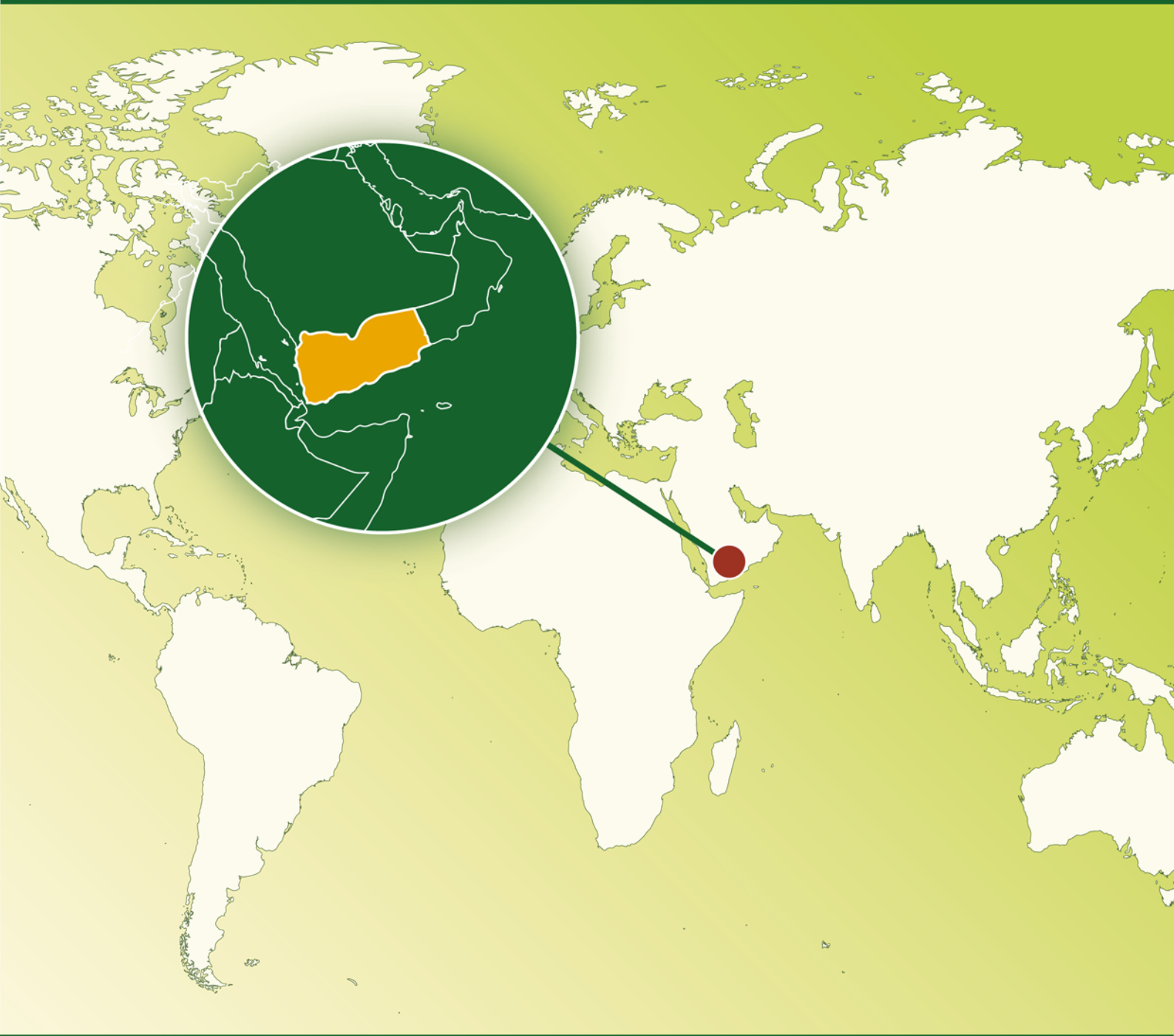


# YEMEN

## Violence Against Health Care in Conflict 2023



# Letter from the Chair



The year 2023 was a grim one for violence inflicted on health care. In 2022, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition identified the highest number of incidents since we began reporting. Yet in 2023 the number was 25% greater, exceeding 2,500.

The intensity of conflicts characterized by pervasive attacks on health care in recent years declined somewhat in 2023, including in Syria, Yemen, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. As a result, it might also have been expected that the global trend of violence against health care would turn downward. Instead, from the first days of two new and catastrophic wars, one in Sudan and the other between Israel and Hamas, health care came under ferocious assault. In both conflicts warring parties killed health workers, attacked facilities, and destroyed health care systems. Meanwhile, attacks on health care in Myanmar and Ukraine continued at a relentless pace, in each case exceeding 1,000 since the start of the conflicts in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In many chronic conflicts, fighting forces continued to kidnap and kill health workers and loot health facilities.

At the same time, new and disturbing trends emerged. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen combatants employed drones to attack health clinics, hospitals, and ambulances. In many conflicts, combatants violently entered hospitals or occupied them as sites from which to conduct military operations, leading to injuries to and the deaths of patients and staff. In many conflicts, the conduct of combatants revealed open contempt for their duty to protect civilians and health care under international humanitarian law (IHL). Israel, while purporting to abide by IHL, promoted a view of its obligations that, if accepted, would undermine the fundamental protections that IHL puts in place for civilians and health care in war.

The one consistent feature of the attacks was continued impunity for these crimes. For more than a decade, despite their repeated commitments, governments have failed to follow through on these commitments and reform their military practices, cease arms transfers to perpetrators, and bring those responsible for crimes to justice.

We need a new approach, starting with stronger leadership from UN agencies and governments willing to join with civil society and the health care community to take far more assertive action to end the scourge of violence against health care. Among other steps, they can press prosecutors domestically and internationally to bring cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against health care, to develop political support for special tribunals to circumvent UN Security Council members' vetoes of referrals to the International Criminal Court, and restrict the sale of arms to forces that commit crimes.

There are some sources of hope. After years of lassitude, the World Health Organization has spoken forcefully against vicious assaults on health facilities and health workers. Civil society groups are exerting pressure to stop arms transfers to perpetrators of violence, while some militaries have launched initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in war. Leaders must build on these initiatives. Ending the suffering of millions of people depends on their doing so.

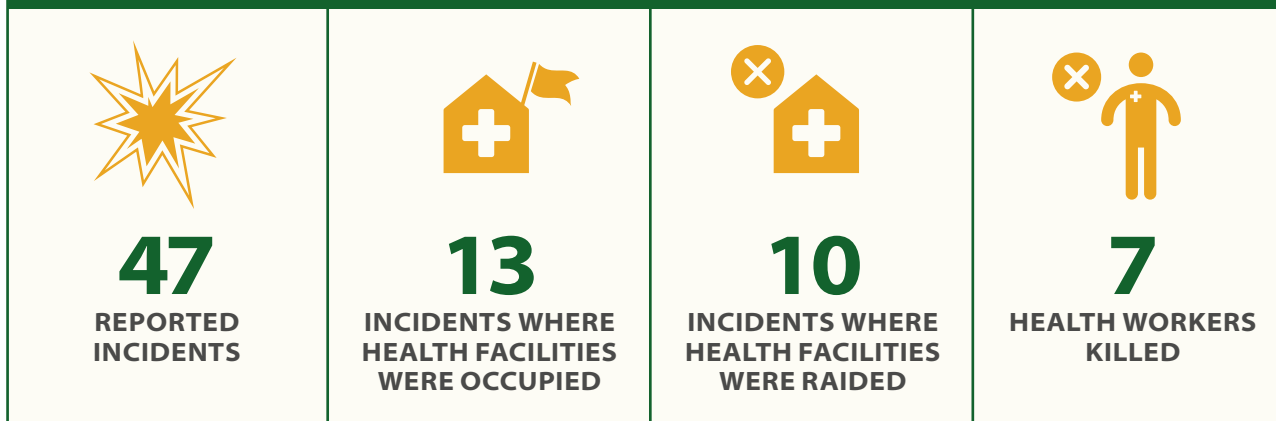
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Len Rubenstein". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Len Rubenstein  
*Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition*

[↓ Executive Summary](#) | [Full Report](#) | [Recommendations](#) | [Methodology](#) | [Data](#)



## REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS



↓ Source: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data

## OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 47 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Yemen in 2023, an increase from 25 in 2022. In these incidents, seven health workers were killed and health facilities were occupied and forcibly entered. This factsheet is based on the dataset [2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data](#), which is available for download on the [Humanitarian Data Exchange \(HDX\)](#).

## THE CONTEXT

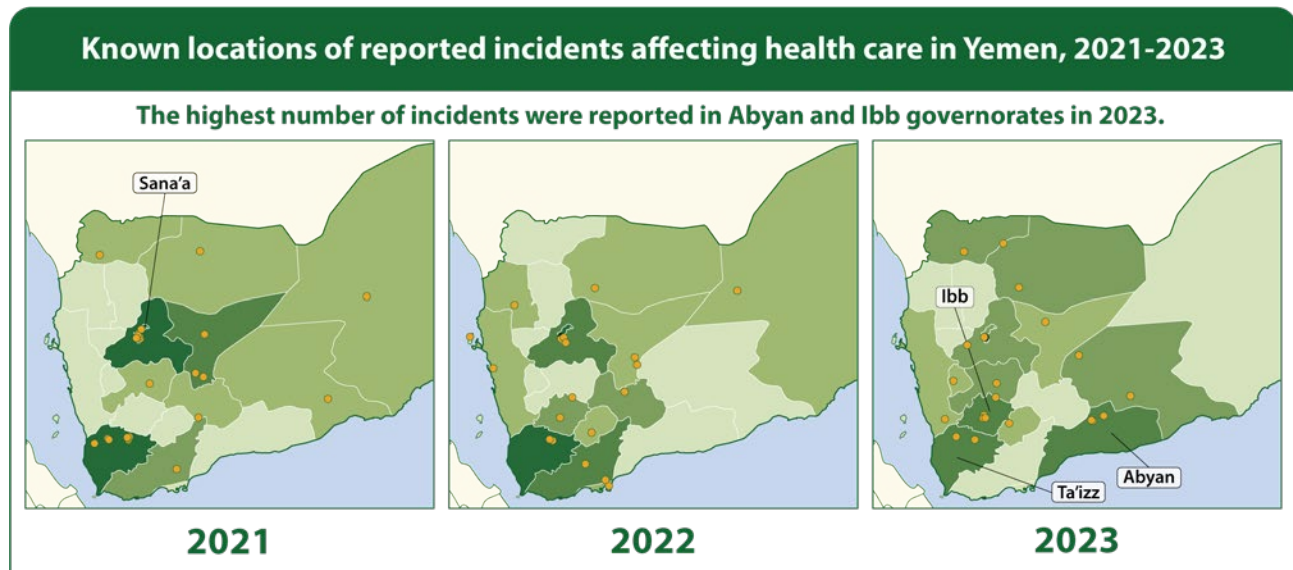
According to the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#), in 2023 violence in Yemen occurred at the lowest intensity yet seen during the war, which reflected the continuation of an unofficial truce. However, despite this overall reduction, violence persisted, especially in the western governorates of Ta'izz, Sadah, and Al Hudaydah.<sup>1</sup> The Houthis remained a key political force, exercising de facto control over Sanaa and the northwestern provinces, and over 70% of Yemen's population. The Houthis also conducted multiple attacks targeting Israeli and Western commercial and naval vessels in the Red Sea in the latter part of the year, following the severe escalation of violence in the occupied Palestinian territories in October. Air strikes in Yemen by the Saudi-led coalition in support of the internationally recognized government continued and violence attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) increased, mainly in the southern Abyan and Shabwa governorates. Air strikes were also carried out by the West Coast Joint Forces, a coalition of three militias: the Giants Brigade, the Guards of the Republic, and the Tihama Resistance. The joint group was formed in 2019, supported by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and has the ambition of removing the Houthis from control of Yemen's west coast and northern governorates.

Other notable actors included the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a secessionist political organization opposed to the Houthis and supported by the UAE, which was reported to have also conducted air strikes in Yemen in 2023.<sup>2</sup>



## VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2023

Incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were spread over 18 governorates in 2023. Recorded incidents increased in Ibb and Raymah governorates and continued in Ta'izz governorate. As in previous years, the majority of incidents affected health care providers working in national health structures in 2023. Two incidents directly affected an INGO. Three-quarters of incidents took place at health centers.



In 2023, health facilities were occupied or raided or damaged by drone-delivered explosive weapons, and ambulances were damaged by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This was a change from 2022, when health facilities were typically damaged by aircraft-delivered explosives and shelling. Seven health workers were killed in four incidents in 2023, similar to in 2022. Health worker killings included those of a medical student and a pharmacist shot and killed by Houthi gunmen in September and October, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Two INGO health workers were kidnapped in a vehicle ambush by gunmen in Marib governorate and a hospital director was kidnapped by Houthi rebels as he was leaving a hospital in Ibb governorate.<sup>4</sup>

Twenty-five incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were attributed to Houthi rebels, an increase from five out of a total of 25 incidents in 2022. AQAP members were named as perpetrators on four occasions in 2023, with the last recorded incident attributed to the group in 2020. The pro-government Giants Brigade militia took over Usaylan Hospital in Shabwah governorate in southern Yemen and repurposed it as a base for its fighters.<sup>5</sup> In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified.

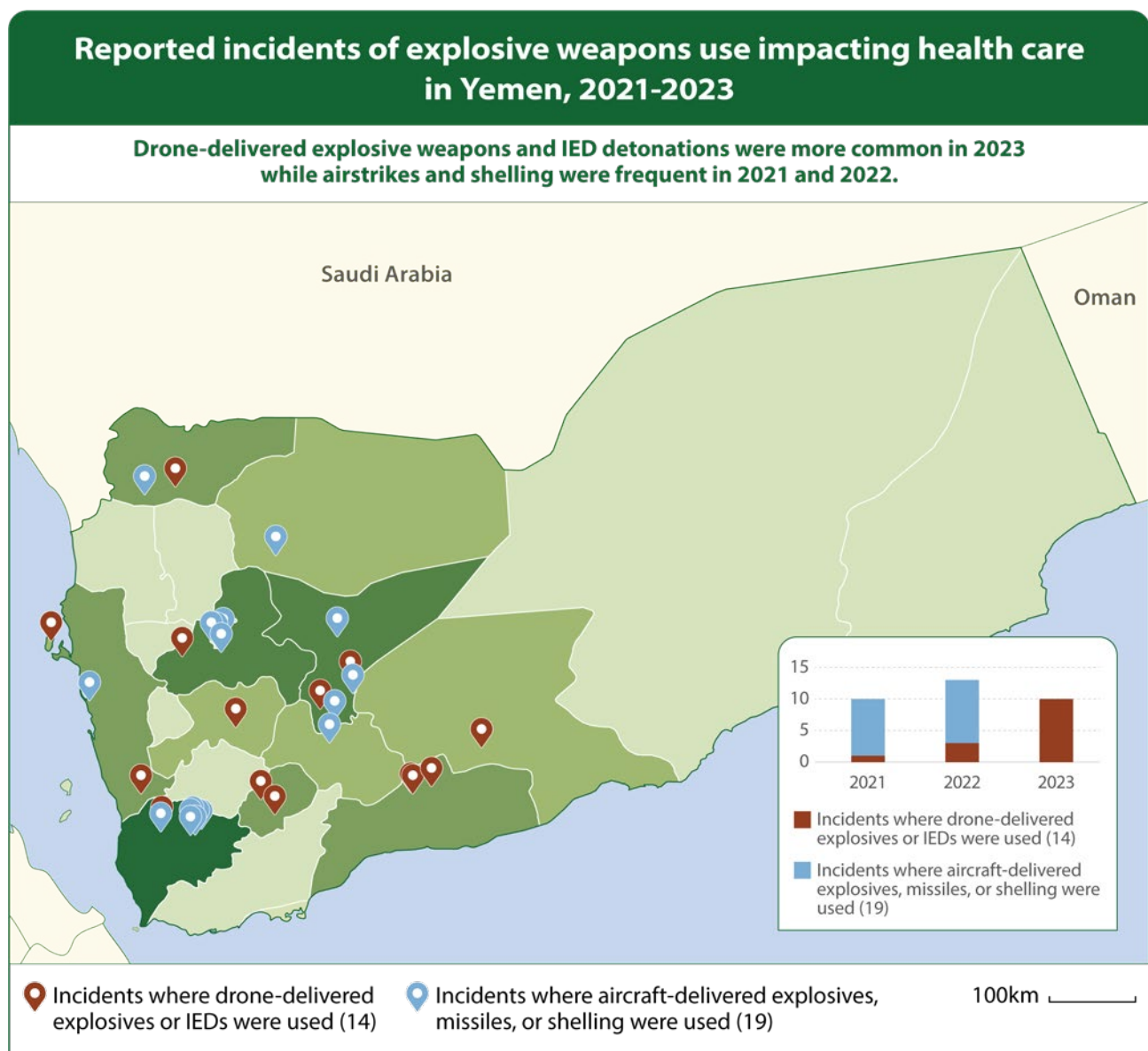
### Explosive weapons use

Twelve incidents recorded explosive weapons use affecting health care in 2023, compared to 14 such incidents in 2022. Over half of the recorded incidents involved damage to or the destruction of seven military ambulances belonging to the STC or its affiliates. In addition, four health facilities were damaged and a doctor and his son were injured when a Houthi-planted landmine targeting a tribal leader detonated.<sup>6</sup>



Five cases recorded the use of drones armed with explosives in attacks on health care in Al Dali, Al Hudaydah, Dhamar, Sanaa, and Ta'izz governorates in 2023, compared to one in Marib governorate in 2021. Three cases recorded Houthi rebels using drones to drop mortar bombs that damaged two clinics and an STC military ambulance.<sup>7</sup>

Four incidents recorded AQAP-planted IEDs damaging STC military ambulances in Abyan and Shabwah governorates, areas that coincide with the group refocusing its efforts to target STC forces in southern Yemen.<sup>8</sup> When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, they often have wide-area effects and cause death and destruction beyond the intended target, resulting in reverberating adverse effects on the health sector.





## The Houthis

Twenty-five incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were attributed to the Houthi rebels in 2023. Cases were spread over 11 of Yemen's 21 governorates. Houthi rebels armed with firearms forcefully entered four health facilities in Al Jawf, Amanat Al Asimah, Ibb, and Raymah governorates.<sup>9</sup> Two were privately owned facilities, which were raided and repurposed by Houthi rebels in Ibb governorate in January and February.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, the affected facilities were looted of medical equipment, and on one occasion two patients were kidnapped after Houthi rebels stormed a hospital.<sup>11</sup> One of the patients had been injured while fighting the group the day before.<sup>12</sup>

On eight occasions, Houthi rebels took over health facilities to celebrate religious holidays with most taking place during September in Raymah governorate.<sup>13</sup> Health workers were obligated to attend and medical services were suspended for several hours.

Houthi rebels also seriously assaulted a Sudanese doctor in Dhamar after he refused to pay Houthi taxes.<sup>14</sup> The doctor's brother was later killed by a Houthi gunman after speaking out against the assault.

## THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

Attacks on health care coupled with broader insecurity and violence have had dire consequences in Yemen. The country's total annual expenditure on health care has long been "among the lowest in the world." This expenditure has since reduced in wartime even though demand for treatment has increased due to casualties inflicted during the fighting and the spread of conflict-related diseases. Meanwhile, the political division of Yemen between the de facto control of the Houthis in the north and the internationally recognized government in the south has resulted in the fragmentation of the health care system and an absence of clear governance mechanisms. This, together with the fact that health administrators have often lacked access to basic equipment and services, including computers and internet connections, has contributed to severe limitations on and even the absence of official reporting on health indicators, including life expectancy, fertility, and maternal and infant mortality.

Data collected up to July 2023 suggested that 44% of health facilities in Yemen were only partially functioning or were not functioning at all. Insufficient staff, equipment, finances, and medical supplies were the most frequently cited reasons for this dysfunctionality. Furthermore, several hundred health facilities were assessed to be either "fully damaged" or "partially damaged," suggesting that many health facilities had gone unrepaired years after being initially damaged or destroyed.

The outcomes for health-seeking populations have been harrowing. Large numbers of people suffering from diseases or wounded during the war have been unable to obtain or afford essential treatment. In an interview in 2023, the father of a girl who struggled to walk or stand up straight noted that "She was shot in the back by a sniper. That was in 2016 and the bullet is still lodged inside her [seven years later]."

The wider health needs of the population remain severe. In one hospital in Hajjah governorate, 68% of women admitted to the maternity department in February 2024 were malnourished, an increase from 51% in 2021.

*She was shot in the back by a sniper. That was in 2016 and the bullet is still lodged inside her [seven years later].*



- 1 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database attribution policy, accessed April 20, 2024.
- 2 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database attribution policy, accessed April 20, 2024.
- 3 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 41466; 42055. Two incidents that have not been reported elsewhere were reported by the WHO Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care. Further information, including the identity of the perpetrators, the weapons used, and the locations of the incidents, is not available.
- 4 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 40627; 39654.
- 5 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 36828.
- 6 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 42595.
- 7 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 38750; 38169; 39665.
- 8 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 39851; 39657; 39656; 41652.
- 9 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 40354; 36827; 37186; 37835.
- 10 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 37186; 37835.
- 11 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40354.
- 12 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 40354.
- 13 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 46152; 40762; 46151; 46131; 46130; 46165.
- 14 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 YEM SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 39653.

# SAFEGUARDING HEALTH IN CONFLICT

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organizations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war or civil unrest. We have raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. We monitor attacks, strengthen universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demand accountability for perpetrators.

[www.safeguardinghealth.org](http://www.safeguardinghealth.org)

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