2019.²⁶ The cholera epidemic—more than 1.36 million suspected cases between late 2016 and December 2018, and nearly 2800 associated deaths—continued into 2019, with more than 56 000 new cases reported in the first nine months of the year. Outbreaks of dengue fever and malaria were also reported.²⁷ In addition to endemic diseases an estimated 80 per cent of the population (24 million people) required some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, with 15.9 million people in urgent need of food and livelihood assistance at the beginning of 2019.²⁸ An estimated 4 million people remained displaced, including 375 000 during 2019.²⁹

In February 2019 international donors (led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE), pledged \$2.6 billion in funding towards the UN 2019 \$4.2 billion humanitarian plan for Yemen—the single largest UN humanitarian appeal ever.³⁰ The distribution of humanitarian aid within Yemen is itself a component of the conflict, especially in areas controlled by the Houthis.³¹

At the end of October 2019 the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) estimated that over 100 000 people had been killed in the Yemeni war since 2015 (including over 12 000 civilian fatalities in direct

²⁴ UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, 'Situation of human rights in Yemen, including violations and abuses since September 2014', A/HRC/42/17, 9 Aug. 2019.

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, 'Yemen: Collective failure, collective responsibility—UN expert report', Press release, 3 Sep. 2019; and Wintour, P., 'UK, US and France may be complicit in Yemen war crimes—UN report', *The Guardian*, 3 Sep. 2019.

²⁶ UN News, 'Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN', 14 Feb. 2019. On the role of gender in humanitarian assistance in Yemen, see Christiansen, C. C., 'Gender, development and security in Yemen's transition process', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2019), pp. 197–215.

²⁷ Al Jazeera, 'Red Cross: Yemen faces new outbreak of dengue fever', 26 Nov. 2019.

²⁸ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Global Humanitarian Overview 2020* (OCHA: 10 Dec. 2019), p. 49.

²⁹ OCHA (note 28).

³⁰ Parker, B., 'Saudi Arabia and UAE in record pledge at Yemen aid conference', *New Humanitarian*, 26 Feb. 2019.

³¹ *The Economist*, 'The Houthi rebels wrestle with the UN over food aid', 28 Nov. 2019.

Table 6.6. Estimated conflict-related fatalities in Yemen, 2015–19

| Event type | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| Battles | 9 097 | 8 366 | 10 634 | 20 575 | 15 686 |
| Explosions/remote violence | 7 884 | 6 712 | 6 346 | 11 314 | 9 687 |
| Protests, riots and strategic developments | 77 | 21 | 17 | 47 | 188 |
| Violence against civilians | 207 | 242 | 199 | 416 | 329 |
| Total | 17 265 | 15 341 | 17 196 | 32 352 | 25 890 |

Notes: The first available year for data on Yemen in the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database is 2015. For definitions of event types, see ACLED, ‘ACLED definitions of political violence and protest’, 11 Apr. 2019.

Source: ACLED, ‘Data export tool’, [n.d.].

attacks).³² Over 25 800 people were killed in 2019 alone, making it the second most lethal year in a row (table 6.6). This estimate almost certainly undercounts the true extent of casualties and excludes deaths from disease, malnutrition and other consequences of the crisis. The UN Development Programme, for example, estimated that by the end of 2019 total conflict fatalities from fighting and indirect deaths (due to lack of food, health services and infrastructure) would be 233 000 (or 0.8 per cent of the country).³³

Implementation of the Stockholm Agreement

The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement between the Houthis and the Yemeni Government included several confidence-building measures: a commitment to exchange almost 5000 prisoners, an immediate ceasefire across the governorate of Hodeidah, demilitarization of the Red Sea trade corridor, transfer of Hodeidah port to UN management and the reopening of a humanitarian corridor linking Hodeidah with Sanaa.³⁴ A Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC)—a Houthi–Hadi working group—was formed to oversee the ceasefire, mine action operations and the ‘mutual redeployment of forces’, including the difficult question of the make-up of the ‘local security forces’ that would subsequently police the city and ports.³⁵ While implementation of the agreement in 2019 went through several ups and downs, especially in the first half of the year, significant progress was made.³⁶

³² ACLED, ‘Over 100,000 reported killed in Yemen war’, Press release, 31 Oct. 2019; and ACLED, ‘Ten conflicts to worry about in 2020’, Jan. 2020, p. 9.

³³ Moyer, J. D. et al., *Assessing the Impact of War on Development in Yemen* (UN Development Programme: 2019).

³⁴ Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, ‘Full text of the Stockholm Agreement’, 13 Dec. 2018; and Walsh, D., ‘Yemen peace talks begin with agreement to free 5,000 prisoners’, *New York Times*, 6 Dec. 2018.

³⁵ International Crisis Group, ‘Crisis Group Yemen update no. 9’, Briefing note, 19 Apr. 2019.

³⁶ See e.g. International Crisis Group, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, Middle East Report no. 203 (International Crisis Group: Brussels, 18 July 2019).

On 16 January 2019 Houthi and government delegates met in Amman, Jordan, to discuss implementation of the prisoner exchange arrangements, but failed to reach agreement.³⁷ Thereafter, the issue remained unresolved, although the Houthis unilaterally released 290 prisoners on 30 September 2019, and the coalition forces released 128 Houthi prisoners in November 2019.³⁸

The United Nations support mission and withdrawal of forces from Hodeidah

On 16 January 2019 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2452 (2019) that established the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA). On 31 January a Danish general, Michael Anker Løllesgaard, was appointed to head the newly constituted mission.³⁹ With an initial mandate of six months and an authorized personnel of up to 75 monitors as well as additional support staff, UNMHA will lead and support the RCC in monitoring compliance with the ceasefire and work with parties to ensure that security is assured by local security forces. In July the UNMHA mandate was extended for a further six months under UN Security Council Resolution 2481 (2019).⁴⁰ In September, a retired Indian general, Abhijit Guha, took over leadership of the mission.⁴¹

In the first quarter of 2019 the RCC worked to resolve technical disagreements over the redeployment of military forces from front-line positions in and around Hodeidah, and in mid-April UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths announced that a detailed plan for troop withdrawal had been agreed.⁴² However, the issue of who would control the area after the withdrawal remained unresolved. On 11 May Houthi forces began withdrawing from Hodeidah in accordance with the plan, and in June they agreed a mechanism to allow UN inspection of ships entering the ports.⁴³ In early July the UAE announced a withdrawal of its forces from the city and a partial drawdown in other parts of the country.⁴⁴ In August 2019 Special

³⁷ Al-Khalidi, S., 'Yemen combatants start talks in Jordan on prisoner swap deal', Reuters, 16 Jan. 2019; and Al Jazeera, 'Yemen's warring sides fail to reach agreement on prisoner swap', 19 Jan. 2019.

³⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross, 'Yemen: 290 detainees released with facilitation of the ICRC', 30 Sep. 2019; and International Committee of the Red Cross, '128 detainees repatriated to Yemen from Saudi Arabia', 28 Nov. 2019.

³⁹ UN Security Council Resolution 2452 (2019), S/RES/2452 (2019), 16 Jan. 2019; and UNMHA website, <<https://dppa.un.org/en/mission/unmha-hudaydah-agreement>>.

⁴⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 2481 (2019), S/RES/2481 (2019), 15 July 2019.

⁴¹ UN, 'Secretary-General appoints Lieutenant General Abhijit Guha of India to head United Nations Mission in support of Hudaydah Agreement', 12 Sep. 2019.

⁴² UN News, 'Plan for troop pullback "now accepted" by rival forces around key Yemen port, but fighting intensifying elsewhere, Security Council warned', 15 Apr. 2019.

⁴³ BBC, 'Yemen war: Houthi withdrawal from Hudaydah as planned—UN', 12 May 2019; and Reuters, 'Yemen's Houthis to allow UN to inspect ships in Hodeidah: Sources', 18 June 2019.

⁴⁴ Wintour, P. and McKernan, B., 'Yemen: UAE confirms withdrawal from port city of Hodeidah', *The Guardian*, 9 July 2019; and *The Economist*, 'The UAE begins pulling out of Yemen', 4 July 2019.

Envoy Griffiths reported that there had been no major military operations in Hodeidah or in the surrounding area since the signing of the Stockholm Agreement. In September 2019 the RCC deployed monitoring teams in four locations on the front lines of the city as an initial step to sustain the ceasefire.⁴⁵

The Riyadh Agreement

Extending the peace process to include the STC was a significant development during the year. On 5 November 2019 a deal was signed by the government (backed by Saudi Arabia) and the STC (backed by the UAE) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, after more than a month of negotiations. Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, said the deal—which stipulates the formation of a new, Aden-based, 24-member government comprising equal numbers of northern and southern ministers, integration of STC-affiliated forces into national military and security structures, and inclusion of the STC in government delegations to future UN-led talks with the Houthis over a political settlement to end the war—was a positive step on the path towards resolving the multifaceted conflict in Yemen.⁴⁶ However, the Houthis rejected the agreement; at the end of 2019 it had largely not been implemented and clashes were continuing.⁴⁷

Conclusions

The combined Stockholm and Riyadh agreements provide a path towards national-level peace talks and a political settlement of the Yemen civil war. Saudi Arabia is likely to be pivotal in shaping any subsequent security and political arrangement, having taken over coalition command in the south from the UAE. Talks between the Houthis and Saudi Arabians aimed at ending cross-border attacks could be the prelude to the start of a national political process under UN auspices. While the Riyadh Agreement might provide a negotiating platform for the fragmented anti-Houthi bloc, there is also a risk of intra-coalition fighting during its implementation as parties strive for advantage on paper and on the ground.

⁴⁵ UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 'Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for Yemen to the open session of the Security Council', 20 Aug. 2019; and UN and RCC, 'The Sixth joint RCC meeting', Joint press statement, 9 Sep. 2019.

⁴⁶ Reuters, 'Yemen's Government signs peace deal with southern rebels', *New York Times*, 5 Nov. 2019; and Salisbury, P., 'The beginning of the end of Yemen's civil war?', *International Crisis Group commentary*, 5 Nov. 2019.

⁴⁷ ACLED, 'Ten conflicts to worry about in 2020' (note 32), p. 10; and UN Security Council, S/2020/70 (note 5), pp. 17–18.