



January 28, 2022

## **Internet shutdowns in Yemen: telecommunications infrastructure is not a military target**

Yemen's telecommunication infrastructure must not be targeted during military operations.

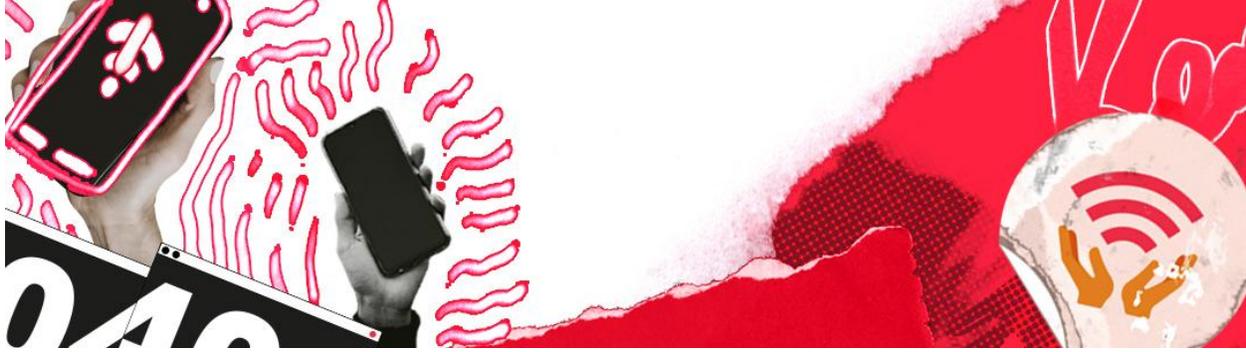
We, the undersigned civil society organizations and members of the #KeepItOn Coalition — a global network of human rights organizations that work to end internet shutdowns — strongly condemn the [recent targeting and destruction](#) of telecommunication infrastructure in Hodeidah by Saudi- and UAE-led airstrikes. These unjustified attacks [claimed](#) the lives of hundreds of people while others remain missing in the rubble. Survivors have been unable to communicate with, or confirm the wellbeing of, those targeted.

On Friday, January 21, 2022, activists and technology experts [reported](#) that internet access had dropped significantly across the country, except for people using internet service provider, AdenNet, in the region of Aden, which was not impacted by the shutdown. The telecom facility which was heavily affected by the airstrike connects Yemen to the FALCON international cable, thereby cutting off millions of people from the internet. The shutdown lasted for about three and a half days with full internet access [completely restored](#) on January 24 at approximately 01:00 local time.

These [incessant attacks](#) on internet access further exacerbate the plight of the people of Yemen who have been trapped in this prolonged conflict. Internet shutdowns have deprived millions of Yemenis of their right to communicate and be in touch with their families and loved ones, to access and exchange information, and importantly, to tell the world about their stories and experiences. Since the beginning of the war in 2015, internet and telecom facilities have been a battleground for exerting control between warring parties — the Houthi rebels and a Saudi-led coalition. Internet access continues to be arbitrarily tampered with, leaving the people of Yemen disconnected from the rest of the world and making it extremely difficult for journalists and human rights defenders to carry out their work.

## **Internet shutdowns serve as cover for human rights abuses**

One thing is clear: internet shutdowns imposed by warring parties during conflicts exacerbate humanitarian crises and often aim to leverage the absence of internet access to perpetrate, with impunity, human rights violations against people. The United Nations in 2019, warned that the conflict in Yemen remains “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.” [Hundreds of thousands](#) of Yemenis are dead, over [4 million are displaced](#), 16 million suffer from hunger, and 5 million more are



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on the brink of famine, [according to](#) the U.N. refugee agency.

### **Yemen’s history of internet shutdowns and censorship**

According to Access Now’s Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (STOP), Yemen has accounted for at least 26 incidents of shutdowns between 2016 and 2020, some of which occurred as a result of targeted attacks by the warring parties in the conflict. In 2017 for instance, network disruptions [increased](#), most likely due to targeted attacks perpetrated by warring factions. In 2020, damage to a submarine fiber optic cable cut nearly 80 percent of internet capacity in Yemen, with many sources attributing the shutdown to sabotage by the Houthis, a rebel group involved in the conflict. Irrespective of the perpetrators, these shutdowns are in violation of the fundamental rights of the people of Yemen to express and access information in order to keep safe amid the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged conflict in the country.

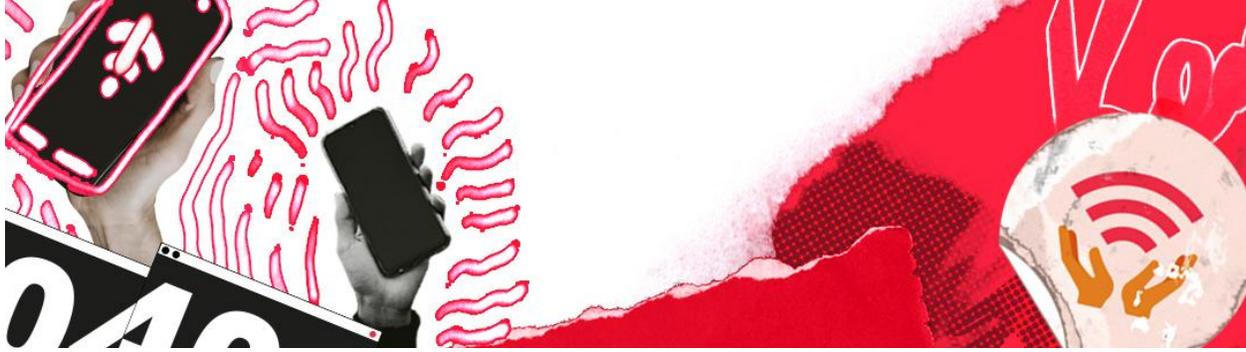
### **Internet shutdown violates international human rights law**

Internet shutdowns violate fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and the right to peaceful assembly, among other civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights guaranteed by national, regional, and international frameworks.

Although Saudi Arabia is not party to some of these frameworks, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the legally-binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), by virtue of its membership in the United Nations Saudi Arabia is obliged under international law to uphold and respect these universal human rights including the freedoms of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information — offline and online. It is therefore imperative for Saudi Arabia and other members of the United Nations to refrain from measures such as the recent attack on Yemen’s telecom infrastructure which violates the fundamental rights of people in the country.

### **Access to the internet and telecommunications is a lifeline in times of crises**

The internet, social media platforms, and other telecommunications play a critical role in society, especially during times of social and political unrest, crises, and conflict. They provide spaces for communicating, public debate, seeking public information, reporting and documenting events, and holding governments accountable for their actions. Journalists, human rights defenders, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders count on the internet and digital platforms to monitor,



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document and report on conflicts, and provide emergency support and resources during health and humanitarian crises.

### **Recommendations**

We urge **all parties to the conflict in Yemen** to:

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- 1. Stop targeting internet and telecommunication infrastructure causing communication blackouts in the country during the conflict;**

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  - 2. Immediately facilitate conditions to enable the protection and security of all telecommunication and other civilian facilities in the country;**

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  - 3. Depoliticize the telecommunications sector to remain neutral from warring parties as well as armed groups while recognizing internet access as an enabler of other fundamental human rights and needs at all times; and**

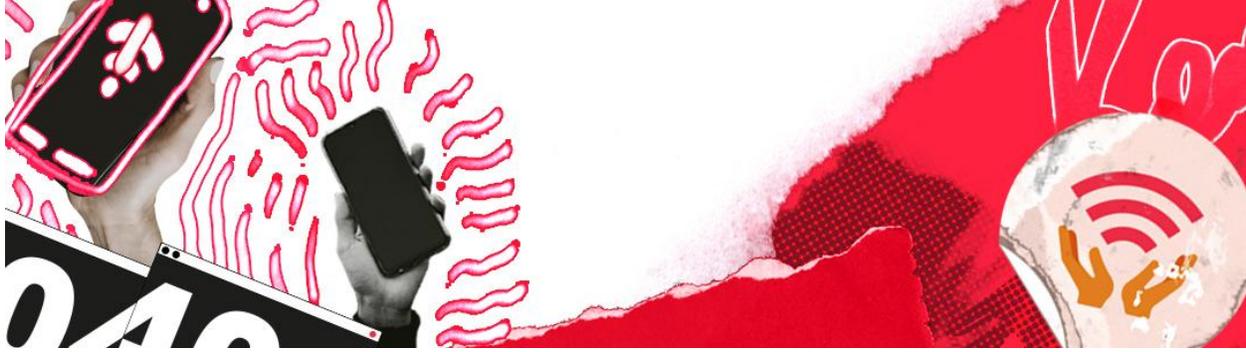
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  - 4. Take necessary steps to increase and expand internet connectivity throughout Yemen by allowing internet service providers and telecom operators unfettered access to internet cables operating in the country.**

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To the **U.N. General Assembly**:

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- 1. Establish an independent and impartial mechanism to investigate and report on violations of applicable international human rights, including those impacted by internet shutdowns, and international humanitarian law and take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.**
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Sincerely,

## ORGANIZATIONS

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Access Now  
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)  
Africa Open Data and Internet Research  
Foundation (AODIRF)  
African Freedom of Expression Exchange (AFEX)  
ARTICLE19  
Business & Human Rights Resource Centre  
(BHRRC)  
Common Cause Zambia  
Committee to Protect Journalists  
Digital Rights Kashmir  
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)  
International Press Centre (IPC)  
Internet Protection Society, Russia  
Kandoo

Kijiji Yeetu  
Manushya Foundation  
Media Institute for Southern Africa (MISA  
Zimbabwe)  
Miaan Group  
Mnemonic  
Organization of the Justice Campaign  
Sassoufit collective  
SMEX  
The Tor Project  
Ubunteam  
WITNESS  
YODET

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