

## Increased civil unrest and worsening humanitarian situation in southern governorates

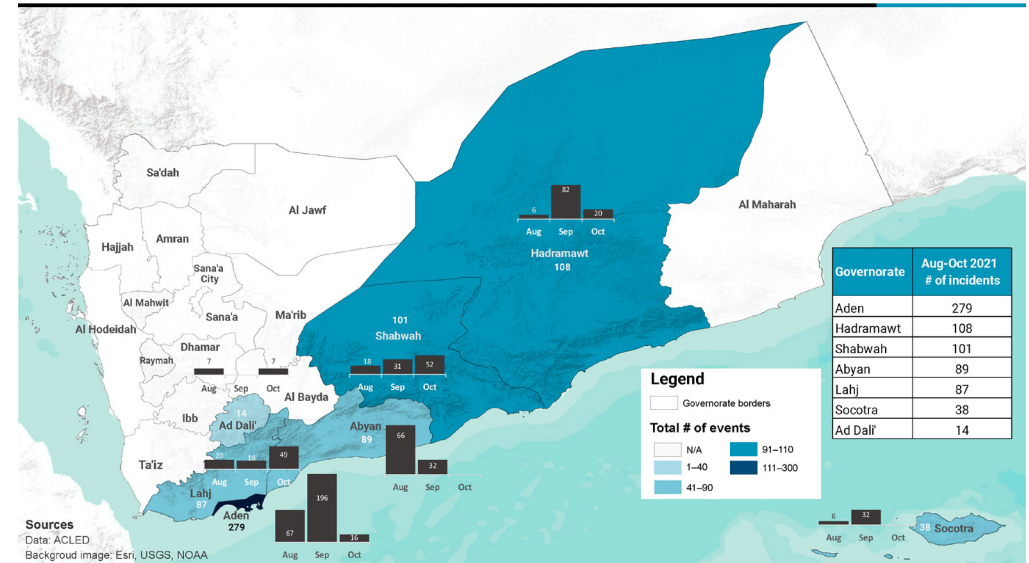
### SUMMARY

Since mid-September 2021, the southern governorates of Yemen have been experiencing a surge in public demonstrations that often lead to street violence. This report focuses on governorates nominally under the control of the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen (IRG) but de facto under Southern Transitional Council (STC) rule. These are Abyan, Ad Dali', Aden, Hadramawt, Lahj, and Shabwah. The deterioration of living conditions primarily drives the civil unrest in southern governorates. The depreciation of the Yemeni rial and the resulting increase in the prices of commodities have largely affected people's capacity to sustain their basic needs, including food. Increased power outages, disruptions to water provision, and a collapsing health system have also largely affected people's wellbeing, and demands for better services remain at the centre of the protests. Local governance in the southern and western governorates remains fragmented, with tensions increasing between the IRG and the STC, including over the lack of progress in implementing the Riyadh Agreement. The de facto control of the STC in the south and the lack of presence of IRG ministers in Aden further hamper the IRG's ability to provide services and control the escalating situation. The Houthis' advances towards Marib city can compromise IRG legitimacy in the south of Yemen, likely leading to more tensions with the STC. Such conflict further affects the economy and exposes the population to protection risks and higher food insecurity levels.

### Limitations

- There is limited information on the social and protection impacts of the civil unrest in the south and in Yemen in general.
- There is limited information on any displacement resulting from civil unrest and the deterioration of security in southern governorates.
- Since the second half of September, the focus of media and other reporting mechanisms has shifted to other places, such as Marib and the west coast of Yemen (Al Hodeidah and Taiz), which constricts open sources on the south.

### Number of civil unrest incidents between August-October 2021



Source: ACLED. See full map on page 5

### About this report

**Aim:** this report aims to provide information on the economic and political drivers and the social and protection impacts of the increasing civil unrest in southern governorates to explain how the situation could evolve and possible humanitarian impacts.

**Methods:** this report is based on the desk review of relevant literature on southern Yemen political dynamics (historical and present) and on media and social media monitoring, key informant interviews, and the analysis of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project data about protests and riots in southern governorates.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

### Civil unrest and security forces' response

The depreciation of the Yemeni rial has led to commodity price hikes and further deterioration of public services. In response to worsening living conditions, a new wave of protests started in Yemen's southern governorates in mid-August 2021. As at September, protesters have blocked roads, attacked government premises, and thrown stones and other materials at security forces. Especially in Aden, shops have had to close. Many business activities in major southern cities have been interrupted, preventing people from accessing household supplies and getting income (Al Jazeera 16/09/2021 and 15/09/2021). Civil unrest incidents vary in terms of frequency, popular participation, and degree of violence across southern governorates. In September, incidents appear to have peaked in Aden governorate, with 196 incidents of civil unrest recorded, followed by Hadramawt with 82. In October, the Shabwah governorate witnessed more than 50 civil unrest incidents (ACLED accessed 02/11/2021).

The response of security forces has differed across governorates. In Aden, the response has been more heavy-handed, with reports of killings and injuries of a number of protesters from 14–16 September (Al Jazeera 16/09/2021). The different responses could be partly attributed to the political dynamics within the southern context, such as the relationship between different political partners, including Islah, IRG, and STC. In general, violence has been witnessed during all protest incidents in the southern governorates, with more than 60 fatalities reported in September–October (FEWS NET 06/10/2021). In mid-September, the STC President declared a state of emergency across all southern governorates. This led to the further deterioration of relations between the IRG and the STC in the context of the non-implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. On 28 September, the Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed and members of his cabinet returned to the interim capital in Aden to take hold of the situation and as a first step of reviving the stalled Riyadh Agreement process. It was the first time the Yemeni cabinet had returned to the capital since March 2021 (Arab News 28/09/2021).

### Political dynamics across Yemen's southern governorates

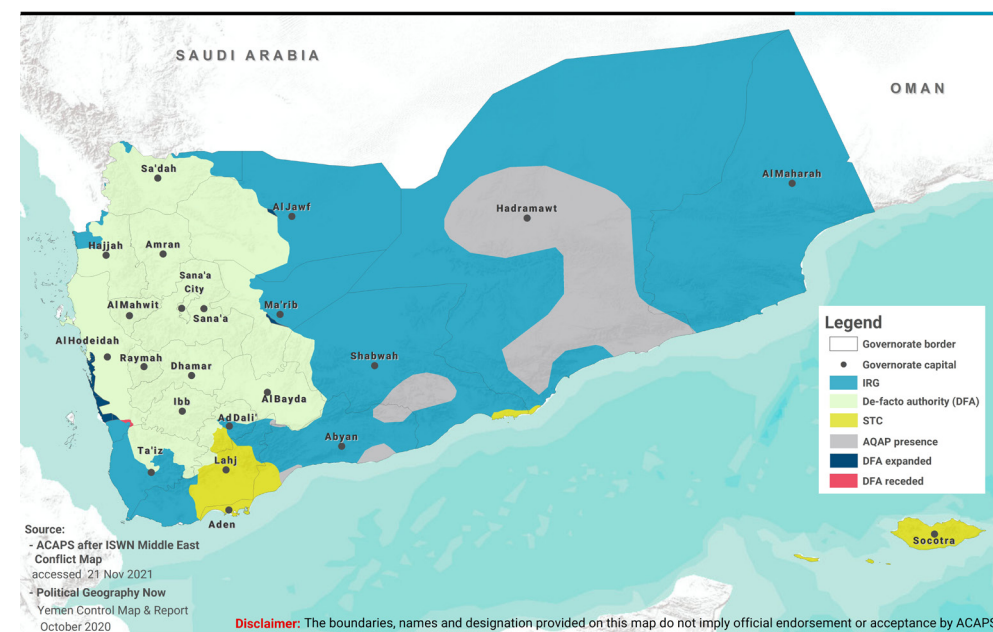
Political dynamics across Yemen's southern governorates are defined by the fraught relationship between the IRG and the STC. Despite IRG nominal control, the STC is in de facto control of the governorate and interim capital of Aden, the governorates of Ad Dali' and Lahj, and parts of the Abyan and Socotra governorates. They also have a significant presence in Hadramawt and Shabwah. The absence of IRG ministers in Aden and the inability of the

government to deal more effectively with the situation across the south of Yemen have been some of the main reasons behind the deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions in Aden.

In late 2019, the IRG and the STC signed the Riyadh Agreement through the mediation efforts of Saudi Arabia. The main aim of the agreement was to prevent both sides from resorting to violence against each other and unite the anti-Houthi block. Further provisions sought the participation of the STC and other southern Yemeni political actors in a power-sharing cabinet, the joint appointment of government officials in the southern governorates, and the eventual amalgamation of both sides' military forces. Since then – and after a renegotiation of the agreement in the summer of 2020 – its implementation has been stalled. The situation has caused IRG ministers to leave their posts from the interim capital of Aden for long periods at a time because of insecurity.

The imminent threat posed by the advancement of Houthi forces against Marib and their recent inroads into the northern part of Shabwah governorate have also contributed to the worsening of relations between the IRG and the STC and might be instrumental in the lack of progress in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

### Areas of control as at 21 November 2021



Source: ACAPS, ISWN (accessed 21/11/2021). See full map on page 6.

## Drivers of civil unrest

### Yemeni rial depreciation

One of the main drivers of civil unrest across the southern governorates has been the continued depreciation of the Yemeni rial used in IRG-controlled territories. Rial banknotes have depreciated from YER 691 for USD 1 on 1 January 2021 to YER 1,535 for USD 1 in mid-November. The depreciation has rapidly accelerated since September (YETI accessed 20/11/2021). One of the main causes has been the continued fighting between the IRG and the Houthis over the resource-rich governorate and city of Marib. By mid-November, Houthi forces had claimed control over all but two of Marib governorate's districts, sparking fears of an imminent takeover of Marib city and already causing the inflow of IDPs from the rural parts of the governorate into its capital. This situation has led to a significant loss of trust in the IRG-run economy, fuelled by fears that IRG-issued currency will no longer be accepted under a Houthi administration. As a result, people living in Marib have been trying to exchange whatever savings they hold in IRG-issued rials into hard currency or even bulk-buying household commodities (Sana'a Center 13/10/2021). The rial depreciation has also affected money transfers between the two areas of control between IRG and DFA. On 25 September, transfer fees exceeded the value of the transfer sum. For example, sending YER 100,000 from Aden to Sana'a would cost YER 102,000 in fees (Al Quds Al Arabi 24/10/2021).

### Commodity price hikes

Between September 2020 and September 2021, the Minimum Food Basket price in IRG-controlled areas increased by 66%. Prices of commodities in southern governorates have been affected by the depreciation of the Yemeni rial and have been increasing particularly since January 2020, when the Houthis banned the use of the new Yemeni rial banknotes in their areas. The ban resulted in two different exchange rates, with the rial in IRG areas increasingly depreciating. Fuel prices have also been increasing; between January–September 2021, the price of diesel on the official market increased by 85% – and by 136% between September 2020 and September 2021 (FAO accessed 10/11/2021). The increased prices and the depreciation of the rial, compounded by the disruption in the payment of public salaries, have decreased purchasing power for many households, increasing the need for assistance to cover basic needs.

## Public services provision worsening

Even before the onset of the current conflict in 2014, the provision of public services in Yemen was already rudimentary. The southern governorates were particularly affected by the lack of water provision and frequent electricity cuts in the middle of the summer heatwaves (OCHA 05/09/2021). It was common, for example, to experience ten-hour power cuts in Aden at the height of electricity consumption in May or September. Since August 2021, conditions have markedly worsened, with reported outages lasting more than 11 hours daily (SA24 13/09/2021). Equally, in the absence of the essential maintenance of critical infrastructure since the start of the war, public services (including healthcare during the pandemic) have deteriorated even further, bringing both infrastructure and local communities to a breaking point. Together with economic concerns, demands for better public service provision has remained central in recent protests and in the ensuing civil unrest (Euro-Med Monitor 19/09/2021; FEWS NET 06/10/2021). Local Yemeni councils, which are key institutions of governance in the country, are responsible for providing essential services and maintaining public infrastructure, including hospitals, water networks, and internal roads in cities and villages. Since 2014, their governing capability has dramatically weakened because the central government's financial resources have been depleted and redirected to other priorities such as food import financing. The direct support by the central government of local councils was cut in half in 2015 (Sana'a Center 10/09/2016).

## Humanitarian impact and protection consequences

The depletion of sources of income and inadequate access to services are major drivers of food insecurity and malnutrition throughout the country. As at 10 November 2021, an estimated 80% of Yemeni people have lost their livelihoods and sources of income, pushing between 17.5–21.6 million people into extreme poverty (UNICEF accessed 10/11/2021; OCHA 21/02/2021). Civil unrest in southern cities and towns has affected economic, humanitarian, and protection spheres. The situation has become a vicious cycle. People protest because of poor economic conditions, causing markets and shops to close and disrupting livelihoods and access to commodities; the resulting economic stress to households leads to further frustration and protests (ACAPS 05/11/2021). A significant number of the workforce in Yemen are either government civil servants or government contractors. The latter's contracts have either been terminated or are about to expire soon, while the former have not received their salaries for several months. As a result, both government civil servants and government contractors cannot meet their basic household needs. Many families have resorted to reducing the number of daily meals from three to one, eating only dates or bread daily because they are cheap and available, or in general eating poor-quality imported food because they are affordable (ACAPS' interview with key informants 03/11/2021).

## RISK

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The spiralling depreciation of the Yemeni rial, accompanied by a total collapse of services and widespread insecurity and fuelled by the Houthis' takeover of Marib city, results in the total depletion of households' assets and increases needs for protection and food security assistance.

### Triggers:

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- The Houthis take over Marib city and its resources.
- The Central Bank of Yemen in Aden lacks foreign currency and fails to implement economic measures to slow down the depreciation of the Yemeni rial.
- The STC pulls out of the Riyadh Agreement, declares self-rule, and increases military presence with the support of the United Arab Emirates.
- Negative public opinion against the IRG and the STC in different governorates increases.

### Rationale

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The fall of Marib city and the remaining two districts of the Marib governorate under IRG control (including the Safer oil facilities) to Houthi forces would have a detrimental impact on both political and humanitarian conditions in Yemen's southern governorates. Marib remains a significant source of revenue for the IRG and is the last northern governorate capital under its control. Its loss would almost certainly plunge the IRG into a political crisis, which the STC can exploit further for political gains. The argument that southern Yemeni leaders would use is that the IRG has lost its legitimacy because it does not fully control any governorates in northern Yemen and that they are the only legitimate force in the southern part of the country. This situation would very likely lead to the withdrawal of the STC ministers participating in the government and ultimately to the collapse of the Riyadh Agreement. Violence in areas in the Abyan and Shabwah governorates where IRG and STC forces have engaged against each other in the past would flare up, posing renewed challenges for humanitarian access in these parts of the country and likely causing new IDP flows. IDP movements into southern governorates from Marib would increase significantly, causing tensions with local populations both for political reasons and because of stresses on local resources. Political tensions between the IRG and the STC can also directly affect the reception of IDPs into local communities in southern governorates.

The continued battle for Marib and the uncertainty stemming from it are already responsible for some of the IRG's economic woes. If the government loses control over Marib, the depreciation of the currency in IRG-controlled areas will accelerate, putting renewed pressure on already stressed household finances. Additional commodity price increases are to be expected, placing more households in need. Similarly, the loss of revenues from Marib would render it impossible for the IRG to either pay public and military sector salaries or provide any tangible improvements in public services. This situation can fuel another cycle of civil unrest and violence across the southern governorates, especially in the cities of Aden and Al Mukalla. Coupled with the anticipated deterioration of relations between the IRG and the STC, this cycle of civil unrest and violence can lead to further insecurity and a repetition of rioting against the government that in the past has forced IRG officers and ministers out of the interim capital for months.

### Impact

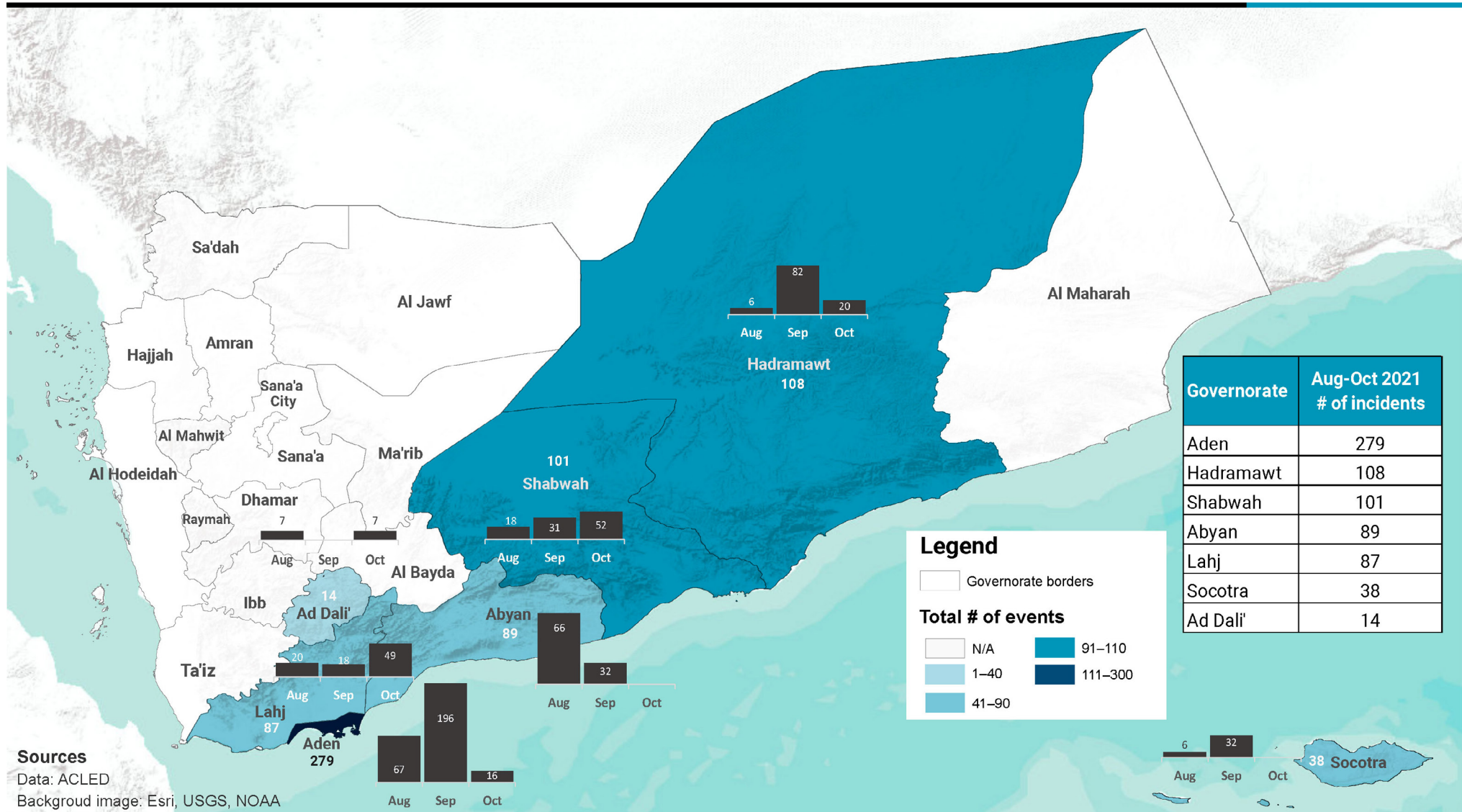
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A quick deterioration of the economy (resulting in reduced purchasing power) and the security situation affecting services and livelihoods lead to households exhausting their assets and adopting negative coping strategies. Livelihoods are disrupted, with more people losing their jobs and falling below the poverty line. Food security levels quickly worsen, while access to other basic needs (such as healthcare and education) are likely deprioritised. Traders' difficulties in accessing foreign currency and the decreased ability of the population to afford basic commodities result in the import of lower-quality food. This situation causes the further escalation of food security needs, particularly for nutrition assistance.

Increased violence causes many civilian casualties. The already struggling health system is quickly overwhelmed with people injured. COVID-19 awareness decreases, and safety measures are largely overlooked, leading to a new wave of cases and further collapsing health facilities. Reduced health screenings, compounded by reduced access to water and hygiene practices, likely result in severe outbreaks of communicable diseases.

Widespread insecurity leads to the displacement of people, resulting in their reduced ability to respond to shocks as people would already have exhausted most of their resources. Aside from needs for food, cash, shelter, healthcare, and WASH services, particularly for IDPs, the overall population faces high protection risks. These risks include exposure to physical violence, arbitrary detention, loss of property, and increased tensions within the households and among communities. The humanitarian access and space is further challenged and likely diminished by armed conflict. Humanitarian operations are also predominantly hampered by already existing bureaucratic restrictions imposed by various local authorities.

## Number of protests per governorate between August–October 2021



### Areas of control as at 21 November 2021

