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Checkpoint fragments and hierarchies

Competing regimes of circulation in wartime Yemen, 2015–2026

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CHECKPOINT FRAGMENTS AND HIERARCHIES

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ABSTRACT

- Since the onset of the war in Yemen, checkpoints have become a central mechanism by which authority is exercised, allowing competing state or rebel authorities to control the movement of people and cargo. The implications of this shift are far-reaching, encompassing everything from territorial control to conflict financing; the undermining of state authority to security sector reform; and the cost of goods to peacebuilding efforts.

- Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the strategic Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor, which is currently subject to two competing political orders, one nominally legitimate (the Government of Yemen and its partners) and the other not (the Houthi rebels based in the northwest). These rival political orders translate into two contrasting mobility regimes: in areas (at least nominally) held by the central government, the regime is fragmented and decentralised; while in Houthi-held areas a more centralised and digitised regime prevails. Both regimes rely on widespread extraction from circulation, with traders subject to coercive practices and consumers forced to pay higher prices as a result. Crucially, a significant proportion of the funds raised goes towards sustaining Yemen's civil war, more than a decade after it erupted.

- Yemen's checkpoints have, over recent decades, evolved into multi-purpose sites of hybrid governance. Today, their functions include security screening; counterterrorism; counter-smuggling and counterintelligence; fiscal extraction; corridor regulation; political signalling; and logistics control. The fact that many of Yemen's paved roads are in a poor state or have been arbitrarily closed has reduced mobility choices, increasing the population's reliance on checkpoint-heavy highways or secondary roads.

- The rise of Yemen's competing checkpoint regimes has negatively affected not only those whose livelihoods depend on transporting commodities, but the welfare of those reliant on such goods. Moreover, in terms of humanitarian access and service delivery programming, the fragmentation of authority has made it harder to pursue a more regionally based approach. Instead, organisations must conduct negotiations on both a node-by-node and corridor-wide basis, putting further strain on resource mobilisation at a time of declining international aid.

- In sum, road security and revenue collection, once seen as sovereign duties, have today become little more than arenas for predatory extraction and control. In a country already worn out by long years of conflict, this has come at the direct expense of civilian welfare, the credibility of state authority and private sector viability.

- Only by gradually restoring the state's monopoly over violence can Yemen's many parallel modalities of extraction be reduced and, ultimately, dismantled. In the short-to-medium term, potential avenues that could be pursued by the Government of Yemen and supportive international actors include a concerted push to reduce discretionary enforcement authority; a review of abused revenue collection laws; the standardisation of corridor procedures; and the revival of local-level accountability mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

The use of checkpoints to control movement has become a central mechanism by which authority is exercised in wartime Yemen. No longer regarded as peripheral security nodes, checkpoints are a crucial means of imposing (state or de facto) power, allowing the authority involved to regulate access and control the movement of people and cargo. The implications of this shift go beyond everyday flows and interactions, encompassing everything from territorial control to conflict financing; the undermining of state authority to security sector reform; and the cost of goods to peacebuilding efforts (Schouten et al., 2026b).

Checkpoints in wartime Yemen are far more than manifestations of fragmented authority. Rather, they are primary nodes through which authority is contested, (re)produced, (re)distributed and (re)configured. Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor: a strategic route that connects maritime flows via the Port of Aden, as well as cross-border movements from Saudi Arabia and Oman to Yemen's central markets. At present, the corridor is subject to two competing political orders, one nominally legitimate (the Government of Yemen [GoY] and its partners) and the other not (the Houthi rebels based in the northwest). In early January 2026, the balance of power along the corridor underwent a significant shift, with the GoY — assisted by Saudi Arabia — able to expand its control. This was achieved at the expense of the GoY's up-until-that-point most prominent 'partner', the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) (Jalal, 2026).

Crucially, the two rival political orders along the corridor translate into contrasting mobility regimes: in areas held by the GoY and (until recently) dominated by the STC, the regime is largely fragmented, decentralised and heterarchical; while in Houthi-held areas a much more centralised, highly digitised and hierarchical regime prevails. Although the two regimes differ in structure and operation, they share a common logic: the consolidation of order through the governance of circulation. As such, checkpoints provide a critical mechanism for competing Yemeni actors — formal, hybrid and rebel — to redefine fiscal practices, administrative procedures and territorial authority.[1]

Control over key mobility hubs and connectivity lines has generated a strategic rent window. Whoever dominates chokepoints along the corridor commands the flow of goods, people and transactions, allowing them to selectively impose favourable (or unfavourable) terms of passage. The potential consequences in terms of livelihoods, security and, perhaps most critically of all in the present context, peacebuilding are considerable. In short: understand the dynamics involved and potential pathways to peace may open; fail to understand them, and the risk of causing harm in what is a complex, volatile context increases greatly.

This analysis builds on a growing scholarship that reconceptualises checkpoints beyond their security functions, drawing on cross-regional research in Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Libya, Myanmar and West Africa (see Schouten et al., 2026a). Across a variety of often fragile, war-afflicted contexts, checkpoints have emerged as vital sites of economic extraction, central to the restructuring of mobility,

[1] For the purposes of this paper, 'hybrid' refers to actors and armed groups wielding de facto authority, including those who may have been represented in government, but who now operate outside state institutions and formal structures. 'Formal' actors or practices refers to codified procedures, while 'informal' encompass coercive interactions and/or discretionary frameworks outside institutional mandates.

revenue streams and authority over trade flows. Insurgent actors have developed sophisticated governance and revenue generation systems, transforming civilian life in ways that speak to the concept of 'twilight institutions'. The reconstitution of public authority through overlapping, often contested, arrangements frequently results in the lines between formal and informal circulation regimes becoming blurred (Schouten et al., 2026b, cf. Arjona, 2017; Lund, 2006; Mampilly, 2011; Raeymaekers, 2014).

Turning to Yemen specifically, the existing research has yet to take full advantage of the politics of circulation as an analytical lens. The result is a knowledge gap in how this plays into the country's governance and security dynamics, and potential missed opportunities to build peace amid recurrent conflict (Coombs and Salah, 2023; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2025). The paper seeks to address this gap by demonstrating how competing circulation regimes can coexist within a single space, generating overlapping but differentiated forms of power.

How do different checkpoint regimes structure and justify levies and taxes? What roles do checkpoints play in regulating mobility? How do they function as extractive military, social and political institutions? What does this reveal about the transformation of authority in wartime Yemen? In what ways and to what extent does collective action shape daily checkpoint interactions and policy reform pathways?

Such are the questions the following sections seek to answer. In doing so, the paper's analytical contribution is three-fold. First, it provides an empirical account of how checkpoints operate as extractive institutions, shaping circulation, revenue extraction and armed mobilisation in a part of Yemen's contested internal borderlands. Second, it offers a comparative analysis of Yemen's divergent mobility regimes, challenging binary interpretations of state consolidation versus state collapse. Third, it reinforces the argument that checkpoints can partly be viewed as primary sites of governance, linking micro-level extraction practices to broader debates around the formation of authority.

Methodology and structure

The study upon which this paper is based employed a mixed-method approach, triangulating open-source information and desk research with corridor mapping and 32 key informant interviews. The findings were further validated by 11 informal follow-up conversations, local reporting, available documents (e.g. receipts, tariff cards, policy memos) and reports. Interviews were conducted between November 2025 and March 2026 with government, security and local authority officials; transporters; traders; travellers; and civil society and truck association representatives. Particular attention was paid to transport-sector actors, including logistics intermediaries, given their first-hand experience. The identities of contributors have been anonymised to ensure their safety. Given the sensitivity of the topic and access constraints in conflict-affected settings, triangulation prioritised consistency and cross-source vetting.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section sets the scene by outlining the background to Yemen's ongoing civil war, before detailing the evolution and typology of the country's checkpoint regimes past and present. The following one goes into further detail about the importance of the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor, and how checkpoint practices differ between the areas held by the GoY and those controlled by the Houthi rebels. The third section then draws on the first-hand testimony of Yemeni truckers to flesh out how everyday interactions at the corridor's checkpoints play out, and how truckers have responded — and in some cases attempted

to resist — the predatory extortion they are subjected to. The subsequent section builds on all of the above to offer in-depth analysis on the impacts arising from the politics of circulation in wartime Yemen. Finally, the conclusion summarises the paper's key arguments and offers several recommendations aimed at addressing the extractive dynamics currently endemic in Yemen's political economy.

BACKGROUND: CHECKPOINTS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR TERRITORIAL CONTROL

Yemen's ongoing conflict

Ever since Yemen's central state gradually slid into collapse in 2011, soon to be compounded by a full-scale armed rebellion by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in 2014, the country's security order has fragmented into competing zones of influence. The subsequent years of war have led to a patchwork of armed groups, overlapping claims to authority and hybrid governance arrangements in areas nominally held by the government (Nagi, 2020).

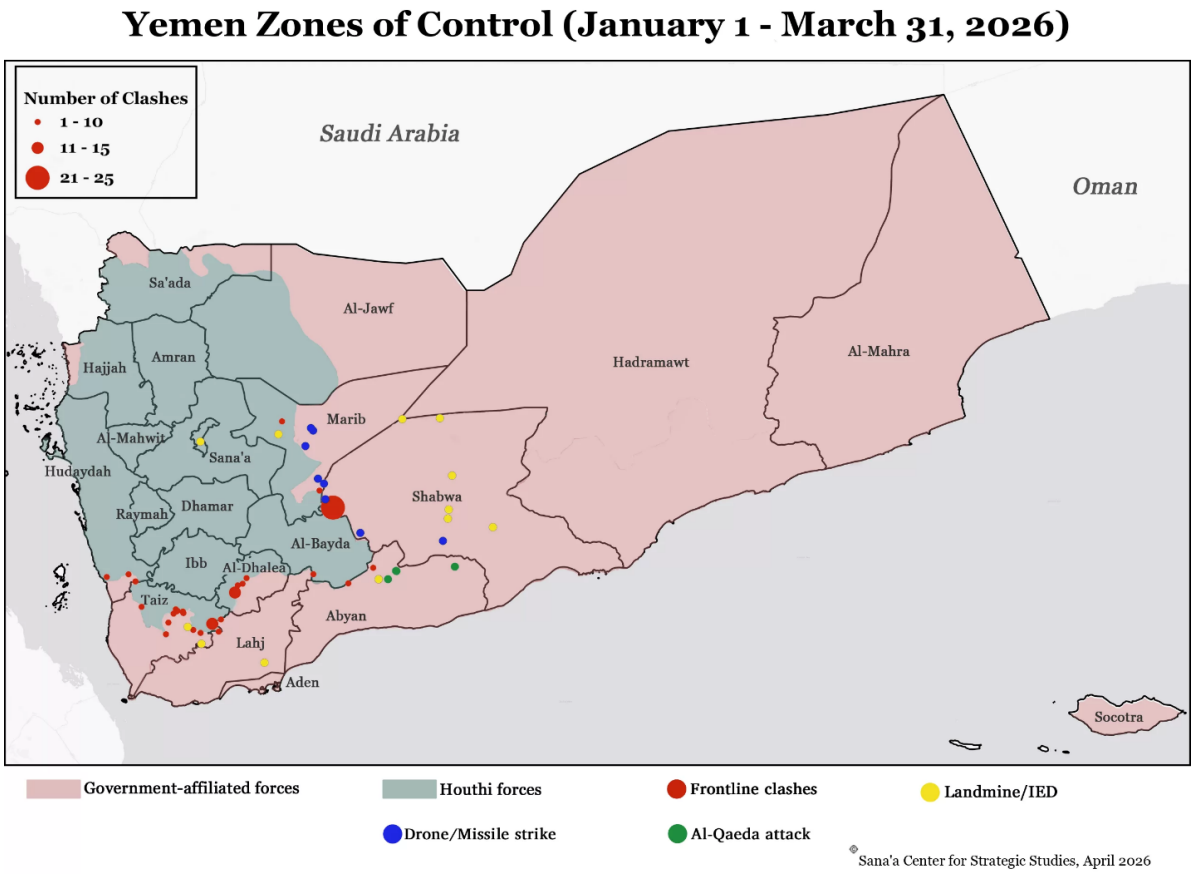
Over the course of 2015–16, the existing fragmentation deepened in areas 'liberated' from the Houthi rebels. This was magnified by the expansion of anti-Houthi forces, bolstered by the UAE under the Saudi-led Arab Coalition. Fighters were organised into governorate-level Security Belt Forces that were eventually brought under the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was created in 2017 and sought to secede based on Yemen's 1990 borders. The proliferation of security forces in the south — numbering up to 200,000 fighters by 2020 according to UAE officials — undermined the legitimacy of the central government they were purportedly formed to aid (al-Dawsari, 2021; Jalal, 2020a; The National, 2020).

These developments introduced new layers of complexity and counterbalancing centres of power to the conflict. The UAE-backed STC ended up exercising de facto control over Aden, Lahej, al-Dhale'a and Abyan, and in December 2025 launched a major offensive towards Hadramawt and al-Mahra that saw it briefly expand its reach to much of Yemen's south before military reversals propelled the STC's collapse in early 2026. These dramatic events underscore an enduring feature of the conflict: unpredictability (Jalal, 2026). Territorial reordering remains volatile, with the consolidation of authority often taking considerable time in the wake of shifts in the military balance.

The Houthis, meanwhile, consolidated control over northwestern Yemen in 2017 by co-opting state institutions, absorbing the General People's Congress and eliminating rival centres of power — including that of their one-time ally, President Ali Abdullah Saleh (who was killed in December 2017) (Alley, 2018). This tightened grip on power facilitated a more centralised, hierarchical administrative and security apparatus in Houthi-held areas.

While a binary division between non-state (Houthi) and state (GoY) rule may be correct from a legalistic point of view, it fails to capture the nuances of command coherence, institutionalisation and control over circulation that characterise these competing governance environments.

Figure 1. Territorial control in Yemen as of 31 March 2026



Source: Courtesy of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

The evolution and typology of Yemen's checkpoint regimes

Control over trade routes, taxation and movement has long been central to authority formation in Yemen, especially between coastal cities and the heartland (Day, 2012). Historically, rulers in ancient South Arabia derived their power less from territorial control and more from their ability to regulate trade flows between port cities, caravan junctions and consumer markets (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025a). Rulers in the Kingdom of Hadramawt, for instance, used barriers and checkpoints to channel caravans through specific historical trade routes (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025b). This enaction of authority via a corridor of checkpoints traversing complex terrain remains relevant to this day, indicating how central the regulation of circulation has long been in Yemen.

While the ancient caravan routes have been replaced by trucking roads, the logic remains the same. Table 1 provides an overview of how Yemen's checkpoint regime has developed in more recent years — specifically, from the 1990s onwards. Yemen's road network was already underdeveloped even before the country's descent into conflict in 2004, with the outbreak of fighting in Sa'ada. The network was further weakened in the years that followed, particularly after the outbreak of full-scale civil war in 2014. As a result, civilian and commercial traffic has been reduced to a limited web of corridors (Nagi, 2020).

A plethora of (state and non-state) armed actors have established checkpoints at strategic locations along these corridors — including city entrances, vital infrastructure, road junctions and governorate boundaries — in order to exert control (Coombs and Salah, 2023). Over time, these have developed from ad-hoc security measures into regular extraction counters tasked with regulating the movement of people and goods, monetising mobility through inspections, weighbridges, delays and layered payments (see Table 2 for an overview of checkpoint types). Some of the tax collection mechanisms existed pre-war, while others were created during the war (see Table 4). The passage costs involved are then reflected in consumer prices. Thus, checkpoints have come to function as 'satellite offices' of the war economy, imposing authority, extraction and enforcement on everyday mobility and interactions (Coombs and Salah, 2023; Schouten et al., 2026b).

Table 1. Checkpoint evolution in Yemen (1990s–2026)

Period	Primary operators	Functions	Characteristics
1990s–2003 (pre-war)	State security and police; Houthis; tribal actors (sporadic)	Security and order; commodity control; episodic mobility protection	Lower density; episodic enforcement; negotiated tribal roles in peripheries
2004–2010 (Houthi rebellion and Sa'ada wars)	State police and military units; local intermediaries; tribal actors in peripheries; Houthi rebels	Security filtering; selective mobility restriction in contested areas	Some peripheral theatres; not routinised as corridor-wide systems
2011–2014 (political transition)	Fragmenting state units; Houthis; local power brokers; tribal actors	Security and order; emerging informal extraction; commodity control	Persistence amid institutional fragility and state erosion
2014–2017 (war escalation)	GoY, Houthis, tribesmen, armed groups and organised criminal groups (OCGs)	Territorial marking; mobility control and restriction; revenue extraction	Rapid multiplication; corridor passage; routinisation
2017–2021 (entrenched war economy)	GoY; military commanders; tribesmen; STC-aligned militias; the Houthis and OCGs	Territorial marking; extraction; supply chain control; moral/political screening	Dense corridors; cumulative passage; institutionalisation
2022–present (institutionalisation of war economy)	GoY; military commanders; tribesmen; STC-aligned militias; the Houthis	Routinised extraction and regulation; targeted crackdowns and screening; governance effects	Road politics as policy arena; corridors consolidate as satellite offices

Source: Author's work, 2026 (see Coombs and Salah, 2023; al-Dawsari, 2012; Day, 2012; Lackner, 2016; Reiner and Weissenburger, 2024; Salisbury, 2017; Yemen Times, 2012).

Table 2. Checkpoint types in Yemen

Type	Operator	Primary functions	Instruments and signs
State	Formal (i.e. police, military, customs)	Security control; fiscal collection (customs/excise); regulating commodity flows	Permanent posts; uniforms/IDs; written procedures; taxation, often with receipts; seizure for non-compliance
Non-State	De facto and parallel armed formations including	Surveillance and counter-infiltration; revenue extraction; signalling 'internal borders'; targeted harassment/detention	Layered checkpoints; mobile; discretionary search of personal devices; selective fast-tracking; levies with receipts sometimes; seizure for non-compliance
Tribal	Armed tribesmen	Episodic security; leverage in disputes; identification of opponents; extortion; protection, escort and/or bargaining	Ad-hoc roadblocks; negotiated passage; informal fees; sporadic resurgence during insecurity, state collapse, tribal mobilisation and feuds

Source: Author's work, 2026 (see Coombs and Salah, 2023; al-Dawsari, 2012; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2025b; Yemen Times, 2012).

Tribal checkpoints and Houthi ascendancy

Prior to Yemen's civil war, exercising control over the country's checkpoints was an important means by which the central state demonstrated its legitimacy. Nevertheless, various informal extraction practices existed even then. In peripheral borderlands and rural areas, tribal checkpoints — better known as *Qitt'a Qabli* — appeared sporadically, mostly in remote and contested rural spaces (al-Muslimi, 2013). Many of these tribal checkpoints were temporary, negotiated and/or purpose-specific (e.g. local disputes, security incidents, discontent over share of wealth or power), rather than routinised revenue-extraction systems.

Other tribal checkpoints were and continue however, to be established for economic extraction, particularly those known locally as *Taqato'a* (roadblocks) (al-Muslimi, 2013). These function as a mobile, ad-hoc form of highway banditry, and often emerge during periods of weakened state authority. Through such means, small sections of tribesmen are able to impose informal passage fees, as well as extort and/or detain travellers to gain leverage in local disputes. In some instances, the equivalent of 2,000 Saudi Riyals (US$533) per fuel truck has reportedly been charged along strategic transit routes.[2]

De facto tribal control over circulation has also been co-opted to serve government purposes at various times. For instance, prominent tribal leaders in Ma'rib and Hadramawt have, during periods of state weakness (especially the 2011 uprising and 2014 Houthi armed uprising), coordinated with state security forces and local authorities, deploying armed tribesmen to secure roads, counter criminal activity and contain violence (al-Dawsari, 2012). In such contexts, tribal leaders may operate as alternative security providers, helping the state fulfil its responsibilities.

Tribes enjoy considerable legitimacy in their territories, and principled tribal leaders have also cooperated with state authorities to limit roadblocking. Such adherence to tribal

[2] Interview with a tribal Shaikh, February 2026. These truckers are paid in Saudi Riyals, so those become the currency of roadblock exactions, too.

codes is, however, not a given. For instance, in 2023 security forces in Ma'rib governorate lost four soldiers when a tribal militia fought back against removal of a checkpoint — the situation was eventually de-escalated following tribal mediation (Yemen Online, 2023).

Turning to the Houthis, the rebels first established a limited number of checkpoints in 2004. These proliferated over the years, particularly after the Houthis assumed full control of Sa'ada governorate in 2011. Following this, rebels were able to gradually expand their area of territorial control from the periphery to the centre, culminating in the civil war that erupted in September 2014 when they captured the capital, Sana'a (Salisbury, 2017). The checkpoints set up during this time were primarily intended to help the Houthis counter the Yemeni Armed Forces. Subsequent years, especially after the Saudi-led Arab Coalition entered the fray against the Houthis in March 2015, saw a qualitative shift in the Houthis' checkpoint systems, which became more explicitly tied to war financing and corridor governance.

Yemen's checkpoints have, over recent decades, evolved from landmarks of sovereign state duties to multi-purpose nodes of hybrid governance. Today, their functions include but are not limited to: security screening; counterterrorism; counter-smuggling and counterintelligence (identity checks, detention threats, sponsor requirements); fiscal extraction (levies, taxes, bribes); corridor regulation; political signalling; moral policing (restrictions on women's mobility); and logistics control (inspections, delays, selective fast-tracking) (see Coombs and Salah, 2023; al-Dawsari, 2012; Day, 2012; Lackner, 2016; Reiner and Weissenburger, 2024; Salisbury, 2017; al-Tairi, 2022; Yemen Times, 2012). Because some roads have been closed by force and others are too damaged to use, these checkpoints increasingly concentrate along a shrinking set of corridors open to movement.

Against this backdrop, the remainder of the paper focuses on the two main governance ecosystems currently shaping Yemen's politics of circulation. In GoY/STC-held areas, security provision is plural and overlapping, resulting in negotiated passage, cumulative levies and non-linear forms of enforcement. In Houthi-held areas, by contrast, checkpoints have become progressively more centralised and administratively codified, with clearly defined bureaucratic chains linking checkpoints to internal customs and taxation structures. These differences are reflective of how the competing regimes exercise their authority through everyday circulation.

EVOLUTION OF THE CORRIDOR AND THE PRICE OF PASSAGE

South of the frontline in al-Dhale'a, GoY-held areas were — up until January 2026 — largely dominated by the UAE-backed STC and its aligned forces. This led to overlapping claims to authority, plural security provision and command chains. As a consequence, checkpoint interactions between security providers, transporters and travellers across these areas became frequent, cumulative (in terms of fees paid) and highly negotiated affairs (International Crisis Group, 2022).

By contrast, north of al-Dhale'a drivers enter a more centralised Houthi rebel administrative system rooted in digitised internal customs and taxes. Traders who have already paid customs fees at GoY-held ports of entry must submit to the parallel regime if their trucks are to be allowed on their way, increasing the price paid by the end consumer.

Before elaborating on these two mobility regimes (see Table 3 for a summary of their main features), it is necessary first to trace the enduring impact of Yemen's 1990s public finance laws and sector-specific funds, as well as the evolution of the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor.

Table 3. Features of the corridor's two main mobility regimes

Aspect	GoY/STC areas	Houthi-held areas
Checkpoint density	High	Fewer since digitisation (2021-22)
Extraction pattern	Layered and dispersed	Largely centralised and sequenced
Payment modality	Cash-heavy, less digitised	Digitised in primary checkpoints
Negotiation	Frequent	Less frequent in main checkpoints
Regulatory variability	High and variant	Regulatory changes are sudden
Revenue routing	Factional and unit-level	Institutionalised and unit-level

Source: Author's work, 2026.

The legacy of Yemen's 1990s public finance laws and sector-specific funds

During the 1990s, the Yemeni government — in coordination with international development partners such as the World Bank — enacted various sectoral public finance laws and established sector-specific funds in a bid to shore up revenues, strengthen local governance and boost development.

For instance, the Road Maintenance Fund (RMF) Law No. 22 (1995), under the authority of the Ministry of Public Works and Highways, was established to support road maintenance by taxing fuel flows at 3–5% (al-Tairi, 2022; World Bank, 2012, 2017). The RMF was supposed to work closely with the GoY's transport and interior ministries to ensure compliance, oversight and complementarity. The Cleaning and Improvement Fund, meanwhile — anchored at governorate level as per Prime Ministerial Establishment Decree No. 20 (1999) — was intended to support local authorities, public welfare and development through an off-budget revenue stream (World Bank, 2012).

Over time, however, Yemen's patchwork of armed groups found ways to exploit these legal instruments, such as the Road Maintenance Fund, at a district level, generating

more funds, adding more burden on commuters and diverting the funds towards factional or personal enrichment (see Table 4 for types of fund and levy labels). Given the scale of abuse that has resulted, the issuance of a receipt under a government fund name does not necessarily denote that the collection of such resources is carried out under a legitimate process.

Table 4. Typology of checkpoint fee labels and models

Label	Justification	Payee	Modality	Function
Road Maintenance Fund	Road repair and infrastructure upkeep	Trucks by size/weight	Often formal receipt, including by district offices	Territorial revenue capture
Weighbridge compliance	Tonnage regulation	Medium and large trucks	Formal scale-based charge	Weight monetisation
Inspection fees	Cargo verification	All trucks	Informal in cash mostly	Delay leverage
Security support	Security operations and protection	All transport	Often cash and/or banking	Unit and factional financing
Economic support	Administrative or factional fund (i.e. STC)	Commercial cargo	Semi-formal via Hawala transfers or banking	Revenue generation
Ground transport services	Service facilitation	Cross-governorate cargo	Semi-formal in cash	Passage acceleration
Martyr Family Fund	Support for family of combatants	Cargo, traders	-	Revenue generation
Cleaning and improvement Fund	Urban services by local authorities	Trucks entering cities or sometimes districts	Formal	Municipal revenue capture
Passage clearance permit	Speed up passage given security clearance	Traveller	Semi-formal via the Transport Authority in Sana'a	-

Source: Author's work, 2026.

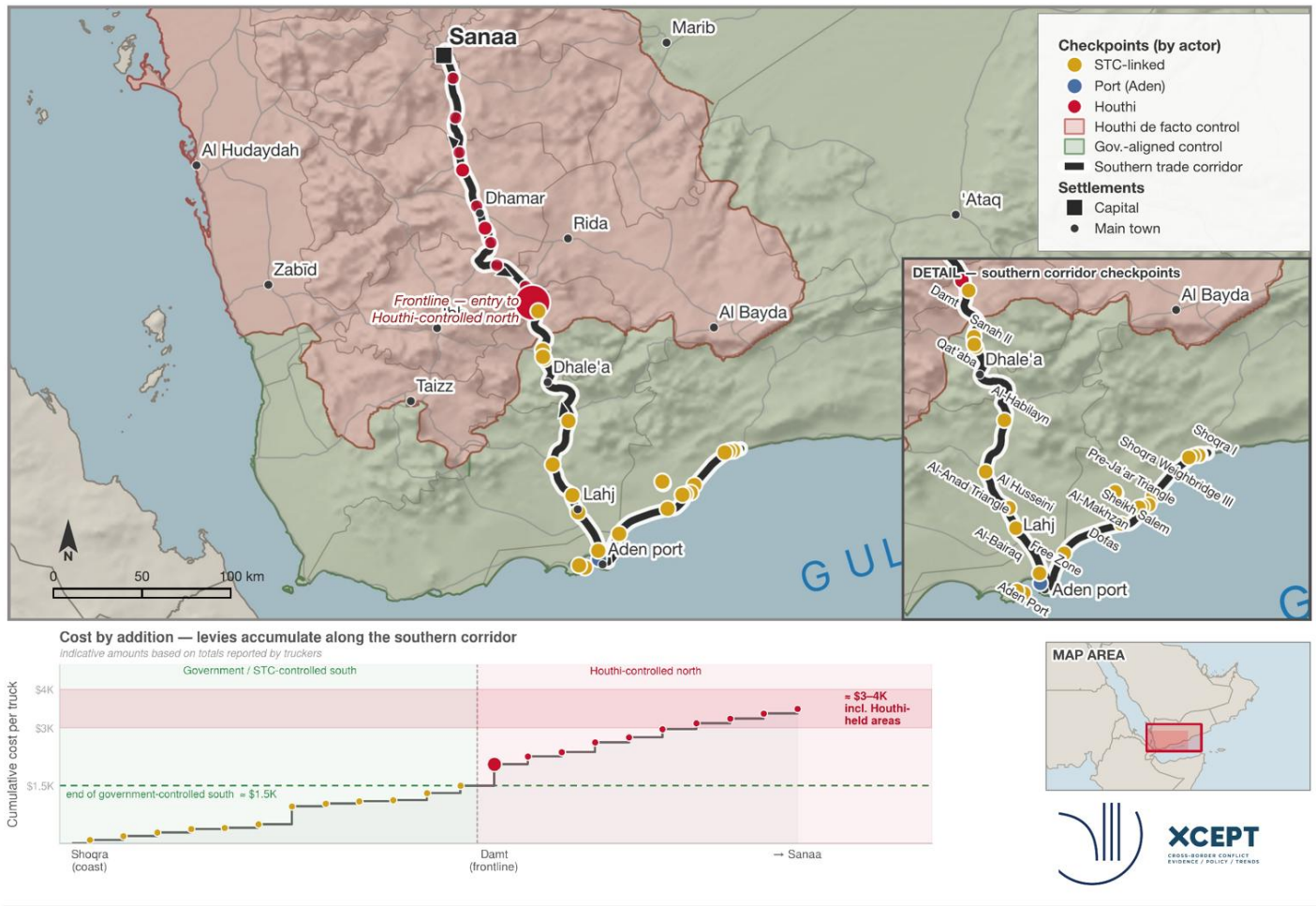
The Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor

The Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor is one of the region's main arteries through which imported goods (e.g. fuel, food, livestock, goods, qat, construction materials) and people flow, offering a transit route towards Yemen's central, northern and southern markets. Of particular importance in elevating the corridor's strategic value are flows from the Port of Aden, as well as inland flows from Oman and Saudi Arabia. Various defined nodes sit at governorate boundaries, military buffer zones and urban entrances, transforming circulation into a highly regulated, monetised process. Rather than a linear proliferation of checkpoints, the corridor has developed into a layered, dense system of control, where movement is regulated via formal procedures, informal practices and coercive enforcement. In this way, the corridor has become key to

revenue generation and the reordering of political, economic and administrative authority.

Crucially, the corridor now plays host to two main mobility regimes that coexist despite differences in their institutional structures, administrative processes and extractive logics — and are each overlaid by tribal checkpoint activity that varies in intensity according to the strength of local authority. In GoY-held, STC-dominated areas, checkpoint taxation practices have been fragmented, more heterarchical and less digitised. This is reflective of the GoY's diminished authority during this time, overlapping chains of command and control, and a multiplicity of semi-formal security providers. By contrast, mobility governance in Houthi-held areas has evolved into a more centralised, highly digitised and administratively codified regime, comparable to those imposed by al-Shabab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Figure 2. Checkpoints along the corridor (2026)



Source: Cartography by J. Masselink and P. Schouten.

Checkpoint practices in GoY-held, STC-dominated areas

Aside from the longstanding contestation of authority caused by the presence of the STC prior to January 2026, GoY-held areas in the corridor have undergone significant reconfiguration since 2014, caused by — among other factors — the rise of armed groups, foreign patronage and the gradual reclaiming of territorial control. The latter was

consolidated chiefly via the manning of checkpoints in Aden, the interim capital, in 2018 followed by steady expansion into Lahej, al-Dhale'a and Abyan.

From 2017 onward, the expansion of the STC-aligned Security Belt Forces (SBF) normalised a checkpoint ecology across key southwestern governorates in Yemen. Initially, this constituted a security project aimed at constraining the Houthis, before evolving into a regime of control over the mobility of goods and people. April 2018 proved to be a critical turning point in al-Dhale'a governorate, with the SBF assuming frontline security obligations, extending its deployment along key roads, and deepening coordination with other military formations and armed groups. This served to blur the lines between the SBF's warfighting and policing functions.[3] In Aden, meanwhile, the SBF supported the STC's first armed rebellion against the GoY in January 2018 and by August 2019 had expanded its de facto control to Abyan during the second armed rebellion. In collaboration with partner forces in the Giants Brigades, the SBF came to wield influence in several governorates (Jalal, 2020b).

Over time, this model — initially framed as necessary for stabilisation and counter-infiltration — came to be used by hybrid armed groups and political movements as a means of generating financial capital and demonstrating a presence on strategic roads in GoY-held areas. This manifested in a proliferation of fixed checkpoints, corridor 'securitisation', and screening and intelligence practices designed to enable extractive economic pipelines.

By 2019–21, numerous armed groups were involved in governing circulation along the southern checkpoint system linking the interim capital, Aden, to eastern and northern governorates. Each checkpoint was (and remained, at least up until January 2026) embedded within local command chains, thereby falling outside the auspices of unified state authority and regulation.[4] Moreover, several checkpoints were mobile and discretionary. As one mid-level Ministry of Interior official noted: 'Commanders of brigades near relevant roads may unlawfully and independently establish one, two or three checkpoints, impose levies, and if no one challenged their presence within a few days, their checkpoints could easily stay for months'.[5] These dynamics reinforce heterarchical patronage networks, intensify intra-factional competition over levy collection and add considerable costs, which are then reflected in logistics and consumer prices.

Checkpoints have continued to proliferate along key overland connectivity infrastructure, reflecting both the fragmentation of authority and an increased reliance on circulation as a source of income. Available reporting and interviews with transporter networks indicate that each governorate along the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a corridor in GoY-held, STC-dominated areas had (prior to January 2026) between 8 and 25 checkpoints, with Abyan being a particularly prominent case in point.[6] Additional ad-hoc, mobile or rotating posts have appeared sporadically either as a means of mobilising fighters or generating personal wealth, especially during periods of heightened tensions, security campaigns or in the face of economic pressures.

The study on which this paper draws examined the levies collected at a number of key chokepoints (see Figure 2), most notably: al-Alam and al-Bureiqa (Aden); Dofas and Wadi

[3] Interview with a senior Ministry of Interior (MoI) official, January 2026.
[4] Interview with an armed STC affiliate, November 2025.
[5] Interview with an MoI official, February 2026.
[6] Interview with a trucker, November 2025.

Hassan (Abyan); Sanah, Damt and Qa'tabah (al-Dhale'a); and al-Bairaq, al-Husseini and al-Anad (Lahej).

Various armed formations collect formal and informal taxes/levies along this network of checkpoints. According to open-source information and interviewee testimonies, a specific vocabulary is employed to justify extraction, with levies rarely described as taxes. Instead, they are mostly justified in administrative, security or developmental terms (see Table 4 above). Regardless of the rationale, the logistical costs incurred by these payments are ultimately passed on to the end consumer.

To add a veneer of legality, receipts from specific entities are issued for some of these payments. In many cases, however, no such receipts are provided, with the majority of payments made in cash.[7] This makes it difficult to trace payments within an institution, enabling heterarchical patronage, reinforcing dependency pathways and entrenching the sub-war economy. In practice, the fees demanded can be seen more as a repertoire of justifications than a transparent levy system, allowing multiple actors to exploit the fragmented political landscape. A truck driver decried the 'outright extortion given especially the lack of accountability and oversight', emphasising that a vague collection justification accompanied by a stamped receipt does not make extraction legitimate or legal.[8]

Traversing GoY areas has typically involved paying a diverse series of fees across many checkpoints, reflective of the contested authority along this side of the corridor (see Table 5). Drivers reported a dense network of more than 45 checkpoints along Abyan (20+), Aden (10+), Lahej (8+) and al-Dhale'a (7+).[9] Rather than a unified fee being collected at a major hub, the cost of passage accumulates at every checkpoint. Truckers pay an estimated YER 900,000–3,000,000 (equivalent to US$529–1,765) along the GoY's section of the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a corridor,[10] with the exact figure dependent on factors such as cargo type, truck size, route selection and enforcement intensity.[11] In October 2022, heavy truck transporters reported having to pay more than a million Yemeni Riyal across 21 checkpoints between Abyan and Aden alone. The following year, in July, drivers staged a protest in Aden against levies exceeding YER 2 million (US$1,176) along the Hadramawt–Aden Road. These heavy costs prompted traders to explore alternative shipping options enabled by the de facto truce conditions then in effect, particularly the reopening of Hodeida Port (Sahafa 24 Net, 2023).

Levy collection reports indicate several key chokepoints along the corridor. These include the eastern entrance to Aden, Al-Alam, where — according to heavy trailer drivers transporting high-value goods — payments can reach as much as YER 600,000 (US$353).[12] At Dofas and Wadi Hassan checkpoints along the coastal road in Abyan, drivers paid up to YER 200,000 (US$117) at each major point, as well as negotiated 'facilitation' passage fees in the range of YER 20,000–50,000 (US$12–29).[13] The reopening of the al-Dhale'a–Sana'a road in 2025 saw accompanying extractive processes surge, with reports indicating payments of up to YER 400,000 (US$235) at

[7] Interviews with three truckers, November 2025–February 2026.
[8] Interview with a truck union representative, December 2025.
[9] Interviews with MoI officials, STC affiliates, truckers and travellers, November 2025–February 2026.
[10] Based on an exchange rate at YER 1,700 per US$, which was reportedly the rate in GoY-held areas. The rate in Houthi-held areas was around YER 535 per US$.
[11] Interviews with two truckers, December 2025–February 2026.
[12] Key informant interview with a trucker, January 2026.
[13] Key informant interview with two truckers, January 2026.

Sanah, Damt and Qa'tabah checkpoints in al-Dhale'a governorate. Many of these costs were documented in receipts, and are representative of overall trends.

Table 5. Cost ranges at key STC chokepoints (as of December 2025)

Checkpoint	Governorate	Reported fee ranges
Al-Alam	Aden	YER 400,000–600,000 (US$235–353)
Al-Bureiqa	Aden	Up to YER 150,000
Wadi Hassan	Abyan	Up to YER 200,000 (US$117)
Dofas	Abyan	Up to YER 200,000 (US$117)
Al-Bairaq	Lahej	YER 50,000–150,000 (US$29–88)
Al-Husseini	Lahej	YER 50,000–150,000 (US$29–88)
Tor Al-Bahah	Lahej	YER 15,000–50,000 (depending on truck size)
Sanah	Al-Dhale'a	Up to YER 400,000 (US$235)

Source: Author's work, 2026.[14]

The checkpoint sub-war economy has led to diversified revenue streams and, prior to January 2026, entrenched both the heterarchical and hierarchical dominance of the STC and its aligned formations, including the SBF.

The port-to-interior corridor generated considerable revenue, with one report estimating that the STC collected YER 256.5 billion annually in levies (approximately US$204.6 million) (Barran Press, 2024). The various sub-categories of collection cast light on the political economy of the corridor: of the estimated YER 21.4 billion (US$4.25 million) collected each month, around YER 7.22 billion came from fuel-related levies; YER 1.65 billion (US$970,588) from Aden Port-related levies; YER 4.5 billion from qat (US$2.65 million); and YER 7.76 billion (US$4.56 million) from checkpoint collections across Aden, Abyan and Lahej governorates. These figures are reflective of the degree to which the STC viewed ports, checkpoints and supply chains as integral to its efforts at territorial reordering and mobilisation (as the following table and visual show).

[14] The author triangulated collected receipts with interviews and available press reports, investigative journalism and further documentation.

Table 6. STC-imposed commodity-based levies (as of 2025)

Commodity/activity	Amount	Location	Remarks
Fuel	YER 10–14 per litre (+ YER 9 for storage)	Al-Zait Port, Aden and primary checkpoints of passage	
Livestock	YER 7,000 per head	Checkpoints	Port/refinery toll
Port exits	YER 50,000 per container/truck	Aden Port	First toll
Qat	Variable		
Cement (50kg bags)	100 YER per 50 kg bag	Checkpoints	STC's security and military support

Source: Author's fieldwork, documents and open source, 2026.

The document below (Figure 3) shows an order from the STC's Supreme Economic Committee to levy YER 100 on each 50 KG bag of cement, with the revenue being collected as 'support for the joint security forces.

Figure 3. An example of the STC's levy generation orders on cement

Southern Transitional Council
Supreme Economic Committee
Finance Resource's Committee

المجلس الانتقالي الجنوبي
اللجنة الاقتصادية العليا
لجنة الموارد المالية

الأخ / مدير شركة الوحدة للإسمنت المحترم
الأخ / مدير شركة الوطنية للإسمنت المحترم
الأخ / مدير شركة أستار للإسمنت المحترم

تحية طيبة وبعد..

الموضوع / رسوم الدعم الأمني والعسكري

بالبدء نهديكم أطيب التحايا متمنين لكم مزيداً من التقدم والازدهار

إشارة الى الموضوع أعلاه نفيدكم علما ان يوم السبت الموافق 2021/9/4 سيتم مباشرة العمل.

وعليه يتم أشعار وكلائكم بتوريد رسوم الدعم الأمني والعسكري بواقع (100) مئة ريال يمني على كل كيس عبوه 50 كيلو جرام وذلك الى حساب بنكي برقم (122602147) وباسم دعم اللجنة الأمنية المشتركة -الإسمنت لدى شركة التضامن للصرافة.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الاحترام والتقدير

وسيم محمد العمري
عضو اللجنة الاقتصادية العليا
رئيس لجنة الموارد المالية

نسخة :
- رئيس اللجنة الاقتصادية العليا
- الملف

Source: STC's Supreme Economic Committee (2021).

It is clear that checkpoints are seen as tempting prizes, often entrenching heterarchical networks and localised conflict dynamics. This can provoke intra-factional competition within nominal alliances. In July 2025, for instance, sporadic armed clashes took place between STC-aligned groups — SBF elements on one side and a local military brigade on the other — over the control and share of levies. Moreover, given that — according to interviewees — a single major checkpoint in Abyan was capable of generating YER 135 million (US$79,400) per month, it is perhaps unsurprising that strains have emerged between armed commanders and local authority officials (Yemen Eco, 2025; Yemen Now News, 2025).[15] At one point, the then SBF head in Zinjibar (Abyan) demanded that Abyan's governor pay YER 30 million (US$17,600) to support his forces, before resigning, rescinding his resignation, and then engaging in limited military confrontation after he was replaced (Al-Ayyam, 2025). Here, it should be noted that the corridor's cumulative sums function as a 'decentralised revenue pipeline' that supplements (indeed, far exceeds) state payrolls, creating a degree of unit-level autonomy.

Some checkpoints are even more lucrative than the Abyan checkpoint mentioned above. One checkpoint in al-Dhale'a governorate managed to raise YER 1.94 billion (US$1.14 million) over the course of just 25 days, imposing an average levy of YER 250,000 (US$147) on 7,779 trucks. At Sanah checkpoint, the STC-aligned local authority office and local security forces imposed a YER 400,000 (US$235) levy on 2,083 cartons of oranges en route to Aden from Sana'a (see Figure 4 below), verified by receipts shown to the author. The predatory approach to levies demonstrated by these examples significantly inflates logistics costs, and in turn the price paid by consumers (Ain Aden, 2025).

Figure 4. Levy receipt of YER 400,000 (US$235) for a cargo of 2,083 cartons of oranges in al-Dhale'a

Source: Supplied to author by informant (2025).

Overall, the evolution of checkpoints in GoY-held areas demonstrates a structural transformation in how authority is contested, reconstituted, manifested and exercised

[15] Key informant interview with three MoI and local authority officials, January–February 2026.

along the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a corridor. What started as episodic stabilisation support and the limited, arbitrary manning of checkpoints has evolved into dense, economically embedded systems of control, reshaping internal power balances and the broader conflict's political economy.

Checkpoint practices in Houthi-held areas

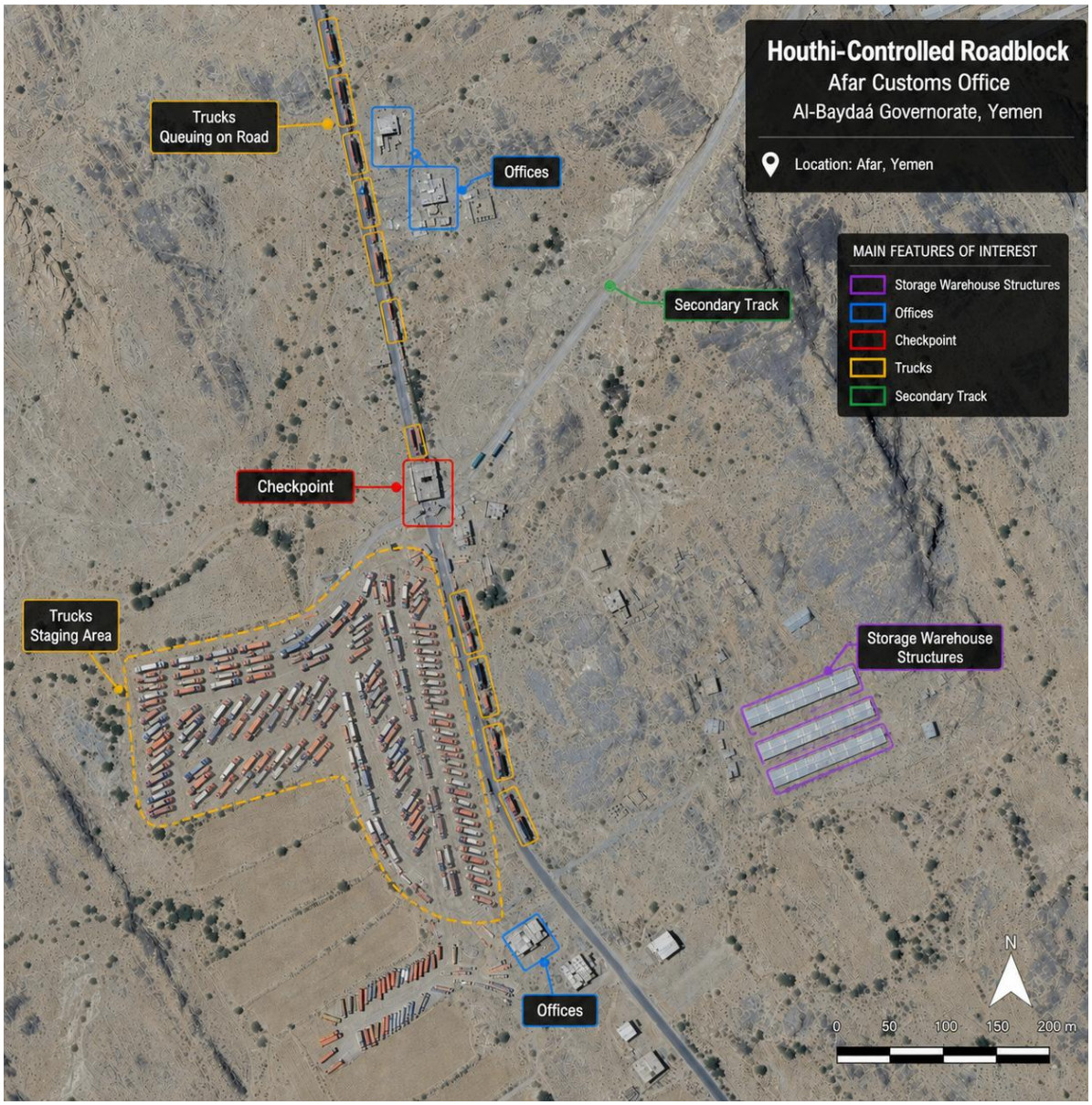
In the early years following the outbreak of full-scale civil war in 2014, the Houthis controlled a dense network of checkpoints along frontlines, transit routes and within cities, exceeding even the numbers seen in GoY-held, STC-dominated areas. In 2017, some estimate that the Houthis had around 300 checkpoints across their areas of control, including many along major roads linking urban hubs such as Sana'a, Dhamar, Hodeida, Ibb, Ma'rib and Taiz (al-Kamali, 2017). Multiple interviewees described Houthi-held roads then as 'revenue-extraction machines, generating millions of Yemeni Riyals a day' under changing labels.[16] Levy collection labels included war-financing efforts (*Majhood Harbi*), family martyr funds, local security operations, 'foreign goods', improvement funds, weighbridge fees and fees for religious and cultural events (e.g. the Prophet's birthday, al-Quds Day, al-Wilaya Day) (26 September Net, 2019; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2020; al-Kamali, 2017).

The most cited chokepoint was Abu Hashem checkpoint in Rada'a, al-Bayda'a governorate, where a refusal to pay could result in denial of passage or, in some cases, arbitrary detention, torture and release upon payment of a 'ransom'. For instance, relatives and friends of a trucker carrying foodstuffs had to raise YER 500,000 (US$1,350) to secure his release (al-Kamali, 2017).

Over time, however, collection efforts became concentrated around several key nodes, including: al-Raheda in Taiz; Dhamar; Nehm in Sana'a; al-Labanat Base in al-Jawf; and Afar in al-Bayda'a (see Figure 2).[17] These customs offices are supplemented by dozens of checkpoints placed along routes in the corridor, which are used for military and logistical purposes.[18] This approach is reflective of Houthi attempts to standardise oversight of circulation at a limited number of major revenue hubs, which coexist with informal levies imposed across a web of checkpoints. Figure 5 below shows heavy traffic of trucks at Afar Customs in al-Bayda'a governorate.

[16] Interviews with truckers, traders and travellers, November 2025–February 2026.
[17] Interviews with three truckers, November 2025–December 2025.
[18] Interview with a senior military official, March 2025.

Figure 5. Houthi customs office in Afar, Al-Bayda'a



Source: Google Earth 2026, annotation by author.

From 2019 onwards, the Houthis expanded their use of digital collection methods, centralising collection through the Tax and Customs Authority under the rebel-held Ministry of Finance. Central to such efforts was the introduction of barcode-based customs inspection in 2021, followed by the gradual introduction of e-payments by late 2021–early 2022 (Yemen Press Agency, 2021). These moves have culminated in the launch of a 'single window' customs system in 2025, which officially ended manual payments at Hodeida and al-Salif ports (Saba News Agency, 2025a, 2025b). According to a recent estimate, the Houthis generate an annual of YER 90-120 billion (US$ 65-85 million) from the latest customs system (Al-Jumai'e, 2026).

Amid growing frustration at heavy levies, the Houthis have incorporated subsidiary levies collected under either funds or labels such as 'martyr family fees', 'security fees' and 'war-financing fees'.[19] As one respondent noted: 'The Houthis increased the prices of

[19] Interview with a trucker, November 2025.

each customs statement by 2% to fund several sectoral funds, including the Family Martyr and Injured Fund, which often means their fighters'.[20]

Multiple interviews with truckers and travellers indicate that formalisation has reshaped the geography of interaction. Generally speaking, trucks coming from GoY-held areas must first submit to forwarding checks before proceeding on to customs, tax and control offices at key nodes, where their loads are verified and processed.[21] Thus, the transit points register cargo flows while the inland custom offices conduct inspections and valuations based on the commodity involved, receipts, quantity and origin. For example, trucks entering from al-Dhale'a must first stop for barcode sealing north of Damt before entering Dhamar for full processing. In this way, the collection of levies rests with the customs houses, rather than traders having to engage in negotiated settlements with multiple collectors.

Traders and transporters now clear payments electronically through banking, Hawala networks (Sarafeen) and/or CAC Bank e-wallet and mobile money systems, which inspectors can check on their iPads, laptops and phones.[22] This has allowed the Houthis to exercise a monopoly over collection and revenue capture, mimicking normal state institutions. As a consequence, the Houthis now preside over a much more centralised fiscal system than is the case in GoY-controlled areas, echoing the experiences of the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Shabab in Somalia (Amiri, 2022; Clark, 2022; Schouten, 2023; Bahadur, 2022). While the centralising dynamics have reduced the necessity for negotiation at checkpoints, traders must now contend with double taxation and customs fees, as well as hidden fees in standardised percentages.

Despite this trend towards centralisation, the number of checkpoints in Houthi areas of the corridor remains relatively high due to the security functions they fulfil. The Houthis have also used their checkpoints to reshape supply chains in support of their war economy, including preventing the entry of specific goods along the conflict's internal borderlines. In mid-2023, for instance, the Houthis banned the purchase of Yemeni gas from Ma'rib governorate, which led to the seizure of hundreds of gas tanker trucks in Sana'a and al-Jawf governorates (al-Batati, 2023). Not buying Yemeni gas put pressure on the GoY's revenues, forcing them to turn instead to more expensive cooking gas imported via Hodeida Port.

The 2024–25 policy to push for localisation represented a significant expansion in the Houthi's attempts to wage economic warfare and extend their control over supply chains. The policy saw some imports banned outright, while other goods were subject to fixed taxes or higher customs fees (up to 40%). In some cases, cargo was delayed or impounded in order to discourage imports (Houthi Ministry of Economy, Industry and Investment, 2025). The affected goods included dairy drinks, bottled water, tissues, plastics, packaging materials and ceramics.

Some view the shift in upstream control as a move by Houthi leaders to increase the market share of the factories they own, thereby ensuring their personal enrichment. However, the rebels have countered such claims by saying the localisation policy 'protects and encourages local production' (Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, 2025).[23] For consumers, the practical reality of such measures is that there are fewer high-quality goods on the

[20] Interview with a subject matter expert, March 2025.
[21] Interviews with five truckers and trailer-tractor drivers, November 2025–February 2026.
[22] Interviews with banking/Hawala personnel and truckers, November 2025–February 2026.
[23] Interview with a trader based in Houthi-held areas, March 2026.

market. Crucially, the political economy is monopolised in the hands of the few, deepening their control over distribution and sourcing. This in turn increases the levy ladder confronting traders and transporters. Thus, the politics of circulation in the corridor is being reshaped not only via the checkpoints themselves, but top-down regulatory intervention.

Interviewees indicated that the Houthis have also imposed heavy levies on contraband goods, narcotics and illicit fuel shipments entering their territory, some of which is being transported via logistics companies affiliated with senior Houthi leaders.[24] The proceeds of these smuggling activities are then distributed among the Houthi leadership, loyal supervisors and wider smuggling networks. These illicit rents have become a vital artery of Houthi financing, reinforcing the war economy logics (Ardemagni, 2023).

Looked at from a broader perspective, the Houthis' shift towards a centralised, digitised and heavily policed mobility regime can be seen as a reconfiguration of extraction, capitalising on the new technologies and governance modalities the rebels have acquired in recent years. Here, a 2023 UN Panel of Experts report illuminates the scope and ultimate purpose of the Houthis' fiscal regime, with the rebels able to collect approximately 70% of Yemen's total tax and customs revenues in order to fund their war effort and sustain patronage networks, despite only controlling a third of the country's territory (United Nations Security Council, 2023). Here, it should be noted that the Houthis have presented their levies as customs fees on 'imported' goods, despite these goods already having been customs cleared by the GoY, resulting in a duplication of fees. Technically speaking, all such dues imposed by the rebels are illegal and disregard past agreements including between the Houthis and the Government of Yemen.

According to a 2025 document, the Houthis have recently issued an updated commodity-class tax mechanism for 'manufactured goods', oil derivatives and poultry feed, segregating handling by entry mode (maritime, overland, air). This modified tax mechanism formalises a system whereby basic staples (e.g. wheat, rice, flour) are exempt from sales tax (although still subject to add-on charges of around 0.5–1%), whereas higher-margin goods such as manufactured clothing, dairy products, iron, wood and poultry feed face higher composite rates (approximately 8–15%, depending on outlet type and compliance status). Moreover, it explicitly replaces discretionary checkpoint bargaining models with a more standardised schedule. As such, the mechanism helps codify the shift towards a more legible extraction architecture, even if significant fiscal burdens remain for transporters and consumers alike.

Given their consolidation of power, intent to remain in control for as long as possible, and desire to improve their finances to overcome resource shortage, the Houthis have actively pursued a more unified and advanced financial and security system. They have also demonstrated relative control over local populations, using intimidation, repression and fear to project power and impose their will — unlike the GoY, which has been less able to secure its operations.

Although the settlement of dues through electronic means has reduced intermediaries, smaller levies along checkpoints endure (see Table 7). Field accounts indicate that informal cash payments in the range of YER 3,000–10,000 (US$6–19) for parcels are common at 'anti-smuggling' points or security posts.[25] In some cases, though, levies can

[24] Interviews with two truckers, November–December 2025.
[25] Interviews with truckers and trailer-tractor drivers, December 2025–February 2026.

reach YER 30,000–60,000 (US$56–112), with fines on excessive tonnage potentially going as high as a million Yemeni Riyal. Trucks carrying cigarettes, tobacco, pesticides, construction materials, fuel and plastics often attract particular scrutiny. Phone checks, including of social media applications such as WhatsApp, X and Facebook, remain part of the passage experience, undermining personal freedoms and safety (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2025; Coombs and Salah, 2023).[26]

Table 7. Revenue extraction at Houthi checkpoints (as of 2026)

Checkpoint/facility	Province	Levy type	YER amount	Pricing basis	Justification
Al-Labanat Camp	Al-Jawf	Informal payment	~15,000 (US$28)	By cargo value	Customs/checkpoint
'Abu Hashem'	Al-Bayda'a	Extortion to avoid delay/unloading	~10,000 (US$18)	Flat amount	'Inspection'
'Anti-smuggling'	Multiple	Confiscation settlement	Up to 30,000 (US$56)	Negotiated and discretionary	'Anti-smuggling'
Small roadside	Multiple	Petty informal levy	2,000–5,000 (US$4-9)	Discretionary	'أنت وقبيلتك' 'You and your generosity'
Weighbridge(Kilo16; Ma'bar)	Hodeida/ Dhamar	Weight-based penalty	500 (weigh fee); 18,000 (US$33) per excess tonne	Per excess tonne	Excess weight
Checkpoints citing scrap restriction	Multiple	Regulatory fine	~20,000 (US$37)	Flat 'fine'	'Scrap prohibited'
Oil-tanker route points	Multiple	Petty informal levy	2,000–5,000 (US$4-9)	Flat range	'Qat fee' 'حق القات'
Land Transport Authority (LTA)	Multiple	Administrative fee	60,000 (US$112)	Annual fee	'Annual Permit'
LTA	Multiple	Informal permit-related payment	20,000 (US$37)	Discretionary/coercive	'Queue system' or 'Permit incomplete'

Source: Author's work, 2026.

As all of the above suggests there is a stark divergence between the fragmented heterarchy seen in GoY-held areas and the centralised, digitised and extractive governance that has emerged in Houthi-held areas. The latter, despite being introduced by a non-state, rebel group, has proven to be the more organised, predictable and consolidated. Nevertheless, both regimes continue to rely on widespread extraction, with traders subject to coercive practices and consumers forced to pay higher prices. Crucially, a significant proportion of the funds raised goes towards sustaining Yemen's civil war, more than a decade after it erupted.

[26] Interviews with two travellers, December 2025.

DEALING WITH THE CHECKPOINT REGIME: COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PERFORMATIVE GOVERNANCE

Drawing on the everyday interactions and lived experiences of truckers and travellers, this section examines how Yemen's politics of circulation is being contested, negotiated and reshaped. Faced with the constraints on movement imposed by checkpoint networks, those affected have come up with an array of adaptive responses. However, whether these actually challenge the prevailing checkpoint regimes or, in fact, serve to reinforce them is up for debate. Against this backdrop, it explores the tools of collective mobilisation used to challenge exorbitant levy collection and the responses — whether performative, reform-minded or repressive — of the respective GoY and Houthi authorities.

Everyday interactions: truckers at checkpoints

Many of the truck drivers interviewed testified to the ways in which 'passage regulation' has become a coercive fiscal leverage instrument, reshaping everyday mobility, interactions and outcomes.[27] Accounts described how technical compliance measures had been turned into a cycle of extractive opportunities, often affecting cargo delivery timelines. When drivers in the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor resist additional or excessively high payments, or have document discrepancies, they are often forced to endure time and monetary costs caused by cargo delays, truck detentions, extended inspections, paperwork 'objections', selective enforcement, threats of immobilisation and/or repeated (un)loading.

In GoY-held areas prior to January 2026, the landscape was largely shaped by the STC's dominance. In 2025, the STC-aligned SBF detained more than 50 truck drivers overnight at Abyan's Hassan checkpoint for refusing to pay a YER 200,000 fee (US$117), which represented an increase of up to YER 150,000 (US$88) in truck passage charges compared to previous years (Al-Janoob Al-Youm, 2024). Truckers complained that in some instances the levies significantly exceeded the cost of cargo, citing a checkpoint — between Shuqra and Qaran al-Klassi along the coastal road in Abyan — that demanded YER 200,000 for goods worth approximately YER 50,000 (US$29) (Aden Al-Ghad, 2025). One driver association representative explained that: 'If you do not pay, you wait … or delay or ad-hoc truck detention are the penalties'.[28]

Multiple interviewees acknowledged that checkpoint personnel in, for example, Abyan's Dofas and Lawdar checkpoints leverage passage approval and the threat of delays to secure 'passage facilitation' fees or bribes.[29] As part of this process, drivers have to pay inspection fees worth YER 5,000–10,000 per axle at major checkpoints. The extent of these inspections is discretionary, meaning they can go on for hours if checkpoint personnel so desire. Here, significant delays in the delivery of perishable cargo, such as livestock, fuel, beverages and foodstuffs, often results in immediate financial losses.

Turning to Houthi-held areas, the shift towards a more digitised, systematised system is regarded ambivalently by drivers. While some describe the Houthi approach as 'more organised' and 'procedurally clear', they are less happy with the main goods assessments being confined to specific hubs and the parallel levy practices involved.[30]

[27] Interviews with truckers and checkpoint personnel, November 2025–February 2026.
[28] Interview with a member of a trucker syndicate, January 2026.
[29] Interview with a trucker, November 2025.
[30] Interviews with two truckers, November–December 2025.

Documentation discrepancies, reclassification and abrupt regulatory changes — not least restrictions on certain overland imports — have immobilised cargo loads for extended durations, resulting in significant holding costs and sometimes damage to the goods being carried. In this regard, one trucker explained:

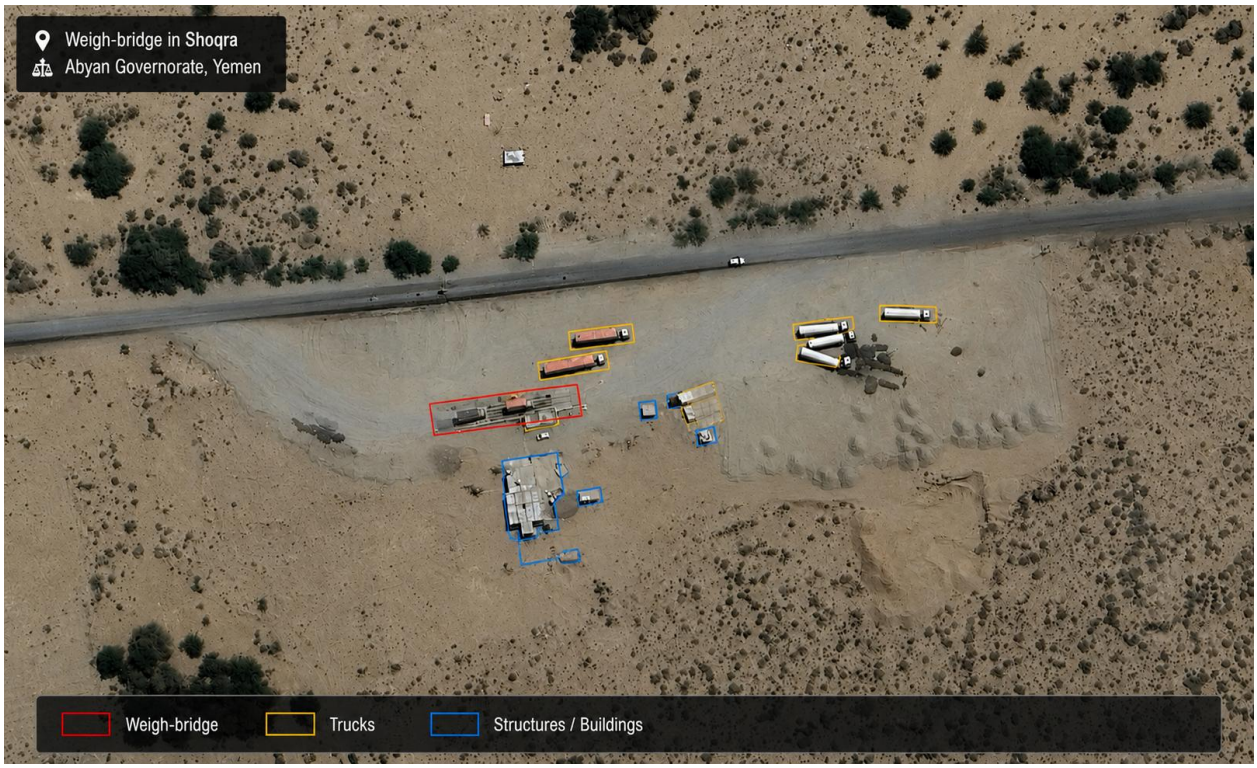
> We arrived driving our timber trucks at Afar checkpoint, a route we previously used to transport Swedish wood cargo from Saudi Arabia for years, only to find the Houthi checkpoint banning our entry. An abrupt Houthi directive had barred the import of wood by land, resulting in our immobilisation for a month. They suddenly sought entry of wood through Hodeida ports, so we had to absorb storage, delay, operational and client loss costs.[31]

When the al-Dhale'a–Sana'a road was reopened for humanitarian reasons in 2025, the Houthis responded by imposing heavier goods charges. This was done in order to offset declining revenues from Hodeida Port arising from Israeli air strikes and US Foreign Terrorist Organization sanctions (al-Jalil, 2025). In July 2025, the US Embassy accused the Houthis of converting the al-Dhale'a–Sana'a road into a tool of extortion, citing the imposition of illegal fees, the confiscation of food and the harassment of travellers at checkpoints. In one incident, a truck driver reportedly burned his cargo-loaded truck in the Houthi-controlled district of Damt in al-Dhale'a in protest of paying exorbitant levies (Amiran, 2025).

Across the political divide, interviewees noted weighbridge inaccuracies and checkpoint abuse. Inconsistent axle standards were a particular irritation, with one heavy truck driver explaining that 'a trailer viewed as eight axles [13 tonnage per axle] with a clear allowable tonnage in Hadramawt, Ma'rib and Shabwa was considered a six-axle vehicle in Aden and Lahej, thus lowering the premised load and forcing loading and reloading cycles'.[32] 'Unload–weigh–reload' processes that had to be repeated within short distances (dozens of kilometres), accompanied by penalties imposed per tonne (often compounded by faulty scales) have deepened transporter discontent. To better understand the weighbridge inspection, Figure 6 below shows trucks undergoing inspection in Shoqra district in Abyan.

[31] Interview with a trucker, November 2025.
[32] Interview with a truck driver, December 2025.

Figure 6. Weighbridge in Shoqra, Abyan (2025)



Source: Google Earth, annotated by author.

In Houthi-held areas, the fine imposed for excess tonnage can be anything from YER 11,500 to YER 18,000. One trucker reported having to pay YER 483,000 (old currency notes used before the war) at Ma'bar International Weighbridge in Dhamar to resolve a 42-tonne excess issue. The allowed tonnage here is set at 64 tonnes, regardless of whether the vehicle is five or ten axles, not to mention that the weighbridge may be inaccurate by 2–4 tonnes. Meanwhile, at Kilo 16 checkpoint in Hodeida, refrigerated truck drivers must pay YER 18,000 for each excess tonne over the 40-tonne allowance.[33] In addition, drivers are usually obliged to pay weighbridge fees of approximately YER 10,000. One transporter angrily decried the system as 'unjust and unfair. What is the benefit of all axles then? Why do we not have a unified system?'[34]

Trucker mobilisation and regime responses

Across GoY-held and Houthi-held areas, truckers employ a range of low-visibility tactics aimed at challenging the exorbitant levies they face at checkpoints. These include media exposure, negotiations, and lobbying state institutions, local authorities and rebel leaders.[35] In some cases in GoY-held areas, peaceful protests, strikes and/or work stoppages are pursued, though these tend to be sporadic. In October 2022, transporter unions organised a coordinated strike that saw trucks and other vehicles (including those bearing fuel and qat loads) parked along the motorway in protest at the chain of levies (Abyan Media, 2022). The blockade quickly drew attention from the press and social media influencers, prompting the STC to cap levies at YER 100,000 and negotiate a one-time payment per governorate, instead of many payments within the same

[33] Interview with two truck drivers, February 2026.
[34] Interview with two truck drivers, February 2026.
[35] Interviews with truckers, November 2025–February 2026.

governorate. Smaller scale protests against checkpoint levy increases and ongoing abuse, as well as threats of further union action, have occurred on occasion in Aden, Lahej and Abyan. While some of these strikes and protests have gone on for more than a week, they nevertheless take place within a highly constrained security environment and risk retribution — whether in the form of detention, harassment or loss of access.

In Houthi-held areas, sustained open confrontation is much less likely to occur, though one notable exception occurred in April 2025, when truckers staged a three-week strike in the Anes and Mayfa'at A'ans districts of Dhamar governorate that forced the rebels to rescind a newly imposed levy billed as 'war effort' contributions (2 December News Agency, 2025). The strike also led to the replacement of a Houthi supervisor. In general, however, resistance tends to manifest in a more cautious manner, as transporters — along with other Yemenis residing in Houthi-held areas — hold justified fears of retaliation. Punitive measures include detention, torture, the cancellation of permits and targeted harassment, often accompanied by accusations of 'assisting the enemy', 'harming the national company', or 'cooperating with the Zionist–American coalition'.[36] Given this, more commonly reported actions include: Facebook posts documenting extortion practices and procedural abuse; protest gatherings; union statements; and formal complaint memos bearing a list of signatures. Drivers also coordinate with business intermediaries — such as trader committees and/or chambers of commerce — in order to transmit their grievances to the relevant authorities.

Overall, collective action — whether on the GoY or Houthi side — has met with only limited long-term success. While some minor concessions have been made, there has been little impact on broader trajectories, with those in power frequently backtracking on promises to remove levies or standardise fees across the political divide.

In GoY-held areas, directives to 'ban illegal levies' have often not been implemented, while checkpoints removed from one point along the corridor frequently reappear in adjacent nodes or under new labels. Such dynamics came into play when Presidential Leadership Council member and head of the Giants Brigades, Abdulrahman al-Muhrammi (better known as Abu Zara'ah), issued instructions in September 2024 to prevent 'any illegal collections' across security and military points in GoY-held, STC-dominated areas (Al-Ayyam, 2024). Regardless of such performative governance, continued levy increases and truck detentions are testament to the unresolved nature of the extraction regimes currently established in the corridor.

Ultimately, by accommodating performative governance and listening to empty promises about ending 'illegal fees', drivers may end up sustaining the very levy structures they rail against. In other words, checkpoint thinking adapts (e.g. rebrand levies, move a checkpoint) and the status quo endures. The very armed formations supposedly tasked (at least in part) with addressing checkpoint illegality are often the prime beneficiaries of the broken system. This reinforces the broader finding that circulation regulation is not pursued unilaterally, but tends to emerge from interactions between a variety of actors, including armed groups, the state and enforcement bodies. Thus, it is in many respects a managed process of pressure, constraint, adaptation and reproduction.

Any reform mechanism aimed at transforming the political economy of checkpoints must — if it is to be truly effective — tackle a long list of deep-seated challenges, including but

[36] Interviews with truckers, November 2025–February 2026.

not limited to: revenue dependence; unit autonomy; fragmented command; and patronage networks substitution tactics. In terms of the GoY-held areas of the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor, doing so requires salary harmonisation, a strategy to improve government's revenues by restoring oversight at the checkpoint level, reducing contesting claims to authority through security sector reform (which has been slowly advancing since January 2026), and wider cross-institutional dialogue initiative between the relevant ministries. At present, the prospects of these conditions being fulfilled appear somewhat remote.

YEMEN'S POLITICS OF CIRCULATION: IMPLICATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Across the political divide, Yemen's checkpoint ecology serves as a primary mechanism for armed actor financing, sustained mobilisation, territorial signalling, internal power projection and supply chain control, reinforcing both hierarchical and heterarchical patronage networks. Here, it is worth noting that a growing body of research in settings as diverse as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Afghanistan points to comparable findings, with control over circulation often central to political reordering, conflict reproduction and capital generation (Arjona, 2017; Mampilly, 2011; Schouten et al., 2021; Raeymaekers, 2014; Schouten, 2023).

The highly bureaucratised fiscal system observed in Houthi-held areas — characterised by unified collection, electronically monitored customs processes, receipt generation and a hierarchical remittance model — in many ways mirrors the insurgent governance regimes imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan and al-Shabab in Somalia. There, too, the dominant armed groups have institutionalised taxation, checkpoint governance and customs regulation into vertically controlled systems to survive, improve revenue and information flow, and consolidate power (Mansfield, 2016, 2023; Schouten, 2023). Moreover, similar to the case of the Taliban and al-Shabab, the Houthis' control over trade routes, commodity flows and customs hubs has become a central feature of both their wartime financing and perceived legitimacy, helping consolidate their territorial authority and state-like functions. This has contributed to strong command-and-control structures, regardless of the parallel informal levy collection present along the corridor.

The Taliban, al-Shabab and the Houthis, which have governed through more effective control of circulation, mobility and taxation, have all been perceived as more coherent and innovative than their respective legitimate governments. While they have all demonstrated that a degree of levy pricing predictability is possible, the Houthis have recently learned the importance of a few central hubs to collect taxes and customs, as the Taliban and al-Shabab have done. It is, however, unclear why weak governments cannot adapt and digitise as quickly as insurgent groups. While the Houthis' digitisation processes may have led to a clearer cost structure, traders and transporters continue to face extortionate levies and predatory extraction.

By contrast, the heterarchical fiscal lines seen in GoY-held areas are — like comparable areas in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo that nominally fall under central government control — characterised by contested authority, fragmentation and a layered, overlapping web of extraction woven by hybrid armed actors (Schouten, 2023). Political and security decisions, along with taxation practices, are distributed, negotiated and challenged. The result is multiple competing collectors of revenue, each of which has their own cost structure determined by the particular commander and locality involved. Here, the drive to capture revenue streams fuels competition, including among supposedly aligned factions. Thus, passage becomes largely negotiated, reinforcing bottom-up patronage networks, increasing fragmentation and potentially provoking repeated rounds of violence.

While the two systems differ in a number of key respects, both are strategically dependent on the Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor, with particular chokepoints emerging as high-yield spots. This dependency has served to entrench conflict dynamics, with both sides determined to maintain and expand control over circulation in the corridor. In effect, then, and contrary to the foundational logic of the

Westphalian state, control over circulation has become increasingly monetised by a web of actors, has compounded challenges to state authority, and has become as important as control over the means of production for revenue generation. Put another way, wartime Yemen does not demonstrate an absence of governance or lack of order, but rather the contestation of fiscal authority. On the one hand, consolidated insurgent authorities have imposed centralised, bureaucratised extraction, while on the other fragmented state authority and sovereignty has led to fragmented taxation and levy practices.

The rise of the politics of circulation in wartime Yemen has had a number of far-reaching impacts. First, in providing a lucrative new source of extraction and fiscal leverage, it has created (and consolidated) new centres of power and parallel patronage networks, thereby weakening the central state's revenue collection. The fracturing of institutional authority arising from the Houthis' armed rebellion and the STC's (now reversed) dominance in Aden has created a 'double extraction' environment. Rather than compliance with the rule of law, this landscape is largely characterised (particularly in areas nominally held by the GoY) by multiple actors asserting their independent right to collect levies along dispersed checkpoints. Amid such circumstances, circulation functions as a 'permission system' reliant on cumulative levies, delays, loss and risk. As a consequence, the mobility of goods and people is often unpredictable and structurally vulnerable to exploitation.

Second, state governance in wartime Yemen has shifted from largely rules-based administrative processes to hybrid coercive measures, not least when it comes to revenue collection. Here, it is not just the Houthis who have deepened authority contestation vis-à-vis the GoY by fulfilling sovereign functions related to taxation, regulatory enforcement and licensing. Until recently, the UAE-backed STC had imposed its own revenue collection techniques, further blurring the lines between formal revenue collection and predatory extraction models. The STC's weakening of institutional legitimacy through authority contestation served to further undermine and fracture the GoY from within, to the benefit of the Houthis.

Third, rent-oriented checkpoint war economies have led to increasingly fragmented security command-and-control structures. A complex patchwork of militias and checkpoints, coupled with overlapping mandates, has in many cases (particularly in GoY-held areas) led to incoherent vertical discipline. Individual commanders have sought to develop their own patronage networks and loyalty chains, allowing them to resist attempts at replacing them. This poses problems for the wider force these commanders belong to (as was the case for the STC's Abyan commander, who fought against his removal). Whoever controls the corridor of chokepoints can command the corresponding flows of goods, people and transactions, allowing them to selectively impose favourable terms. This has reshaped the incentive structures around hybrid armed groups, checkpoints and regulatory enforcement. As such, any durable attempt at policy reform must address the entrenched structural distortions that benefit certain wartime actors.

Fourth, the corridor's densely layered and parallel levy systems have negatively affected not only those whose livelihoods depend on transporting commodities, but the welfare of those reliant on such goods. Traders/transporters who resist excessive or duplicate payments risk severe sanctions, ranging from having their goods confiscated to being personally detained. Perishable and high-value commodities in particular (e.g. construction materials, medicines, pesticides, fuel derivatives) are subject to

considerable extraction attention. Ultimately, it is the end consumer who has to bear the brunt of these additional costs, with households paying a 'control-line premium' on their everyday goods. As a consequence, there may be wide variations in the cost of primary commodities depending on where the consumer resides. For instance, a 50 kg bag of wheat flour reportedly costs around US$25 in Houthi-held areas compared to US$20 in GoY-controlled areas. These price differentials disproportionately burden poorer households and remittance-dependent families, deepening multidimensional poverty, dependency pathways and structural inequalities.

Fifth, in terms of humanitarian access and service delivery programming, the widespread fragmentation of authority has made it much harder to pursue a more regionally based approach. Many humanitarian, international development and civil society organisations are now forced to conduct negotiations on both a node-by-node and corridor-wide basis, putting further strains on resource mobilisation at a time of declining international aid. The proliferation of levy collectors means relief supplies and development interventions are at increased risk of discretionary enforcement, undermining operational predictability, response timelines and safeguarding requirements.

In sum, road security and revenue collection, once seen as sovereign duties, have today become little more than arenas for predatory extraction and control. In a country already worn out by long years of conflict, this has come at the direct expense of civilian welfare, the credibility of state authority and private sector viability.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Fiscal governance in Yemen's Abyan–Aden–Lahej–al-Dhale'a–Dhamar corridor may, at first glance, appear to be little more than scattered checkpoint levy collection, often characterised by predatory extraction and/or corruption. In fact, it is better grasped as an organised sub-war, a political economy of movement within which competing actors are looking to reconstitute authority and advance their claims to legitimacy. Here, circulation is controlled and monetised through layered demands that encompass a variety of passage fees, enforcement penalties and informal extractions.

As this paper has demonstrated, the rent-based incentives embedded in these extractive arrangements have led to a landscape of increasingly fragmented authority, in the process reshaping patronage networks, supply chains and war economy dynamics. In many of the corridor's chokepoints, mandates overlap, regulatory reform is discretionary, command and control is dispersed, and state authority is tenuous to non-existent. The fact that a multitude of armed actors now benefit from this status quo points to how deeply entrenched it has become, blurring the distinction between official revenue collection and informal predatory extraction. While the progress the Houthis made in digitising and codifying levy collection shows that insurgent groups can adapt faster than governments, the digitisation experience may inspire the GoY to better uphold its responsibilities, regain its authority, improve its finances and address the everyday war economy.

The consequences of the checkpoint political economy should not be underestimated, whether at the local or national level. Layered and parallel extraction regimes have increased trade and logistics costs, deepened structural inequalities, distorted markets and driven up commodity prices across lines of political control. To open a window of durable peacebuilding, the governance of roads must be seen as a strategic entry point for state building and authority formation.

Only by gradually restoring the state's monopoly over violence can Yemen's many parallel modalities of extraction be reduced and, ultimately, dismantled. With this in mind, any strategy that fails to acknowledge the micro-political economy of checkpoints will inevitably misread how authority is practised locally, including why patronage networks persist even when state institutions appear administratively intact. In the short-to-medium term, potential avenues that could be pursued by (especially) the GoY and supportive international actors include a concerted push to reduce discretionary enforcement authority; a review of abused revenue collection laws; the standardisation of corridor procedures; and the revival of local-level accountability mechanisms. More specifically, the following policy implications offer a potential starting point for change:

- **The GoY (via the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Local Administration) could digitise tax collection in the areas it controls**, applying anti-capture and transparency safeguards to boost revenues, and using payroll harmonisation to cut unit-level fiscal autonomy, thereby dismantling checkpoint economy incentives.
- **The GoY could launch a review of all legally mandated national and sub-national taxes**, with the aim of abolishing any mechanisms that might be open to abuse, such as the weighbridge tax.

- **The GoY could publish transparent tariff schedules** that can be used to replace the negotiated chains of payment that currently apply.
- **The GoY could reduce the number and density of taxation checkpoints** in order to streamline checkpoint governance.
- **The Houthis could halt unpredictable regulatory changes that** disrupt supply chains, increase business risks, and undermine the private sector's resilience.
- **Donors could consider extending technical support to the Yemen's transporters' union, truckers' syndicate and chambers of commerce**, including offering legal aid for detained truck drivers and diplomatic support for reforms.
- **Civil society organisations could convene a non-politicised dialogue process around reducing and harmonising taxation** that brings together customs officials, business and transport associations, civilian and security sector representatives, and civil society.
- **The World Bank and International Monetary Fund could provide technical assistance to the Central Bank of Yemen concerning the macro-fiscal coordination of checkpoint reform**, thereby ensuring illegitimate rents are eliminated rather than simply redistributed.
- **International actors could support the current efforts being pursued by Saudi Arabia regarding the stabilisation of civil and military payrolls**, as this will help weaken patronage networks and improve compliance among security and military personnel.

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