



Rethinking Peace in Yemen

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? A COVID-19 outbreak has injected new energy into diplomatic efforts to end Yemen's regionalised civil war, now in its sixth year. But the parties remain stubbornly opposed to compromise and the UN's two-party mediation framework no longer provides a realistic pathway to peace given the country's political and military fragmentation.

Why does it matter? The war has killed more than 112,000 people and has left 24 million in need of some form of humanitarian assistance. The pandemic could further decimate a population lacking access to health care and particularly vulnerable due to malnutrition. The worst may be prevented if the war can be halted.

What should be done? The Yemeni government and Huthis should right-size expectations regarding a political settlement and accept inclusion of other political and armed factions in UN-led negotiations. The UN Security Council should draft a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire and inclusive settlement and table it if the parties stick to their positions.

Executive Summary

After five years of war, the parties to the Yemen conflict face a stark choice: accept a ceasefire and an imperfect political settlement, particularly in light of fears of a growing COVID-19 outbreak, or continue a war that will produce more human suffering but no clear nationwide military victory for any group. A political settlement between the internationally recognised government and the Huthis – the de facto authorities in Sanaa – might once have been able to end the war and return the country to a political transition. But subsequent shifts in the military balance, political and territorial fragmentation, and heavy-handed regional intervention have changed peacemaking requirements. A more inclusive UN-brokered, multiparty settlement is needed, along with interim governance arrangements that avoid rapid recentralisation of power in Sanaa to the benefit of just one or two groups.

One of the biggest barriers to a settlement is an outdated international approach to ending the war. The government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi holds that any deal must build on the foundations of an April 2015 UN Security Council Resolution (2216) that it interprets as a form of legal summons for the Huthis to surrender, hand over heavy weapons and allow the government to return to rule Yemen from Sanaa. UN-brokered talks in Kuwait in 2016 produced a draft agreement built around Resolution 2216 that has become the framework for subsequent negotiations. The agreement would have led to a power-sharing arrangement that included a minority Huthi role in government and opened a pathway to national elections.

Much has changed since 2016. The Huthis have consolidated their control over the north west and are threatening the government's last stronghold in the north – in Marib. They have become increasingly confident of their hold on power in Sanaa and now want a deal that bypasses the Hadi government and recognises de facto realities on the ground, which they believe favour their rule. Aware of its territorial weakness, the government has clung to its legal status and become increasingly resistant to any agreement that might provide its rivals with legitimacy.

Other shifts on the ground have further complicated matters. Yemen is now roughly divided into five cantons of political and military control: the Huthi-controlled northern highlands; government-aligned areas in Marib, al-Jawf, northern Hadramawt, al-Mahra, Shebwa, Abyan and Taiz city; the pro-separatist Southern Transition Council-dominated territories in Aden and its hinterland; districts along the Red Sea coast where the Joint Resistance Forces are the chief power; and coastal Hadramawt, where local authorities prevail. The war rages along multiple fronts, each with its own political dynamics and lines of command and control. Local groups, some of which are loosely in the government camp but in practice function independently, reject the idea that they may have to cede newfound autonomy to a recentralised government, as the UN's Kuwait framework suggests and both the Hadi government and Huthis would like to happen, albeit under different rule. Absent their buy-in, a peace settlement will not be sustainable.

A successful political process will require two things. First, the parties will need to be persuaded that it is in their own interest to abandon maximalist demands. The military balance favours the Huthis, but not to the extent that the group might think. They appear to believe they can broker a deal to end the war directly with Riyadh,

but they are fighting an array of adversaries who are unlikely to accept a settlement that does not protect their core interests or to honour one simply because Riyadh demands it.

An outright military victory for any party, including the Huthis, is highly unlikely. Moreover, the Hadi government, however weak, is still Yemen's internationally recognised authority. For these reasons, the Huthis should accept that a UN-brokered deal will not simply transfer authority to them and convert territorial realities into international recognition of their rule. In turn, the government should accept that its demands for a return to power in Sanaa through an effective Huthi surrender are wholly unrealistic. For its part, Saudi Arabia will not be able to declare victory in Yemen as leaders in Riyadh may hope. Its demand that the Huthis decouple from Tehran may have to be a longer-term goal rather than a condition of a political settlement.

Secondly, Yemen's political and territorial fragmentation demands a rethink of the negotiation framework and the substance of an achievable agreement. There is growing international and Yemeni consensus that the two-party settlement the UN has attempted to broker over the course of the war is unlikely to translate into lasting peace. It is increasingly clear that the UN must open talks up, at a minimum to ensure the buy-in of powerful groups such as the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which are capable of upending any settlement. The current approach also leaves out tribal groups, local authorities and a range of political parties, women's and youth groups and other civil society actors whose support will be invaluable in sustaining an agreement.

The content of an agreement will need to address new realities and acknowledge past mistakes. Local groups prize autonomy won over the course of the war and will resist a rush to recentralise the state in Sanaa. Failure to address the social and economic grievances that sparked Yemen's 2011 popular uprising, and contributed to the Huthis' rise, would invite future instability and war.

All combatants can point to reasons for delaying a turn toward peace. The Huthis appear to believe that time is on their side. But the factors that have forced Saudi Arabia into a more conciliatory stance – financial pressures at home amplified by the COVID-19 fallout and collapsing oil income, and the desire to shed a war that has damaged the kingdom's standing with Western allies – may not last. As the battle for Marib – reignited in early 2020 – shows, the Huthis face stiff local resistance with or without Saudi intervention. The Hadi government may be tempted to wait for a decisive shift in its favour, driven by Saudi support. But by resisting negotiations, it risks further erosion of its position on the ground and being labelled a spoiler by outside powers it depends on for its status as the recognised authority. Anti-Huthi groups that are not aligned with the government, such as the STC and Joint Resistance Forces, may see a longer conflict as an opportunity to create facts on the ground that improve their bargaining position. But doing so would mean gambling that regional support will continue – an uncertain wager, particularly during a pandemic.

At one time or another over the course of this war, each side has overestimated its ability to achieve maximalist aims, only to suffer major setbacks. Finding a mutually acceptable deal today will not lead to any party's preferred settlement, but will almost certainly be better than what may be available after years more of conflict.

**New York/Washington/Amman/Abu Dhabi/Riyadh/Muscat/
Aden/Sanaa/Marib/Brussels, 2 July 2020**

Rethinking Peace in Yemen

I. Introduction

Yemen's political order has been upended by, sequentially, a 2011 popular uprising that removed the country's long-time president, the overthrow of the interim government that succeeded him, civil war and foreign intervention. The country has fractured into multiple cantons of political and military control, each tied to an outside power.

The regionalised war has its roots in a failed political transition and a partially successful coup.¹ In September 2014, the Huthis (aka Ansar Allah), a Zaydi revivalist movement turned insurgent group, partnered with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh to seize control of Sanaa from the interim government of President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi.² Neighbouring Saudi Arabia feared a complete takeover of the country by what it saw as a surrogate for Iran. In March 2015, it launched a military intervention to restore Hadi to power. The U.S., the UK and France declined to join the Saudi-led military coalition but provided Riyadh with intelligence, arms and political cover.

In April of that year, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2216, which largely endorsed Saudi Arabia's and the Hadi government's war aims: a Huthi surrender and handover of weapons, and Hadi's return to Sanaa to complete the political transition he had been overseeing since Saleh stepped down as part of the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative in 2011.

Full implementation of Resolution 2216 has become increasingly unlikely, as temporary alliances formed since 2015 have unravelled and the power balance has shifted in favour of an array of forces spread across roughly five cantons of political/military control. These include the Huthi-held north west; government-aligned territory in al-Jawf, Marib, Shebwa, northern Hadramawt and al-Mahra, along with Taiz city; Southern Transitional Council-controlled Aden, Lahj and al-Dhale; coastal Hadramawt, under the control of local military authorities; and territory in coastal Taiz and Hodeida, controlled by the non-aligned Joint Resistance Forces under the command of Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew, Tareq Saleh. Parties are fighting for additional territory along six major fronts, each operating under autonomous lines of command and control.

¹ For further background, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°45, *Yemen at War*, 27 March 2015; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

² Zaydism is a branch of Shiism distinct from Jaafarism, also known as Twelver Shiism, the branch found in contemporary Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. Zaydi religious elites, so-called Hashemites who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, ruled North Yemen under a system known as the imamate until the 1962 republican revolution. Zaydis represent approximately one third of Yemen's population. Zaydis are based in the northern highlands, with their main strongholds in Saada, Hajja and Dammar governorates, as well as the capital, Sanaa. The majority of Yemenis elsewhere are Shafei, following one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. For additional background on Zaydism, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014.

The Huthis are arguably the new power balance's main beneficiaries. They have consolidated their position as de facto authorities in the north west since killing their erstwhile ally, former President Saleh, when he attempted to break from their partnership in December 2017. With some support from Iran, they control the north west and compete for territory in surrounding majority-Sunni/Shafei areas that have historically resisted rule by the predominantly Zaydi highlands, including: along the Red Sea coast, in central governorates like Marib and al-Bayda, in Yemen's industrial hub of Taiz city, and along the old border between North and South Yemen (which were separate states until 1990). Arguably, the Huthis' most important front is along the border with Saudi Arabia. There they fight a ground campaign, including mutual territorial incursions, against primarily Yemeni forces that the kingdom pays for and oversees, and engage in mutual cross-border bombardments, with Huthi missiles and drones on one side and Saudi airstrikes on the other.

On the anti-Huthi side, the assortment of forces that battled the rebels in the war's early days under a nominal government umbrella has fragmented. In August 2019, the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) seized control of Aden after battles with the president's local allies, bringing the south to the brink of its own civil war.³ The fighting brought into the open differences not just between Hadi and the STC, but also between Hadi and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Abu Dhabi has long been frustrated by the perceived influence in the government of Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party and one of Hadi's most important allies, and has supported numerous anti-Islah military factions across Yemen.⁴

The STC holds most of Aden, Lahj, al-Dhale and Hadibu, the capital of the Arabian Sea island of Soqatra, and has a significant foothold in the west of Abyan, all areas in the once-independent south. UAE-backed military authorities in the port city of Mukalla control most of coastal Hadramawt, an oil-rich governorate in the east (also part of former South Yemen), and are principally concerned with maintaining local autonomy from both the government and the STC. The Joint Resistance Forces, formed by the UAE but now nominally overseen by Saudi Arabia and commanded by Tareq Saleh, a one-time Huthi ally, control most of coastal Taiz governorate and the road linking this area with the Huthi-held Red Sea port city of Hodeida.

Elsewhere, government-aligned forces and their tribal and local allies rely on support from Saudi Arabia. They control parts of al-Jawf and Marib governorates to the east of Sanaa, as well as large parts of several southern governorates, including Shebwa, Abyan, Hadramawt and al-Mahra. Government-affiliated forces also control much of the centre of Taiz city, Yemen's industrial hub, and some territory in north-western Hajja, which borders Saudi Arabia. Both al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)

³ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°71, *After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape*, 30 August 2019.

⁴ Islah, or the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, is a political party formed after the 1990 unification of North and South Yemen to compete in national elections. It is often described as Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood, and does have a strong Brotherhood component. But it is mainly a network of mutual interests formed around a coalition of conservative Sunni tribal leaders, business people and clerics, not all of whom subscribe to the Brotherhood's transnational worldview, which hopes to make Islamic jurisprudence the basis of state law throughout the Muslim world.

and the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) reportedly operate in pockets of territory in Abyan, al-Bayda, Shebwa and Hadramawt governorates.

This report analyses Yemen's new political and military realities and international efforts to end the war. It argues that the UN needs to change its approach by including a wider range of actors in negotiations and by pursuing a more limited agreement to end the war that focuses on securing a ceasefire and the resumption of services, while avoiding too rapid a recentralisation of power in the capital. Most likely this shift will require a new UN Security Council resolution that updates Resolution 2216. The report is based on more than 90 interviews conducted across Yemen (on the Red Sea coast in 2018, in Aden and Sanaa in 2019 and in Marib and Hadramawt in 2020), along with dozens of interviews in Egypt, Jordan, the Arab Gulf states, New York and Washington in 2019 and 2020.

II. “All We Want is Peace”: Parties’ Positions and Perspectives

Yemen’s rival power centres share deep mutual enmity and a common narrative. Each party says it wants peace but cannot trust the motives of rivals whose primary goal is dominance over all others. For the Huthis, the war’s primary villain is Saudi Arabia, which the rebels claim hopes to control Yemen via its “mercenary” Yemeni allies and armed jihadists like AQAP and ISIS.⁵ For government supporters, it is the rebels who are at fault for launching a coup against a legitimate president and upsetting Yemen’s transition to democracy. The government and other anti-Huthi factions accuse the Huthis of serving Iran’s regional interests and claim that the rebels hope to rule Yemen through a totalitarian, caste-based system.⁶ Many 2011-era activists believe the Huthis hope to roll back the progress women’s and other civil society groups made during and after the 2011 uprising.⁷

Others frame the conflict around geographical divides. Southern secessionists, some of whom fought under the Hadi government’s umbrella but have since broken away, cite historical divisions between the north and south. They frame the Huthis and Islah (a party which many southerners see as synonymous with the Hadi government) as interchangeable aggressors, northerners bent on occupying and controlling southern land and natural resources. Secessionists believe that the only way peace can be achieved is through self-determination for the south.⁸

The blame game extends to the war’s human cost, which is substantial.⁹ The government and the Saudis argue that the Huthis alone are responsible for the world’s largest humanitarian emergency.¹⁰ Huthi officials blame the Saudi coalition’s air bombardment and the effective blockade of their areas – Saudi-imposed restrictions over Yemen’s land, air and sea borders – for the crisis.¹¹ They express frustration that

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials and representatives, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019; via telephone, March 2020.

⁶ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009, and Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, op. cit.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, anti-Huthi activists, government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020.

⁸ See Crisis Group Briefing, *After Aden: Navigating Yemen’s New Political Landscape*, op. cit. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°114, *Breaking Point? Yemen’s Southern Question*, 20 October 2011.

⁹ As of March 2020, more than 112,000 people had died as a direct result of the armed conflict in Yemen since 2015. “ACLED Resources: War in Yemen”, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 75 per cent of Yemenis live in poverty and that 14.3 million people are in acute need of humanitarian aid. “Yemen Situation Report: 6 May 2020”, OCHA. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) calculates that the war has set back Yemen’s development by twenty years. “Assessing the Impact of War in Yemen on Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals”, UNDP, 26 September 2019.

¹⁰ A senior Hadi government official said, “The Huthis started the coup. Everything was because of their actions. Of course, they were the cause of the humanitarian crisis and they are trying their best to profiteer from it by all means”. Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2020.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials and representatives, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019. Because Saudi Arabia imposed measures to restrict trade and transport into Huthi-controlled

the kingdom's conduct in Yemen does not attract the same level of scrutiny as Huthi missile attacks on what they claim are invariably scrupulously chosen military targets.¹² Anti-Huthi groups retort that foreign media focus on the human cost of Saudi airstrikes in Huthi-controlled territory but pay little attention to Huthi misdeeds, such as the brutal siege of Taiz city.¹³

After five years of open conflict and several failed attempts at peacemaking, the rival parties are deeply sceptical about striking a deal. Hadi's political and tribal allies in Yemen argue that the Huthis are incapable of acting in good faith, and that they use negotiations and truces to regroup and prepare for future fighting.¹⁴ Saudi officials paint the Huthis' cross-border missile and drone attacks as proof of both their intransigence and their fealty to Tehran, arguing that the Huthis prioritise Iran's regional agenda over peace at home.¹⁵ Huthi leaders claim that it is their rivals who break deals; that their attacks on the kingdom are a response to Riyadh's airstrikes and blockade; and that the Saudi-backed Hadi government is not well placed to complain of regional interests driving negotiating tactics.¹⁶ The stories the parties tell are heartfelt. They also obscure far more than they reveal about the complex internal dynamics that drive each side's decision-making processes. What follows is an overview of the component parts of Yemen's multipolar, regionalised conflict.

A. *The Huthi-led Authorities in Sanaa*

The Huthis do not have the monopoly on political power and the levers of government in Sanaa that their rivals sometimes suggest they do. But they are the dominant partner in an alliance of northern forces.¹⁷ The alliance's de facto executive is the Supreme Political Council, formed in July 2016, and the National Salvation Government it appointed the same year. Both bodies consist of Huthi supporters and members of Saleh's former ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), with the former playing the dominant decision-making role.¹⁸ Most, though not all, of the alliance's

areas on behalf of the internationally recognised Yemeni government, and because legal scholars and international lawyers classify the war as a non-international armed conflict, the restrictions do not meet the criteria of a blockade under international law. See Martin D. Fink, "Naval Blockade and the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen", in *Netherlands International Law Review*, vol. 64, no. 2 (2017), pp. 291-307.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019. In the Huthis' telling, they calibrate attacks on government positions and missile strikes on Saudi Arabian territory to telegraph strength and/or as a response to Saudi airstrikes.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, anti-Huthi activists, government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior tribal and political leaders, al-Jawf and Marib, January 2019.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi official, Riyadh, January 2020; Hadi government official, New York, March 2020.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials and representatives, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019; via telephone, March 2020.

¹⁷ The alliance includes important components of former President Saleh's General People's Congress Party and other political parties, the leaders of major northern tribes and a significant, if shrinking, number of the technocratic and bureaucratic class that staffed pre-war state institutions.

¹⁸ The Huthis and their allies formed the Supreme Political Council to supersede the Huthis' Supreme Revolutionary Committee, which appropriated the powers of the presidency and the legisla-

constituent parts are drawn from Yemen's Zaydi-majority northern highlands, and the majority of senior Huthi officials are Hashemites (putative descendants of the Prophet Muhammad).¹⁹ Adversaries thus allege that the alliance represents only Yemen's historical Zaydi elite, a charge that the partnership's components deny.²⁰

The alliance shares a collective narrative of a war of Saudi aggression, and of betrayal or even treason on Hadi's part for calling for the Saudi intervention. The Huthis, who took part in the 2011 uprising, blame General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (now Hadi's vice president) and Islah for the worst excesses of the six Saada wars they fought with the Saleh regime between 2004 and 2010. Many GPC officials who are not aligned with the Hadi government revile Islah for its role in the 2011 uprising that toppled Saleh.

1. Who are the Huthis?

The core of the Huthi movement consists of ideological adherents of its spiritual leader, Abdulmalik Badr al-Din al-Huthi, who in turn espouses the radical Zaydi revivalist worldview of his brother, Hussein, the movement's founder who was killed by government forces in the northern governorate of Saada in 2004.²¹ Local observers describe a series of concentric circles of influence within the movement, with Abdulmalik al-Huthi at the centre, followed by the "2004 Huthis", who fought the government during the first round of combat.²² Important but less influential are those who joined the revolt during five subsequent bouts of war, and then those who supported the group politically during this period.²³

Since Saleh's death, the Huthis have become the dominant players in national and local government institutions, including the military and the security and intelli-

ture in February 2015. In November 2016, the Council appointed the GPC's Abdelaziz bin Habtour as prime minister in Sanaa.

¹⁹ Huthi officials deny that they promote only Hashemites or Zaydis to senior positions. A Huthi representative said, "Because Hashemites and Zaydis are concentrated in Saada, people use this as a claim against us. ... [Our] followers are not all Hashemites; many more are *qabilis* [tribesmen]". Crisis Group interview, Muscat, November 2019. Huthi officials give examples of non-Hashemite officials, such as Mohammed Abdelsalam, the movement's spokesman of many years, Saleh al-Sammad, the former Supreme Political Council president who was killed in a Saudi airstrike in April 2018, and al-Sammad's replacement, Mehdi al-Mashat.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior tribal leaders, Marib and al-Jawf, January 2020; government officials and activists, Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020; Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019 and Muscat, November 2019.

²¹ Hussein al-Huthi, a religious scholar from a prominent Hashemite family, was a parliamentarian and leading member of the Believing Youth movement that sought to revive and modernise Zaydi practices. A critic of state corruption and injustice, al-Huthi criticised the perceived infiltration of Salafi/Wahhabi doctrines, and foreign influences in general, into Yemeni society. Tensions with Sanaa arose over al-Huthi's anti-U.S. rhetoric, as the Saleh regime aligned itself more closely with Washington in the early 2000s. Yemeni government forces killed al-Huthi in his home governorate, Saada, in September 2004 during the first of six rounds of Huthi-government conflict.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Huthi leaders, Sanaa, July 2019 and Muscat, November 2019; Sanaa resident, November 2019; two former officials in the northern alliance who left Sanaa in 2018 and 2019, respectively, Cairo, December 2019 and Amman, January 2020; Yemeni analyst, Amman, February 2020.

²³ Ibid. See also Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.

gence services.²⁴ They attempt to control social institutions and impose conservative social norms, including by influencing appointments of local tribal leadership and operating an increasingly strict police state that brooks no dissent.²⁵ Like Saleh before them, they appear to use patronage to maintain loyalty and influence.²⁶ In this way, the movement has absorbed significant components of the political and tribal elite previously aligned with Saleh.²⁷

The Sanaa alliance's military position has improved considerably since a period of vulnerability after Saleh's death. At that time, anti-Huthi forces cut off key smuggling routes allegedly used to traffic arms from the Horn of Africa via Abyan and Shebwa governorates, while UAE-backed forces advanced on Hodeida, the Huthis' main trade link with the outside world and the main source of basic goods for around 11 million Yemenis.²⁸ The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement, which the UN negotiated to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe, averted a battle for Hodeida and nearby ports. Since then, in a series of showdowns with tribal groups in the north, the Huthis have been able to remove most internal threats to their rule. In early 2020, they seized al-Hazm, the capital of al-Jawf governorate, opening a pathway to an assault on resource-rich Marib governorate, the government's last major stronghold in northern Yemen.

2. Internal challenges

The Huthis acknowledge tensions within their movement.²⁹ While all components believe they can win the war militarily, there are divisions between a group of political figures who seek a negotiated resolution to the conflict and a group of military

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, GPC officials, Sanaa residents, Yemeni political analysts, Sanaa, Muscat, Amman, Beirut and via telephone, October 2018-April 2020.

²⁵ A Sanaa-based NGO worker described how the Huthis extended their authority to Amran, a historically factious governorate whose tribal leadership were loyal to either Saleh/GPC or the Hashid tribal confederation's dominant family, Bayt al-Ahmar, which was aligned with Islah during the 2011 uprising against Saleh. "The Huthis have consolidated their control over Amran ... by using tribal structures. When they come into a new area, they look for whoever is the most prominent sheikh and get him to demonstrate his loyalty to them, normally by providing fighters for the fronts. If he refuses, then things will go badly for him. ... The Huthis replaced these tribal leaders with people from the tribes willing to [demonstrate their loyalty to them]". Crisis Group interview, November 2019.

²⁶ After the Huthis invaded Sanaa in September 2014, they integrated their forces into state military and security structures, and appointed *mushrifs* (supervisors) to oversee state ministries. Officials' rise and fall within state institutions, and the benefits that accrue to them, have since been closely tied to their standing within the movement. Crisis Group interviews, former state employees, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

²⁷ Many senior officials in the de facto government in Sanaa are former or current GPC officials who have become increasingly aligned with the Huthis. Crisis Group interviews, former state employees, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

²⁸ Hadi government-affiliated forces seized Bayhan in northern Shebwa and Mukayras in northern Abyan. Local observers and two people connected to the domestic arms trade believe that Huthi control of these areas allowed them to transport arms to their forces across northern Yemen from the southern coast. Crisis Group interviews, Aden, March 2019; Amman, September 2018.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019.

and political leaders who prefer outright victory on the battlefield.³⁰ Officials reject claims that internal conflict is imminent, as some in Riyadh and in anti-Huthi circles speculate.³¹ They claim that all matters of strategy are subject to robust internal debate within an advisory council consisting of political and military leaders over which Abdulmalik al-Huthi is the ultimate decision-maker.³² Highly dependent on the Huthi leader's availability, their system is prone to bottlenecks, a situation made worse by his seclusion for security reasons, which sometimes slows communication channels with him, and the sheer range of issues with which the de facto governing authorities are dealing.³³

The group has struggled to calibrate its relationship with some of its allies. The Huthis' most important, and fraught, political partnership is with the Sanaa branch of the GPC. The GPC has helped provide the Sanaa alliance with a veneer of legitimacy, given its long history as Yemen's ruling party, its majority in the country's pre-war parliament and its role as part of the post-2011 transitional unity government.³⁴ The Huthi-GPC relationship was tense from the start and appeared to be on the brink of collapse after the Huthis killed Saleh in 2017. Many GPC officials left Sanaa before or during the fighting around Saleh's killing, but a core of leaders, who form a majority of the party's permanent committee, remained.³⁵

Saleh's death hastened the GPC's fragmentation, a process that began in 2011. Hadi attempted, with limited success, to gather additional GPC supporters in Riyadh in

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi official, Sanaa, July 2020; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi official, senior Hadi government official, Riyadh, January 2020.

³² Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019; via telephone, March 2020.

³³ Crisis Group interview, senior Huthi official, July 2019. In November 2019, the de facto authorities in Sanaa formed the Supreme Council for Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and International Cooperation to oversee cooperation with international aid agencies. Two Huthi officials closely tied to Abdulmalik al-Huthi head the council. It soon introduced what aid agencies saw as onerous new regulations, including a 2 per cent tax on all aid entering the country. The U.S. halted funding for projects in northern Yemen in response to these and other Huthi aid regulations. Some Huthi officials present the council as a flawed attempt at improving government effectiveness led by inexperienced officials who sought to prevent aid diversion but did not understand international norms. Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, January 2020.

³⁴ The GPC was formed by President Saleh in 1982. The Gulf Cooperation Council initiative gave the party 50 per cent of cabinet seats in the 2012-2014 transitional unity government. Its permanent committee voted to oust Hadi from the party in November 2014, and many party members argue that Hadi's interim presidency expired that year or when he announced his resignation in January 2015, while under Huthi house arrest in Sanaa. Hadi rescinded his resignation after fleeing to Aden the next month. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Yemen at War*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, GPC officials, Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

³⁵ The GPC has broken into four broad factions: a core of leaders in Sanaa; the group that has allied itself with President Hadi in Riyadh; a faction seen as loyal to the Saleh family, whose members are largely based in Cairo, Abu Dhabi and Muscat; and another group that aligns itself with neither the Saleh family nor Hadi and whose members are mainly based in Cairo. In January 2018, GPC Chairman Sadeq Amin Abu Ras, the senior-most party official in Sanaa, threatened to resign in response to Huthi media attacks on GPC leaders inside Yemen that accused them of collusion with the Hadi government. Crisis Group interviews, GPC officials, Sanaa, July 2019; GPC official, Abu Dhabi, November 2019; GPC officials, Cairo, January 2020.

opposition to the Huthis. Those who remain in Sanaa and those among its leaders outside Yemen loosely aligned with the Sanaa faction say they want to maintain a degree of cohesion and presence inside Yemen.³⁶ In 2018, the Sanaa branch elected a new leadership, including leaders living abroad, that caused renewed tensions with the Huthis, who were reportedly angered that they had not been consulted on the appointment of prominent Saleh loyalists so soon after their split with the former president.³⁷

Party members say their participation in Sanaa's present governing bodies is a matter of expediency, not a long-term political alignment with the Huthis.³⁸ Explaining the balancing act, a Gulf-based senior GPC official said, "Opposition that does not operate in Yemen will not have impact on events in Yemen. The GPC needs to remain in Sanaa and express its stand on the future of Yemen. This is why the GPC's top level are those who are in Sanaa and maintain a relationship with the Huthis. But it is a story of love and hate, not reconciliation".³⁹

A less visible challenge for the Huthis has been sustaining a relationship with the small cadre of technocrats and officials who managed Yemen's pre-war state, many of them GPC rank and file or people aligned with the party. Many from this group have left Sanaa over the course of the war, citing a growing Huthi stranglehold over all aspects of life and an atmosphere of fear and mistrust.⁴⁰ Some former officials have remained largely neutral after leaving Sanaa while others joined the Hadi government, citing a desire to protect what remains of legitimate state institutions.⁴¹ The Huthis promote an amnesty program for Yemenis who want to return to Sanaa. Huthi officials claim the program has been highly successful, attracting thousands to return from areas outside of Huthi control since 2018.⁴² But they have reportedly struggled to reconcile with pre-war Sanaa residents whose family origins lie outside of the highlands.⁴³

Beyond coalition building and maintenance, the Huthis' biggest challenge is economic. The economy is arguably the only front on which the Hadi government has had sustained success against the rebels, although at the expense of Yemen's population.⁴⁴ Saudi constraints on shipping and air travel to Huthi-controlled areas have caused economic disruption. So, too, did the government's decision to move the cen-

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior GPC leaders, Sanaa, July 2019; senior GPC official, Muscat, November 2019; senior GPC official, Cairo, January 2020.

³⁷ "Yemeni party names new leader after Saleh killed", Reuters, 7 January 2018. Crisis Group interview, GPC official, Cairo, January 2020.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, GPC officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, senior GPC official, October 2019.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former Sanaa-based technocrats and officials, Amman, Cairo and via telephone, September and December 2019, January and March 2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, former cabinet office official, Amman, March 2020; former Central Bank of Yemen official, Aden, March 2019; former official at a state-run bank, Cairo, April 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interviews, Huthi representative, Sanaa, July 2019 and March 2020.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, senior tribal leaders, al-Jawf and Marib, January 2020; senior Maribi tribal leader, Cairo, December 2019; Taizi official, Aden, March 2019; prominent Taizi community leader, August 2019; son of a senior tribal sheikh from Ibb, September 2019; STC-linked individuals, Aden, March 2019.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Western economic analyst, Beirut, April 2020.

tral bank headquarters to Aden in September 2016, and subsequent government legislation regulating hard-currency transactions and fuel and other imports.⁴⁵

The Huthis have become effective at taxing goods and businesses, and controlling and profiting from the sale of oil and gas transported into their areas. But their rivals accuse them of using most of these funds to pay for their war effort.⁴⁶ Civil-service salaries have gone largely unpaid in the north for much of the past three years, with the Huthis and government each arguing that the other should pay them.⁴⁷ The Hadi government also accuses Huthi leaders of using new-found wealth to invest heavily in land and property.⁴⁸

3. What do they want?

Despite their differences, the Huthis and their allies have a clear narrative on how the war started – through “Saudi aggression” – and, broadly speaking, how it can be ended. In April 2020, the Huthis published what they described as a proposal for a comprehensive settlement to end the war. It offered the clearest public articulation of the Huthis’ position to date.⁴⁹ It made clear what Huthi representatives have said for some time: they are not interested in limited deals such as the Stockholm Agreement and want any future agreement to include a comprehensive roadmap for ending the war and initiating political reconciliation.⁵⁰

While the proposal outlines positions the Huthis have held for much of the war, their insistence that the agreement be signed between “the authorities in Sanaa” (their side) and the Saudi-led coalition is new and clearly aims to sideline the Hadi government.⁵¹ Other elements are less surprising. The proposal stipulates a national ceasefire, which for the Huthis and their allies means not just a halt to fighting, but also lifting the air, land and sea blockade and reopening roads in battleground areas. An interim period would follow, including Yemeni-Yemeni negotiations over the country’s future.⁵²

The proposal offers little detail on interim governing arrangements or the nature of the intra-Yemeni dialogue, other than referring to the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, a cornerstone of Yemen’s 2012-2014 transitional period, in

⁴⁵ In October 2018, the Hadi government issued decree No. 75 dictating that fuel importers should submit applications to the technical office of the government-run Economic Committee and comply with new regulations, leading to disruptions in supply. In July 2019, a new decree stipulated that fuel importers wanting to bring cargo into Yemen should pay taxes and customs to the government.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni bankers, Aden, Amman and Sanaa, March and July 2019; Western economic analyst, via telephone, October 2011 and January and March 2020.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, July 2019; Sanaa-based civil servant, via telephone, January 2020.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, senior Hadi government official, March 2020.

⁴⁹ “A Proposal for a Comprehensive Solution Document to End the War on the Republic of Yemen”, 1 April 2020. On file with Crisis Group.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representatives, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2020; via telephone, March 2020.

⁵¹ Although the Huthis have long said that the settlement should be with Saudi Arabia rather than the Hadi government, they have proved willing to attend UN-mediated negotiations in the past, and even sign deals with the government, as happened with the Stockholm Agreement.

⁵² The proposal also stipulates that the coalition should underwrite salary payments and reconstruction costs for a decade after the war, and that all foreign forces should leave the country.

which the Huthis participated, as providing the principles for a future transitional period.⁵³ Nor does it mention whether the Huthis seek at least a 50 per cent share of cabinet seats for themselves and their allies in an interim unity government, a position they have adhered to in past negotiations and likely still hold.⁵⁴

The latter is likely to be a sticking point not just for the Hadi government and its allies but also for many GPC members. A number of GPC officials argue that any post-conflict transition should build on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative of 2011, which ended fighting between Saleh and rival factions, saw Saleh's replacement by his vice president (Hadi) and allocated 50 per cent of cabinet seats to the GPC.⁵⁵ GPC officials are also keen to see a return to elections, which they believe will restore them to power.⁵⁶ Separate to their proposal on ending the war, the Huthis have authored a vision document for post-war Yemen along with GPC officials that includes democratic elections. But Huthi representatives add the caveat that Yemen must be stable and its political components aligned on contentious issues such as state structure before any elections.⁵⁷

B. Anti-Huthi Factions

The anti-Huthi bloc – a diverse collection of groups opposed to the Huthis but not necessarily aligned with the Hadi government – is united by what it stands against rather than a common agenda for the way forward. As the rebels have consolidated their position in the north west, the anti-Huthi bloc has atomised. Today, anti-Huthi efforts are stratified between Hadi's self-proclaimed "legitimacy" government and its allies on one side and, on the other, anti-Huthi groups such as the STC and its loyalist paramilitary Security Belt forces, the de facto authorities in coastal Hadramawt and Tareq Saleh's Joint Resistance Forces on the Red Sea coast, many of which refuse to pledge allegiance to the Hadi government. Saudi Arabia provides what little connective tissue there is among these groups: since late 2018, it has attempted to bring them together at least nominally under Hadi's leadership, subject to Riyadh's oversight.

⁵³ The Huthis do not consider the six-part federal model, which was endorsed by a special committee appointed by Hadi after the conference had formally ended, to be part of the National Dialogue Conference outcomes.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, March 2020.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders, Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, January 2020. As noted elsewhere in this report, the GPC is fragmented and there is no uniform view among its members as to what role the party should play in a future transitional government or what share of a unity cabinet it might seek.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders, Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

⁵⁷ "National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State", 26 March 2019. On file with Crisis Group. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Muscat, November 2019. The Huthis' critics present the movement's equivocation on the elections question as evidence that they do not truly seek democracy. Senior Huthi representatives reject this accusation, but the Huthis have yet to offer a coherent view of their ultimate political objectives. There is also ambiguity regarding how the group, which has resisted forming a political party until now, would participate in elections. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

1. The Hadi government and its supporters

President Hadi has been based in Riyadh since 2015, apart from short stints in Aden and a hospital in the U.S. Like Abdulmalik al-Huthi, he keeps largely secluded from the outside world, relying on a small group of family members and political allies to act as his eyes and ears.⁵⁸ This group also controls access to him by the UN and foreign diplomatic missions.⁵⁹ Hadi's inner circle consists of allies from his native Abyan governorate in southern Yemen, including his sons Nasser and Jalal, along with Saleh-era figures such as former Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr and Rashad al-Alimi, a Taizi politician who heads the pro-Hadi National Alliance of Yemeni Political Forces. Many ministers are selected from within this entourage. Hadi also has an influential personal staff that includes Islah members.⁶⁰

The president's inner circle, including many ministers, are perceived to be principally concerned with sustaining Hadi's legal authority and the perks that they derive from his position.⁶¹ For day-to-day management of ministries and implementation of policies, ministers and other senior officials rely on a small cadre of pre-war technocrats and civil-service professionals to maintain the few state institutions that still operate somewhat competently, such as the office of Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalek Saeed and the foreign ministry, both based in Riyadh, and the Aden-headquartered central bank. Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Defence Minister Mohammed al-Maqdashi and, increasingly, senior Saudi military officials oversee military and security affairs, which are centred in the north east and Taiz. Hadi's son Nasser and other key Abyani allies manage most military and security affairs in the south in loose coordination with their northern counterparts.⁶²

Broader support for Hadi is predicated on his symbolic value more than his popular appeal. For many Yemenis, the president has become a holding vehicle for the ideals of the 2011 uprising and the subsequent transitional period. Many also view him as something akin to a failsafe mechanism against Huthi manipulation of future political processes to gain international legitimacy.⁶³

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020; Western and other diplomats, Amman, Cairo, Riyadh, October 2019 and January 2020.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Amman, Riyadh, September and November 2019; government officials, two Yemeni political analysts, Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Yemeni analysts, Amman, Cairo, Riyadh and New York, October 2019-February 2020.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, government military officials, Marib, January and February 2020; southern politicians, Aden and Mukalla, September 2019 and March 2020.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, government supporters, Aden, Amman, Cairo, al-Jawf and Marib, September-December 2019 and January 2020. A government official said, "As long as Hadi is president, he can do what he did in 2015 or 2016 and prevent the Huthis from getting the UN to just work out a deal that makes militia rule in Sanaa normal". Expressing a common view on the government side, the same official explained that Hadi's decision to rescind his resignation, made when he was under Huthi house arrest in early 2015, and later his refusal to sign the Kuwait agreement or the subsequent Kerry proposal, which would have led to the formation of a unity Hadi-Huthi government and, in the case of the Kerry plan, may have been designed to ease Hadi out of power over time, prevented the Huthis from legitimising their coup under international law. Crisis Group telephone interview, Amman, February 2020. When Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen in March 2015,

For these reasons, Hadi draws support from a mixture of the revolutionary youth and others who backed the 2011 uprising, including elements of Yemen's pre-war technocratic class, journalists and other middle-class professionals; members of smaller political parties associated with the Joint Meeting Parties, a coalition opposed to Saleh's GPC whose largest component is Islah; and some women's groups. This eclectic mix is vocal and commands a significant presence in local, regional and international media, and on English- and Arabic-language social media. It sees the Huthis as irreconcilable with the development of a democratic, civil state that provides equality through the rule of law.⁶⁴ Although not militarily powerful, this collection of actors has at times acted as a significant pressure group capable of influencing Hadi and his inner circle.⁶⁵

Arguably Hadi's most important, and certainly his most contentious, ally is Islah. Critics hold up Hadi's 2016 appointment of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as his vice president as proof of Islamists' growing primacy in the government.⁶⁶ Mohsen is not a formal Islah member and denies allegiance to the party, although historically he has had close political and personal ties to senior Islah officials.⁶⁷ Senior government officials based in Riyadh, al-Jawf, Marib and Taiz readily agree that tribal and military networks tied to Islah played an important role in mounting a defence of northern territories and Taiz during the war's early days. But they dispute any characterisation by the STC, the Huthis and others of the Hadi administration as an "Islah government", noting that most ministers are GPC officials, Socialists, Nasserites and independents.⁶⁸ Islah presents itself as a political party that lacks both a military component and influence over government decision-making.⁶⁹ Local authorities and senior political leaders in Taiz and Marib reject accusations that theirs are "Islah" areas.⁷⁰

the then-UN envoy, Jamal Benomar, was in the process of mediating new governing arrangements among Yemen's main political parties in Sanaa. Options under discussion included shifting Hadi to a ceremonial presidency and replacing him with a presidential council. Many in the anti-Huthi camp believe that such an agreement would have legitimised the Huthi-GPC coup. Crisis Group interviews, political figure involved in discussions, November 2019; former UN official, March 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Amman, September 2019; anti-Huthi journalists and civil society activists, Marib, January 2020; Yemeni journalist, Cairo, January 2020.

⁶⁵ When UN Envoy Martin Griffiths spoke approvingly of a unilateral Huthi withdrawal from the port of Hodeida in May 2019, as part of the Stockholm Agreement, members of this group called the move a sham and pressured the government to cut ties with Griffiths for supporting it. Hadi, who had been angered by Griffiths' stance, temporarily refused to meet with the envoy and came close to declaring him *persona non grata*. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Amman, Riyadh and via telephone, May 2019. Although Hadi was eventually convinced to re-engage with the envoy, the public pressure campaign demonstrated the group's ability to influence his actions.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, former Yemeni government official, New York, September 2019; GPC official, Cairo, January 2020.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, individuals close to Ali Mohsen, Marib, January 2020.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni politicians and tribal leaders, Marib, January 2020; leading Taizi politician, Cairo, January 2020; government official, Cairo, January 2020; government official, Amman, September 2019.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Islah leader, Marib, January 2020; Islah member, Muscat, November 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, local authority officials and tribal leaders, Marib, January 2020; senior local government official, Taiz, March 2019; former senior Taiz local government official, Cairo, January 2020.

Other government officials, however, claim that Islah and its local allies are the dominant government-affiliated force on the ground in the north, and that the party's leadership exerts a strong influence over Hadi.⁷¹ Many GPC officials argue that Islah is using the conflict and Hadi's weakness to usurp local and national civil and military institutions – scattered among pockets of government control inside Yemen and ministry offices in Riyadh – that are not under Huthi control.⁷² Yet Islah is fractured like the GPC and is increasingly divided between a group aligned with Riyadh, one with Turkey/Qatar and others operating relatively independently inside of Yemen. Its position on the ground in some parts of the country likely reflects its local allies' relative strength more than a cohesive strategy to take over parts of Yemen.⁷³

2. Internal challenges

Hadi's nominal allies are often critical of the president and his government but note that the presidency is the foundation on which the international legitimacy of the anti-Huthi cause is constructed. Yet since becoming president in 2012, Hadi has been plagued by accusations from his political rivals and allies alike of weak and ineffective rule.⁷⁴ Both the Huthis in 2014 and the STC in 2019 exploited grievances over economic mismanagement, lack of service delivery and corruption accusations to bolster support for their takeovers of Sanaa and Aden, respectively. Hadi's current cabinet, based mostly outside of Yemen, lacks effective control over and coordination with local offices, and is accused by the Yemeni media, local authorities and others of corruption and failure to pay salaries and provide basic services.⁷⁵

The president has failed to arrest Yemen's political, institutional and territorial fragmentation. Since the government-run central bank's September 2016 relocation to Aden, for example, it has competed not just with the rival Huthi-held central bank in Sanaa but also with the relatively autonomous banking systems in Mukalla and Marib, as well as a profusion of money changers and traders who were able to operate their own independent foreign exchange services for much of the war.⁷⁶ Local officials in Marib – which the government holds up as an example of its capabilities

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Cairo, January 2020.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, GPC officials, Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020; Yemeni analysts, Cairo, New York, January and February 2020.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Islah leader, Marib, January 2020; military official, Marib, January 2020; Taizi GPC official, Cairo, January 2020.

⁷⁴ Even the president's allies agree that Hadi and the government have numerous failings, including ineffective management. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020. Accusations of government corruption are also widespread. See "Combating Corruption in Yemen", Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, November 2018. Some anti-Huthi Yemenis believe that the president feels personally threatened by overt displays of autonomy or competence among ministers and other officials. Crisis Group interview, anti-Huthi activists, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

⁷⁵ Most local authorities claim to operate autonomously of a government that provides them with little budgetary or technical support. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Cairo, January 2020; local government representatives, Marib and al-Jawf, January 2020; Aden, March 2019; Mukalla, March 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni bankers, Aden and Sanaa, March and July 2019; Western economic analyst, Beirut, January and March 2020.

– align themselves with the government but also claim to self-administer their area under the leadership of the governor, Sultan al-Arada.⁷⁷

The military and security services are split between the northern fronts in Marib and those in the south, which sometimes work at cross-purposes. After the government's battles with the STC in the south in August 2019, some anti-Huthi northerners accused the president's son Nasser and his allies of moving men and equipment out of Marib to protect positions in the south, leaving the governorate and neighbouring al-Jawf more vulnerable to Huthi attack in early 2020.⁷⁸

Hadi has come under pressure from Riyadh, Washington and his own officials since 2018 to improve government effectiveness and better integrate the various anti-Huthi groups into state structures to bolster the government's credibility as an effective counterweight to the Huthis.⁷⁹ But thus far he has been unable to secure even the full support of his own party, the GPC, despite Saleh's death at Huthi hands.

3. What do they want?

The Hadi government and its supporters argue that the only way to end the war is through implementation of what they call the "three references": the 2011 GCC initiative, the National Dialogue Conference outcomes and UN Security Council Resolution 2216. They think that the government should take full control of all state military, security and civil institutions. In return, officials say the Huthis and their allies will receive a limited number of cabinet seats in a new government, around 10-15 per cent, in line with what the government and Riyadh say is the Huthis' maximum popular support.⁸⁰ For the government, implementing National Dialogue outcomes includes a controversial six-region federalism plan promoted by Hadi and passed by a committee the president formed after the conference ended. The Huthis rejected the six-region plan, as did southern separatists, and it became one of the proximate triggers

⁷⁷ Peter Salisbury, "Behind the Front Lines in Yemen's Marib", Crisis Group Commentary, 17 April 2020.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Maribi local government official, Marib, April 2020; government military official, New York, May 2020. When southern government forces attempted a military push toward Aden in May 2020, government officials said that the campaign was being led by Hadi and Interior Minister Ahmed al-Maysari, both of whom are from Abyan. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Hadi government military official, private security adviser in Aden, May 2020. Hadi was also criticised for failing to send military forces to support tribesmen in their battles against the Huthis in Hajour, in north-western Yemen, in January 2019, and in Radman al-Awad, in al-Bayda governorate, in June 2020.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former senior Hadi official, New York, September 2019; current government official, Cairo, January 2020.

⁸⁰ A number of government officials say the Huthis should have at most 10-15 per cent of seats in a unity government. This number has been their stated negotiating position to date, although some officials say they can be more flexible if they believe the broader terms of an agreement are satisfactory. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Amman and Cairo, October 2019; via telephone, January, March and June 2020. Saudi officials have said the Huthis represent only 50,000 people, 10 per cent of Sanaa's population. See "Press Availability with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir", U.S. Embassy in Yemen website, 25 August 2016; Crisis Group interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, 2019. Another Saudi official said the Huthis had around 50,000 supporters at the beginning of the war, while acknowledging that this number may have increased over time. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, 2019.

for the war.⁸¹ At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, government officials argue that they must recentralise the state before federalism can be put in place, a plan their local allies, including the authorities in Marib, reject.⁸²

4. Non-government-aligned anti-Huthi groups

The anti-Huthi bloc's remaining groups comprise the STC, military authorities in coastal Hadramawt, the Joint Resistance Forces led by Tareq Saleh and various Salafi militias, among others. These groups do not share long-term goals but an antipathy toward Islah and Hadi, and all have ties to the UAE.

The most prominent division within the anti-Huthi bloc is between the government and STC, often depicted as a power struggle between pro-unity voices and southern secessionists. The STC was established in April 2017 by former and current southern security and government officials as a self-styled government-in-waiting for the formerly independent south. Many of the military and security forces trained and equipped by the UAE in the south from 2015 onward are affiliated with the STC. The STC and the Hadi government have tussled repeatedly for control of Aden and other southern governorates, notably during battles for Aden in August 2019 that left the STC in control of most of the city and almost sparked a civil war within a civil war in the south.⁸³ A Saudi-brokered deal, the Riyadh Agreement of November 2019, sought to prevent further fighting and bring the STC back under the government umbrella. But the deal stalled and, frustrated by perceived Saudi inattention and government attempts to prevent it from moving ahead, the STC declared "self-administration" in southern territories in April 2020.⁸⁴ The government responded with an abortive military push toward Aden.

Hostilities flared up again in June 2020 when the STC seized control of Hadibu, the capital of the Arabian Sea island of Soqatra, precipitating renewed fighting in Abyan and a fresh mediation drive from Riyadh.⁸⁵

Competition between the government and the STC comprises elements of north-south enmity, historical intra-southern rivalries and anti-Islah sentiment among secessionists. Before the country unified in 1990, the southern People's Democratic

⁸¹ Huthi officials reject both the legitimacy of the committee appointed by Hadi to study federal options and its recommendation of six-part federalism. The National Dialogue Conference rules stipulated that all decisions be made by consensus. But because the federalism committee was formed after the conference had ended and did not include representatives of all constituencies, and because they did not endorse its findings, the Huthis say its recommendations were not based on consensus. Crisis Group interview, Huthi representatives, Sanaa, September 2015; Muscat and via telephone, June 2020. See also Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit. The Huthis also believed that the six-region plan was designed to geographically isolate their group, then based largely in Saada. Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Sanaa, September 2015.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, senior Hadi government official, Aden, March 2019. Many of Hadi's southern allies argue that the federal plan is the best way to build peace in Yemen, as do Islahi and non-Islahi northern tribesmen in al-Jawf and Marib. Crisis Group interviews, pro-Hadi southerners, Aden, March 2019; tribal and political leaders, Marib and al-Jawf, January 2020.

⁸³ Crisis Group Briefing, *After Aden*, op. cit.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group Commentary, "Heading Off a Renewed Struggle for Yemen's South", 29 April 2020.

⁸⁵ See Mohammed Mukhashaf, "Yemen separatists seize remote Socotra island from Saudi-backed government", Reuters, 21 June 2020.

Republic of Yemen suffered from internal tensions between two powerful political-military factions, the “tribes” from al-Dhale and Lahj governorates, on one side, and the “Bedouin” from Abyan and Shebwa on the other.⁸⁶ The groups battled one another in a civil war in 1986. The STC’s political and military leadership derives largely from the al-Dhale/Lahj group, which dominated state structures after winning the 1986 war. President Hadi’s allies are mostly Bedouin from his native Abyan and neighbouring Shebwa. Hadi and his allies took Sanaa’s side in a 1994 north-south civil war that ended in the north’s victory, while most of the al-Dhale/Lahj group fought for independence. The latter were at the forefront of protests and renewed calls for secession from the mid-2000s onward.

Not all separatists support the STC.⁸⁷ Although they back its call for addressing the “southern question” in peace talks, many of them fear that the Council seeks to be the south’s sole representative at those talks and in future governance. These worries overlap somewhat with southern intra-regional divides. Separatists from Aden, Hadramawt, Abyan and Shebwa do not want to see a future south dominated by al-Dhale and Lahj. As a result, some secessionists have aligned themselves temporarily with Hadi’s pro-unity southern allies.⁸⁸ So deep is the enmity between the STC and Hadi that many Council officials see the Huthis as less threatening than the government. Some STC representatives believe their group would be best served by reaching an accommodation with the de facto authorities in Sanaa, if the Huthis can be convinced to limit their political and territorial ambitions to Yemen’s north (an idea which some but not all Huthi leaders share).⁸⁹

Coastal authorities in the eastern Hadramawt governorate are another component of the anti-Huthi bloc that do not fit neatly into the government camp. Hadramawt is divided between a government-controlled interior, which includes the provincial capital Seiyoun, and a largely autonomous coastal region overseen by military authorities from their base in the port city of Mukalla. Led by Hadramawt’s governor, Major General Faraj Salman al-Bahsani, and backed by the UAE, the Mukalla authorities enjoy cordial relations with the STC but have not formally aligned themselves with the secessionists. They are more focused on engineering the autonomy of a unified Hadramawt, either within a federal Yemen or as part of an independent south.⁹⁰

On the Red Sea coast, Tareq Saleh acts as the de facto military authority in coastal Taiz. From his base in Mokha, he directly oversees a coalition of as many as 40,000 fighters, including a mix of Guards of the Republic (a military unit composed of many former Saleh loyalists), Salafi fighters and the local Tihami Resistance forces consisting of tribesmen from Hodeida governorate.⁹¹ Saleh defected from the Sanaa

⁸⁶ See Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Point? Yemen’s Southern Question*, op. cit.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, pro-federalism southern politicians, secessionist leader, two southern youth activists, Aden, March 2019.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni secessionist, Aden, March 2019; Abyani political leader, March 2019; Shebwani tribal figure, September 2019; Hadrami official, Mukalla, January 2020.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, STC official, Aden, March 2019; STC official, via telephone, March 2020; Huthi official, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi official, via telephone, December 2019.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hadrami official, Mukalla, January 2020; Hadrami journalist, October 2020.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, senior member of Tareq Saleh’s staff, June 2020.

alliance after the Huthis killed his uncle, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in 2017. He joined the UAE-led campaign against the Huthis along the Red Sea coast in early 2018 and has never formally accepted Hadi's authority.

Saleh's stated goal is a renewed assault on Hodeida and the defeat of the Huthis through the eventual capture of Sanaa. But many in the government camp believe he is equally focused on Taiz. Some observers say Saleh represents the GPC's military wing and seeks to build a GPC footprint in Yemen on a par with Islah's widely perceived position of dominance in Marib and Taiz.⁹² Those close to Saleh refute this contention, arguing instead that he represents his uncle's legacy of pragmatic northern leadership, seeks to protect a unified Yemeni republic and is not beholden to any party.⁹³

Saleh's relationship with Salafi factions within the Joint Resistance Forces is a source of intrigue and concern among some Yemeni parties who worry about the growing strength of Salafi groups and the sectarian dimension of the conflict.⁹⁴ Numerous armed Salafi factions have grown into important fighting forces over the course of the war with coalition support. Many members of the Salafi-leaning faction working with Saleh come from the Yafa region of southern Yemen (which includes parts of Lahj and Abyan governorates) and are part of a group that is aligned neither with the STC nor the government. Instead, they prioritise the fight against the Huthis, largely for sectarian reasons.⁹⁵

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, individual close to Tareq Saleh, Cairo and via telephone, March 2020.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni analyst, New York, February 2020; Taizi politician, Cairo, January 2020; Hadi government official, June 2020.

⁹⁵ Yemen's Salafis are perhaps the most understudied constituency among the anti-Huthi ranks. Prior to the war and during Yemen's transition period, Salafi religious students battled Huthis at two Salafi institutes in Saada between 2011 and 2014. Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader, Aden, March 2019; former Salafi student, New York, October 2019. Salafis owe their rise to military prominence largely to coalition support. They have divided over time into three camps. First are those directly allied with the government. Second are those who have become aligned with the STC and the UAE over the course of the war. And third are those working under direct Saudi command along the kingdom's southern border and in some parts of the south. Crisis Group interviews, Salafi leader, local security official, Aden, March 2019; Yemeni security analyst, December 2019. For background, see Laurent Bonnefoy, "Sunni Islamist Dynamics in Context of War: What Happened to al-Islah and the Salafis", in *Politics, Governance and Reconstruction in Yemen*, Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018.

III. A Regional Standoff

A. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has long treated the political stability of Yemen, with which it shares a long border, as a matter of domestic security. Riyadh intervened in the war in 2015 because it feared that Iran was working with the Huthis to create a Hizbollah-like proxy with access to Yemen's pre-war arsenal of medium-range missiles.⁹⁶ It appears to want to engineer an outcome to the conflict that minimises the Huthis' ability to threaten its border and territory, forces or persuades the rebels into publicly and effectively breaking with Tehran and, according to Yemenis from across the political spectrum, positions Saudi Arabia as kingmaker in Yemeni politics.⁹⁷ As to the contours of a post-war Yemen, while Riyadh supports a unified Yemen, its relationship with the issue of southern separation is complicated. It backed separatists during the 1994 civil war, recognises southern grievances and views a likely, even desirable, longer-term settlement as a decentralised, federal state.⁹⁸

Over the course of the five-year conflict, Riyadh's position has moved from a bellicose demand for Huthi surrender toward greater interest in a political compromise and direct talks with the rebels to find an exit. Although Saudi officials insist they wanted a political solution from the outset, several factors seem to have accelerated their search for one from mid-2019 onward.⁹⁹ Amid Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, a series of escalations in the Gulf culminated in the September 2019 Huthi-claimed but likely Iran-conducted complex attack on vital Saudi Arabian oil and gas infrastructure. As a result, Saudi officials came to both question the reliability of the U.S security umbrella and fear the consequences of a spiralling conflict.¹⁰⁰ The UAE's decision to draw down its troops from Yemen over the course of 2019 also likely played a part insofar as it significantly curtailed the coalition's military options.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Yemen at War*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit.

⁹⁷ Saudi officials regularly emphasise the importance of preventing or at least mitigating the emergence of a Hizbollah-like entity on the kingdom's border, by which they mean a non-state armed actor that is backed by Iran and belongs to Tehran's regional network that can threaten U.S. and allied interests. Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019; senior Saudi officials, Jeddah, December 2019. While Saudi officials would not acknowledge that they aspire to play a kingmaker role in Yemen, they have occupied this position historically, and Yemenis from across the political spectrum – Huthis, Hadi government representatives, GPC and Islah members, STC and others – almost uniformly suggest that Riyadh wants to reassert its position as the dominant external player. Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government official, Amman, September 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019; STC representative, via telephone, March 2020.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, March 2019; senior Saudi defence official, September 2019. Some Saudi officials suggest that if Yemenis want to vote on southern separation once the war is over, they would consider it an internal Yemeni matter. Crisis Group interview, senior Saudi official with expertise on Yemen, Riyadh, March 2019. At the same time, Saudi officials are very sensitive to being accused of wishing to divide Yemen. As one senior policymaker said, "the legacy of this war is not going to be separation". Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, March 2019.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Riyadh, September 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, December 2019.

Other developments weighed on Riyadh's collective mind. The kingdom's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, appears keen to repair his country's damaged reputation in Washington – which has suffered as a result of both the brutal coalition air campaign in Yemen and the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2019 – before the U.S. presidential election and the G20 summit in Riyadh, both in November 2020.¹⁰¹ A senior Saudi official summarised this desire to move on from the Yemen war and Khashoggi murder: “If a screen were to show the story of Saudi Arabia as seen in the United States, 75 per cent of the screen would be taken up by the Yemen war and another 15 per cent by Khashoggi. All of this is negative and it crowds out the many positive domestic reforms. We need to clear up space for other stories”.¹⁰²

By September 2019, a number of key policymakers in Riyadh assessed that rather than try to win the war militarily, the kingdom would be better served by working with more pragmatic Huthi elements to try to end it politically.¹⁰³ Attempting to drive a wedge between the rebels and Iran through a combination of military and economic pressure on the Huthis and outreach to pragmatic elements of the movement was hardly new. But, given the above factors, winding down the conflict gained more urgency.¹⁰⁴ In October 2019, Saudi officials revitalised direct talks with the de facto authorities in Sanaa after a lull of several years, leading in turn to a significant de-escalation of cross-border land and air attacks in subsequent months.

Not surprisingly, winding down the war has proven more difficult than entering it. The UN, Western diplomats and many Yemenis – along with Crisis Group – have long advocated a direct Huthi-Saudi communications channel as a means of unlocking the conflict. Given Riyadh's outsized role in the war and the priority it gives to reducing Huthi threats to its territory or connections to Iran, an agreement between the two is essential. Yet, in practice, the back channel established in October 2019 has faltered. The Huthis blame the talks' stagnation on what they describe as their Saudi counterparts' inability or unwillingness to carry out decisions made during the

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Jeddah, December 2019; Western diplomats, via telephone, January and March 2020. After Khashoggi's murder, the U.S. Congress began to advance a raft of bipartisan bills – some intended to pull U.S. support from coalition forces engaged in hostilities, others prohibiting offensive weapons sales, refuelling and other support to the coalition – that signalled to both the administration and the coalition that long-term bilateral relations could be in danger absent a course correction. See Crisis Group United States Report N°3, *Ending the Yemen Quagmire: Lessons for Washington from Four Years of War*, 15 April 2019.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, December 2019.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, senior Saudi official, Riyadh, September 2019.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, Riyadh, December 2010. Prior to reopening negotiation channels with the Huthis in 2019, Saudi officials had pursued a strategy of military and financial pressure on the Huthis, in addition to outreach to its more pragmatic members in an attempt to fracture the movement and drive a wedge between at least a part of the movement and Iran. According to a senior Saudi official, “We must keep military pressure on the Huthis and we are doing it on fronts other than Hodeida. Maybe over time this pressure will work and we can win militarily. We are also continuing efforts to split the movement”. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, March 2019.

talks or enter into detailed negotiations over ending the war.¹⁰⁵ Saudi officials claim it is Huthi intransigence that has delayed progress.¹⁰⁶

Another problem was the channel's lack of connection to other aspects of Yemen's multi-layered war. Once Riyadh established it, the Huthis' Yemeni opponents worried that Saudi Arabia might seek to broker a deal with the rebel movement and then press the government to accept it without obtaining buy-in from the government and other parts of the anti-Huthi bloc.¹⁰⁷ For this reason, Huthi-Saudi talks caused deep anxiety among many in that bloc who feared being left out of a deal.¹⁰⁸ This fear arguably contributed to renewed ground fighting in the north in early 2020. Escalatory government rhetoric early on in the fighting was likely part of a (successful) attempt to undermine the Saudi-Huthi channel by drawing the Saudis into battles that the government nevertheless ultimately lost.

In addition, Riyadh has faced challenges in its attempt to play an active mediation role within the anti-Huthi coalition. After the coalition nearly collapsed in August 2019 – when Hadi and the STC fought for control of Aden – the kingdom stepped in to hold the fracturing coalition together. It brokered the November 2019 Riyadh Agreement, which calls for the formation of a unity government between the two sides. Since then, however, the deal has faltered and the government and STC have resumed fighting, this time in Abyan province.

Pro-Huthi, pro-government and pro-STC Yemenis all agree on one issue, which is that Riyadh is overconfident in believing it has the required internal capacity and strategic vision to pull the different negotiation tracks together on its own to end the war. They point to the fate of the Riyadh Agreement as an illustration.¹⁰⁹ Likewise, both the Hadi government and STC increasingly doubt Riyadh's ability to be an honest broker between them or to provide consistent follow-up on any accord.¹¹⁰ For their part, the Huthis, while still considering Riyadh the principal decision-maker in ending the war, are deeply frustrated by the experience of the back channel.¹¹¹

Despite Yemeni frustrations, Riyadh doubtless will play a central role in either ending the war or ensuring that the fighting continues – given its current military responsibility, influence over key actors on the pro-Hadi side and significant stake in the outcome. It also is one of the few countries with the capacity and incentive to foot some of the enormous cost of stabilisation and reconstruction. Indeed, when the conflict ends, Saudi Arabia will inherit the war's destructive legacy right on its southern border: a fragmented and ravaged country, its population reduced to abject poverty, hunger and disease.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019; two Huthi representatives, Muscat, Sanaa and via telephone, January and March 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, January 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, December 2019 and February 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior local government officials, tribal leaders, politicians, Marib, January 2020; Cairo, December 2019 and January 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, government official, Cairo, January 2020; New York, February 2020; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, STC representative, New York, February 2020; Hadi government official, via telephone, April 2020.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019; two Huthi representatives, Muscat, Sanaa and via telephone, January and March 2020.

For these reasons, Saudi Arabia's position on what constitutes an acceptable political settlement is crucial. While Riyadh's desire to end the conflict has seemingly become more urgent over time, its core concerns have not changed. Saudi policymakers view an Iranian-supported non-state actor on their border, especially one that is dominant militarily, as an existential threat. Accordingly, the rebels' relationship with Tehran, as well as issues of weapons handovers, disarmament and the composition of the new Yemeni government and the military-security services, are likely to remain core concerns for Riyadh.

Yet, this broad principle aside, questions about Riyadh's vision remain. Huthi representatives claim that the Saudis were unable to describe their desired settlement during months of talks in 2019 and early 2020.¹¹² Yemeni government officials similarly say they lack clarity as to Saudi Arabia's endgame.¹¹³ Among the question marks: Saudi officials acknowledge that the Huthis should participate in Yemeni political and security structures, but do not specify the extent of that role.¹¹⁴ They also insist on the Huthis severing their ties with Iran, but are short on ideas as to what this would mean in practice, and how the Huthis could prove that the relationship has ended. Instead, they focus on tactical actions the Huthis could take to build Riyadh's confidence.¹¹⁵ Providing greater clarity as to their vision of an acceptable outcome would be essential as Saudi Arabia seeks to turn the page on the war.

B. *Iran*

The nature and depth of Iranian-Huthi ties is a matter of speculation and controversy. The U.S. and its Gulf Arab allies maintain that the Yemeni movement owes its military position to Iranian and Lebanese Hizbollah support, and Saudi Arabia in particular has labelled them at times as an Iranian proxy.¹¹⁶ Iran, for its part, officially rejects the accusation that it plays a direct role in the conflict or assists the Huthis militarily; its officials have long called for a political settlement to end the war and have offered to assist in bringing the Huthis to the negotiating table, as they claim they have done for the Stockholm Agreement.¹¹⁷

As for the Huthis, they deny receiving significant support from Tehran and maintain that their Zaydi religious practices are distinct and keep them at arm's length, doctrinally, from Iran.¹¹⁸ That said, their representatives acknowledge receiving political and military advice and some material support from both Tehran and Hizbollah, and that parts of the movement's military wing have grown closer to their

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019; two Huthi representatives, Muscat, Sanaa and via telephone, January and March 2020.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Hadi government official, Cairo, January 2020; government official, New York, February 2020; government official, via telephone, June 2020.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019; Jeddah, December 2019.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019; UAE official, May 2019; U.S. official, Washington, February 2020.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. For their part, Huthi officials say they accepted the Stockholm Agreement over Iranian objections. Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi official, March 2019.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi representative, March 2020.

Iranian counterparts over time.¹¹⁹ But they assert that Tehran does not have final say in strategic decisions, such as the use of missiles and drones.¹²⁰

The Huthi military spokesman's questionable claim of responsibility for the attack on oil installations in eastern Saudi Arabia in September 2019 arguably undermined Huthi assertion of full independence from Tehran. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. attributed the attack to Iran, and independent arms experts assessed that the attack was launched from Iran or by Iran-backed forces in Iraq.¹²¹ The close coordination required for the claim to come immediately after the strike, and the attack's sophistication, which experts say was beyond Huthi capabilities, gave the impression of the Huthis providing Iran with plausible deniability while risking considerable international diplomatic and military backlash.¹²²

The precise degree of Iranian support for and influence over the Huthis is hard to gauge. But several things seem clear. First, the Huthis remain a Yemeni group driven by domestic more than external priorities.¹²³ Secondly, continuing the war can only deepen ties between the rebels and Tehran, making a split less likely. Thirdly, the Huthis are keen to use Iran and the spectre of regional conflict as a bargaining chip in negotiations over a settlement to end the war. Huthi officials warn of deepening ties but frame the end of the war in Yemen as the true test of their relationship with Iran. A senior Huthi official said, "If they [Saudi Arabia and the U.S.] stop this total war against us, they could start a war in the region and we would not interfere. At that time, they will see whether we belong to Iran or make our own decisions".¹²⁴

It is also clear that, for Tehran, the Yemen war was from the outset a low-cost opportunity to bog down its Saudi rival. Iranian officials have also used Saudi conduct

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2020; Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interviews, arms expert with access to evidence of Iranian involvement, October and November 2019. A UN report published on 11 June assesses that the weapons used in the attack were of Iranian origin. See "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015): Ninth Report of the Secretary-General", UN Security Council, 11 June 2020. Iran has rejected the claim. See Michelle Nichols, "Arms seized by U.S., missiles used to attack Saudi Arabia 'of Iranian origin': U.N.", Reuters, 11 June 2020.

¹²² Evidence of Iranian military support for the Huthis has grown over the course of the conflict. The U.S. and other naval forces have intercepted weapons shipments apparently bound for Yemen in neighbouring international waters, and the Huthis have deployed increasingly sophisticated weapons systems in the field, which they are unlikely to have been able to produce themselves. Crisis Group interviews, Western weapons experts, September 2019 and March 2020. In 2019, the Huthis named an ambassador to Iran after a "state visit" by their spokesman to Tehran. See "Yemen Shiite rebels appoint an ambassador for first time", Bloomberg, 18 August 2019.

¹²³ The Huthis claim to have made decisions against Iranian advice on multiple occasions, including the choices to enter Sanaa in September 2014, advance on Aden in March 2015 and sign the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Sanaa, November 2014; Huthi representative, Sanaa, September 2015; and Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019. The Huthis explain missile and drone strikes on targets inside Saudi Arabia as proportionate responses to Saudi airstrikes, and as military pressure on the kingdom, which they see as their principal rival in the conflict, to end the war. Iranian officials likewise point to Huthi decisions with which they disagreed, notably the advance on Aden. Crisis Group interviews, Iranian officials, 2018-2019.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Huthi official, Sanaa, July 2019.

in the war, and U.S. support for the kingdom, to undercut criticism of Iran's own role in Syria and elsewhere in the region. An Iranian official said, "For us, Yemen was initially revenge for Syria. The Saudis wanted to turn Syria into our Vietnam. With their mistakes in Yemen, we saw an opportunity to return the favour".¹²⁵ They hewed to the Huthi line on what caused the war and how to end it.¹²⁶

Over time, Yemen has become increasingly entangled in the regional power struggle between Iran, on one side, and the U.S and its allies, on the other. While Tehran rejects the accusation, its foes see its hand in Huthi drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, including the dramatic strike on the oil fields, believing this last operation was Iran's way of responding to Washington's maximum pressure campaign and discouraging its Gulf allies from participating in it.¹²⁷ Pressing the Huthis to accept a political settlement in Yemen arguably is also a measure Iran can offer to help effect a broader regional and U.S-Iranian de-escalation.¹²⁸

Addressing Iran's relationship with the Huthis will be a critical component of bringing the war to an end, given Saudi focus on the issue as well as the allergic reaction many Yemenis have to the rebels' links to Tehran. Iran's full support for a political settlement, including halting military supplies to the Huthis, would doubtless assist in reaching a compromise, but it will be difficult to secure without a broader regional de-escalation that would provide Tehran with the incentive to do so. Absent such Iranian steps, there is an active debate among Yemeni and international policymakers over the Huthis' ability and willingness to independently strike, and carry through, a deal that would address Saudi concern vis-à-vis Iranian influence.¹²⁹

C. *The UAE*

The UAE joined the Yemen war in support of Saudi Arabia, an important regional partner whose security Abu Dhabi believed the Huthis' rise threatened.¹³⁰ Abu Dhabi changed the war's course in 2015, when its military helped local forces push the Huthi-Saleh alliance out of southern Yemen. Emirati commanders later oversaw both the liberation of Mukalla from AQAP in 2016, and the military campaign along the Red Sea coast over the next two years that produced the first major battlefield successes against the Huthis since 2015. Abu Dhabi also became Washington's main counter-terrorism partner in Yemen.¹³¹

The UAE's abrupt military departure from Yemen in 2019 came amid its growing tensions with the Hadi government, alongside increasingly mismatched Saudi and Emirati agendas. Emirati officials believed that the war could not be won militarily, particularly after the Stockholm Agreement, feared that the Saudis lacked an exit

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Iranian official, Tehran, 16 April 2020.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Brian Hook, "Iran's other terror front", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 2019.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, August-October 2019 and January 2020.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, August-October 2019 and January 2020; Hadi government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior UAE officials, Washington, March 2017; Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior U.S. officials, Washington, January 2020.

strategy, saw the Hadi government as corrupt and inefficient, and worried that Saudi support for Islah would empower the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³²

Differences over Islah, in particular, proved insurmountable. From 2016 onward, UAE officials framed their war effort as a campaign against the Huthis and AQAP, as well as Islah, which they argued was undermining the war effort and destabilising the south.¹³³ Seeking a counterweight to Islah, the UAE worked with an array of groups it saw as more closely aligned with its own worldview, including precursors of the STC, quietist Salafis and Tareq Saleh's forces.

The Hadi government increasingly frames the UAE's role in Yemen much as it does Iran's: that of an outside power supporting non-state armed actors to serve its own regional agenda. By 2017, Hadi government officials had accused the Emiratis of "acting like occupiers".¹³⁴ After the battle for Aden in August 2019, the animosity increased and Yemen's UN representative, Abdullah al-Saadi, accused the UAE of participating in an STC "coup".¹³⁵

The year 2019 was a turning point for the UAE's engagement in Yemen. Stymied on the Red Sea coast by the December 2018 Stockholm Agreement, which halted a battle for the city; openly berated by the Hadi government, its purported Yemeni ally; and under increasing scrutiny from the Western media, human rights groups and even the U.S. Congress for its role in the Yemen war, Emirati policymakers decided that the best course of action was to limit the UAE's exposure in Yemen by drawing down forces.¹³⁶ The troop reduction began in early 2019 but was announced only in July of that year.¹³⁷

A year after the redeployment began, however, Abu Dhabi's shadow still looms large for the Hadi government, Islah and many other Yemenis.¹³⁸ UAE forces maintain a presence for counter-terrorism purposes in Shebwa and Hadramawt, and they continue to provide logistics and training support to Tareq Saleh's forces in Mokha. Yemeni government officials claim that the UAE continues to support and influence its local allies, including the STC.¹³⁹ The leaders of many UAE-linked groups have homes in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, where at least some of their families continue to reside, as does Ahmed Ali Saleh, the late president's son and a popular candidate for future Yemeni leadership among some parts of the GPC. The UAE remains a potential patron for the GPC and other secular/anti-Islah groups.

In short, and even after its redeployment, the UAE continues to be an important external player with influence over a sub-section of the anti-Huthi bloc. For the moment, however, it has taken a meaningful step back from the Yemeni conflict, reduc-

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, UAE officials, Abu Dhabi, November 2018 and July 2019.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, UAE official, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

¹³⁴ "EXCLUSIVE: Yemen president says UAE acting like occupiers", *Middle East Eye*, 12 May 2017; "Yemen threatens to act internationally to stop UAE support for separatists", *Middle East Monitor*, 21 August 2019.

¹³⁵ "Yemen demands U.A.E.'s expulsion from Saudi-led coalition", *Wall Street Journal*, 22 August 2019.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior UAE officials, Abu Dhabi, June, November and December 2019.

¹³⁷ "UAE troop drawdown in Yemen was agreed with Saudi Arabia: official", Reuters, 8 July 2019.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hadi government official, Cairo, January 2020.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government officials, Amman, September 2019; Cairo, January 2020; via telephone, March and May 2020.

ing its direct military engagement and refocusing its energies on other domestic and regional priorities. The more hands-off approach was evident in April 2020, when the STC announced self-administration in the south. Secessionist leaders reported that, while they had informed Abu Dhabi of their intentions, they had received no indication of support for the move.¹⁴⁰ The UAE later republished a coalition statement rejecting the announcement – a move regional media interpreted as endorsement of its contents – and publicly called on both sides to return to the Riyadh Agreement.¹⁴¹ A senior Emirati official further clarified the UAE’s position: “They [the STC] have a genuine call for self-determination. But it must be through a political process. It cannot be achieved through the kinds of unilateral steps with which we disagree”.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, STC official, New York, April 2020.

¹⁴¹ See Nour Salman, “Saudi-led coalition calls for immediate return to Riyadh agreement”, Emirates News Agency, 27 April 2020; and Patrick Wintour, “Crisis in Yemen as Aden separatists declare self-rule”, *The Guardian*, 27 April 2020.

¹⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, senior UAE official, May 2020. See also Zainab Fattah, “UAE hints at frustrations with beleaguered Libyan ally Haftar”, Bloomberg, 17 June 2020.

IV. International Efforts to Break the Deadlock

UN-led talks in Kuwait and a subsequent round of negotiations led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in 2016 marked the most comprehensive attempt at ending the war to date.¹⁴³ While these talks were ultimately unsuccessful, the outlines of the agreement discussed in 2016 have acted as the UN's baseline for all subsequent negotiating rounds. Broadly speaking, the proposed deal consisted of a series of steps. First, the parties – the government and the Huthis – would implement a ceasefire and form a UN-chaired national security body to oversee interim security measures, beginning in the capital and extending to other major cities.¹⁴⁴ Secondly, they would form a national unity government comprising representatives from both sides. Thirdly, they would reintegrate state institutions under the new unity government, which would preside over a transition period culminating in national elections.¹⁴⁵

The Kuwait talks aimed to enact as much of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 as possible, restoring state authority and institutions in Sanaa by bringing the Huthis and their allies into power-sharing arrangements as a minority partner. This goal seemed somewhat plausible at the time. Many institutions remained intact in Sanaa; the power balance between the Huthi-Saleh alliance and the anti-Huthi bloc was closer to equilibrium; and the GPC was able to place at least some limits on the Huthis' political and military ambitions from within the Sanaa coalition. The talks failed notably because of an unbridgeable gap between the Huthis and the Hadi government over the sequencing of political and security measures and the proportionate number of positions each side expected in transitional governance and security arrangements.¹⁴⁶ These disputes became a common feature of all subsequent negotiations.

The government continues to demand that any agreement front-load security measures that benefit its side, including Huthi weapons handovers and withdrawal from Sanaa and other major cities, in exchange for limited Huthi representation in transitional military and governance arrangements.¹⁴⁷ For their part, the Huthis continue to push for a speedy transition to new governing arrangements that would leave them largely in control of the territory they already hold; they also still demand a share of power in new security and governance arrangements, likely 50 per cent.¹⁴⁸ The Hadi government rejects this demand outright, saying it greatly exaggerates the Huthis' social and political weight.¹⁴⁹

Since the Kuwait talks, the UN has also focused on getting the parties to agree to confidence-building measures, most recently as the second prong of a three-part proposal to end the war comprised of a nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian and eco-

¹⁴³ The Kuwait talks were the third of five rounds since the conflict began. The UN held two rounds in Switzerland in 2015 and another in 2018, before the Sweden talks in December 2018.

¹⁴⁴ These measures include the handover of heavy weapons by armed non-state actors (including the Huthis) to national authorities or a third party, and the handover of control over major cities to new state security services.

¹⁴⁵ Copy on file with Crisis Group, obtained in December 2016.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group Alert, "Central Bank Crisis Risks Famine in Yemen", 29 September 2016.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hadi government official, New York, February 2020.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Hadi government official, January 2020.

conomic confidence-building measures and an “urgent resumption” of the political process that the envoy announced in April 2020.¹⁵⁰ The UN has engaged the two main Yemeni sides in discussions over measures such as exchanging prisoners, making salary payments, lifting the Huthi siege of Taiz, reopening road networks and easing restrictions on Yemen’s land, sea and air borders, including reopening Sanaa airport for commercial flights. With confidence-building measures, sequencing has also been a source of disagreement. The Huthis argue, for example, that lifting coalition-imposed access restrictions should be part of a ceasefire that marks an end to the war, not a confidence-building measure taken as a series of steps after a ceasefire is in place.¹⁵¹

Issues of sequencing will remain a stumbling block in future negotiations. But given the country’s changed political realities, there are even bigger challenges. It is no longer clear that the Kuwait template is feasible, given that the power balance has shifted further in the Huthis’ favour. Now as then, the de facto authorities control around one third of Yemen’s land mass, two thirds of its population, the capital and, with it, the country’s main economic hub and its physical institutions. The Huthis have consolidated their hold on their areas and have the more effective military/security forces. By contrast, the government’s position has weakened. It has failed to build a strong anti-Huthi coalition, and instead has lost control of Aden, its temporary capital, to the STC.

As its credibility as an effective counterpart to the Huthis has shrunk, the government has focused on preserving its last major assets – territories remaining under its nominal control and its internationally recognised legal status. Government officials argue that Huthi territorial gains matter little and that Resolution 2216 remains the basic framework for a deal. In private, many government supporters acknowledge that any deal based on current political realities would rapidly sideline the president and his inner circle in favour of other groups.¹⁵²

Over time, UN Security Council member states have come to recognise that the UN envoy cannot produce a settlement that mimics the terms of Resolution 2216. As the Huthis’ power has grown and the government’s diminished, international attention has shifted to the potential for a deal between the rebels and Saudi Arabia. Many diplomats now see a private Saudi-Huthi understanding as the most important component of any successful political process. They are convinced that Hadi would be unable to resist Saudi pressure if Riyadh believes it has the right deal with the Huthis.¹⁵³

Yemen’s territorial and political fragmentation poses another challenge to the Kuwait framework. Since 2015, civil, military and security institutions have splintered into new, independent entities that operate across roughly five different cantons. The fractures make a two-party negotiation framework very hard to envision. Excluding key Yemeni power centres from a ceasefire, political settlement or both

¹⁵⁰ See “Briefing to the UN Security Council: UN Special Envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths”, Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 16 April 2020.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi representative, March 2020.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Hadi government officials, Cairo, January 2020; New York, February 2020.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, diplomat, April 2020.

could encourage spoiling and deal-making outside the confines of UN mediation, undermining the prospects of a durable national settlement.¹⁵⁴

The Kuwait draft accord called for state institutions to be reintegrated in Sanaa, staffed using pre-war personnel and overseen by a new unity government and a national military body. Rapid recentralisation of authority may no longer be realistic or even desirable, given the many powerful local groups' declared attachment to autonomous self-administration.¹⁵⁵ A return to pre-2014 civil-servant and military employment lists is also increasingly outmoded. This arrangement would likely benefit the country's traditional political parties – the GPC and, to a lesser extent, Islah – since their members disproportionately filled these government lists. Yet both have lost considerable political and military influence to new forces over the course of the war. Large numbers of fighters with the Huthis, the STC and other Hadi-aligned forces, including Salafis, could be left out.¹⁵⁶ Such exclusion, in turn, could create resentment among the newly unemployed, which could become an opportunity for post-conflict spoilers, such as AQAP and ISIS, or external actors to co-opt the jobless and derail the transition.

For these reasons, diplomatic consensus on how to end the war has shifted over time.¹⁵⁷ Many observers and experts do not believe that it is feasible to expect armed groups to hand over weapons quickly to a newly constituted national authority, and that attempts to make them do so could cause renewed conflict.¹⁵⁸ Instead, more gradual approaches are being discussed.¹⁵⁹

Most foreign officials also acknowledge that the process needs to be more inclusive. Some diplomats now believe that initial talks over a ceasefire and transitional settlement could be opened up to ensure that any agreement comprises, if not the full range of parties and interests involved in the conflict, then at least powerful military actors like the STC who have the ability to upend a settlement.¹⁶⁰ In November 2019, the UN Security Council called for “inclusive” national talks. For diplomats in

¹⁵⁴ For example, rumours have been rife in Yemen that the Huthis are engaged in direct and indirect talks with the STC and Islah over new cooperative arrangements. Crisis Group interviews, government officials, journalists, southern activists, Aden, March 2019; Amman, September 2019; Muscat, November 2019; Cairo, January 2020. Such an agreement could, in effect, supersede any UN mediation between the Hadi government and Huthis.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Aden, March 2019; Marib and Mukalla, January 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group fieldwork on the Red Sea coast in October 2018, in Aden in October 2018 and March 2019 and in Marib in January 2020 shows that the majority of forces in these areas, including Salafis, signed up to fight after the war began.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomat, Amman, September 2019; Western diplomat, New York, November 2019; Western official, New York, March 2019; Western officials and experts, via telephone, March 2019.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western diplomats, May-June 2020; UN adviser, February 2020; Yemeni analyst, March 2020; Yemeni researcher, February 2020.

¹⁵⁹ One option is “transitional arms control”, pursuant to which combatants would retain current lines of command and control as well as their weapons stockpiles, while accepting restrictions on weapon use and positioning, as well as increasingly intrusive monitoring. Eventually, parties would hand over weapons to national military/security institutions or third parties as specific transition milestones were reached. See Gregory D. Johnsen, “Assault on Yemen’s Al Hudaydah would be catastrophic”, *The New York Times*, 12 June 2018.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, New York, November 2020.

New York, this marked a progression in member states' positions, underscoring the need for an inclusive process and potentially affording UN Envoy Martin Griffiths more political cover to include a broader range of groups in talks.¹⁶¹

Griffiths recognises the need for greater inclusivity in the peace process in principle.¹⁶² But in practice he is mindful that the Huthis and the government, along with Saudi Arabia, strongly oppose the addition of new parties to the UN-led process, as it would dilute their influence over final settlement outcomes.¹⁶³ To date, the UN has not opened talks to additional parties and has instead tried to address the inclusion deficit through regular contacts with major stakeholders such as the STC and Tareq Saleh, and through informal Track II dialogues the envoy's office leads or participates in.

The envoy's office has made a particular effort to include female political and civil society activists in negotiations through a formal advisory role.¹⁶⁴ A UN-formed technical women's advisory group attended the talks in Sweden that led to the Stockholm Agreement and advised Griffiths there.¹⁶⁵ But the advisory group's members complain that the UN made poor use of their presence and that the final agreement did not reflect any of its input.¹⁶⁶ Other civil society groups similarly complain of a disconnect between Track II dialogues and UN-led negotiations.¹⁶⁷ Some activists, including women, also object to what they see as an international fixation on gender representation to the exclusion of a broader range of youth and civil society activists.¹⁶⁸

There is growing international and Yemeni consensus that the current negotiation framework is inadequate. Yet such criticism has yet to translate into a clear strategy for addressing the shortcomings. The questions for the UN, international policymakers and Yemenis are how much of a shift in the Kuwait framework would be necessary to accommodate new realities and how much change is possible.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, UN official, Amman, May 2020.

¹⁶³ Citing UN Security Council Resolution 2216, Saudi officials reject the idea that talks should be opened up. Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, New York, September 2019; Saudi official, via telephone, March 2020. The Hadi government rejects attempts to broaden inclusion in UN-led talks as an attack on its sovereignty and argues that all questions of state structure were settled during the National Dialogue Conference. Crisis Group telephone interview, senior Hadi government official, January 2020. The Huthis advocate a broadly inclusive Yemeni-Yemeni process, but as part of a transitional period once the war has been ended via a Huthi-Saudi agreement. Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, November 2019.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, UN official, Amman, September 2019.

¹⁶⁵ See "The Women's Technical Advisory Group Plays an Active Role during the Sweden Consultations", UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 12 December 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Although the group discussed the issues of prisoner exchanges and reopening roads in Taiz with the envoy, members say they were not consulted when the envoy and his team engaged in detailed discussions of these issues with the combatant parties. Crisis Group interviews, women's advisory group member, Amman, September 2019; women's advisory group member, Amman, October 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni civil society activist, Amman, September 2019; Yemeni civil society activist, Cairo, January 2020.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

V. An Imperfect Way Forward

A crucial factor in reaching an implementable agreement will be right-sizing the parties' expectations. However much Riyadh or the Hadi government may wish it, the Huthis will not surrender weapons or authority in Sanaa to the Hadi government. Nor will Iranian influence in Yemen vanish overnight. On the other side, the Hadi government, Saudi Arabia and their allies will not simply accept a Huthi-controlled central government and military. Local authorities in Aden, Marib and Hadramawt will not cede newly gained local autonomy to a central government whose powers were agreed upon without their consent, particularly one in which the Huthis are a major player. Nor are Tareq Saleh's or STC-aligned forces likely to submit to the authority of a unified defence or interior ministry in Sanaa if they are not part of an agreement. The STC will reject any deal to which it is not a party and which does not contain clear language on how to address the "southern question", grievances associated with Yemen's unity and many southerners' demand for separation.

A realistic approach does not mean starting from scratch or any party abandoning its position. The Kuwait framework could be adapted rather than completely rewritten. But changes to both the process – who is included and when – and the substance – issues of sequencing political and security interim arrangements, as well as a new central government's composition and authorities – are urgently needed, as is clear international support for any potential deal. Below are four suggestions for updating the approach to negotiations and improving the chances of a durable settlement.

A. *Expanded Participation in Negotiations*

Neither a ceasefire nor a political settlement will work without buy-in from Yemen's numerous military and political factions. Participation in negotiations therefore must be expanded.

One solution is to bring the different anti-Huthi groups and local authorities under the government umbrella. This move would be consistent with Resolution 2216. If Riyadh can overcome the intra-Yemeni disputes, this path would be the easiest, allowing the UN to sidestep, for the time being, questions of how to bring more groups into ceasefire arrangements and whom to include in an expanded political process. Yet given deep differences in the anti-Huthi camp, the Saudis have been unable to pull this approach off, and they may not succeed if they have more time. Even if they can, this approach has its limits. It may lead to an agreement that nominally includes other groups such as the STC under the government umbrella but fails in practice to give them sufficient independent voice in the course of negotiations to ensure a durable peace.

A similar solution could apply to the issue of expanding participation in ceasefire talks. UN officials are already negotiating the formation of a national military body to oversee ceasefire arrangements that includes representatives of the Hadi government and the Sanaa authorities. The UN should, at a minimum, ask Riyadh, the Hadi government or both to include military leaders from the STC and Tareq Saleh's camp in their delegation to the body, as happened with a military redeployment committee formed to carry out the Stockholm Agreement.

If Riyadh and the Hadi government cannot bring more groups under the government's umbrella, the UN could expand formal participation in ceasefire negotiations and/or political talks. Resolution 2216 allows for expanded formal participation, but political resistance from the Hadi government, the Huthis and Saudi Arabia has made this task virtually impossible for the UN envoy, despite the November 2019 Security Council statement calling for inclusion.¹⁶⁹ As such, a formal expansion of the talks would likely need explicit UN Security Council backing through a new resolution mandating greater inclusion. Although controversial, such a step would be in keeping with past precedent. The concept of national consensus underpinned the 2011 GCC initiative and supportive Security Council resolutions, as well as the country's 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference.

It is clear that greater buy-in will be necessary for a sustainable ceasefire and political agreement, given the ability of groups such as the STC to thwart any deal to which they are not a party, and their express demand to be brought into negotiations. Yet the UN will need to balance increased buy-in against the need to press on with negotiations. In other words, the UN should expand participation, but not in an open-ended way that would indefinitely delay or prevent a settlement.

If the UN expands the number of those involved in talks, accordingly, it will need to select the participants. It could use the participation quotas from the National Dialogue Conference as a rough guide to proportionate representation, with some modifications in order to reflect developments of the past five years, such as the rise of the Huthis and STC.¹⁷⁰ Returning to the conference's framework would make negotiations broadly inclusive of Yemen's political parties and other constituencies such as women's and other civil society groups. The drawback would be its complexity and the risk of prolonging negotiations, given the likely challenge of getting multiple groups to reach a consensus on knotty issues like interim governance in a short time.

Other options are available. For example, the UN could expand participation by bringing in a limited number of groups such as the GPC (which might require multiple representatives if they cannot reach consensus on delegates, given their own fragmentation), the STC, and members of the pre-2011 opposition coalition that includes Islah (the Joint Meeting Parties) into talks. As part of a new resolution, the UN Security Council could mandate a certain number of women representatives within each delegation, an approach that would be more effective than relying solely on inputs from advisory groups and Track II dialogues. The envoy would also need to consult with a wider range of groups informally, providing guarantees that the perspectives of those not officially in talks will be taken seriously. Consultations with a wider range of parties could be facilitated through a UN-formed group, again potentially using National Dialogue Conference participation quotas as a rough guide, to help formulate and build consensus around the text of a political settlement, particularly with respect to transitional governing arrangements.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, June 2020.

¹⁷⁰ In November 2012, a preparatory committee agreed on quotas for delegations to the National Dialogue Conference. The GPC received 112 seats, southern separatists 85, Islah 50, independent youth, women's and civil society groups 40, the Yemen Socialist Party 37, the Huthis 35, the Nasserites 30, and an assortment of parliamentary groups and new political parties 34. Tribal and religious leaders and representatives of minority groups were apportioned 62 seats.

The UN could also use ongoing Track II dialogues, which include a range of political players and civil society representatives, more effectively to amplify the perspectives of various constituencies. Track II conversations concern a spectrum of critical topics from future security arrangements to state structure, women and youth roles in political processes and economic reform options. If they were distilled into a short list of policy priorities, the wealth of information produced by these discussions could allow the UN to incorporate local and/or non-elite perspectives into the peace process.

B. *Reaching an Agreement That Recognises Ground Realities*

The main stumbling block in previous negotiations has been the sequencing of political and security arrangements. Any future agreement will also need to grapple with this issue in order to reach agreement on a unity government and a strategy for dealing with the country's many armed groups. To be successful, negotiations may need to take a less ambitious approach than in the past, one that acknowledges that transitional political and military authorities in the capital must be inclusive and find a way to work with Yemen's cantonised reality.

One option would be to limit the scope of an initial settlement to an agreement that stops the fighting, while setting up a new central government with a limited number of cabinet posts and a caretaker remit focused on vital state functions, such as securing the ceasefire and managing issues of fiscal and monetary policy, salary payments, foreign affairs and trade. Yemeni parties could then negotiate outstanding issues necessary for a final political settlement, such as state structure, at a later date. During the transition, the central government and any transitional security bodies would need to work in close coordination with local governorate authorities. In short, a more gradual approach to peacemaking would mean starting with a freeze in hostilities without a major initial handover of weapons or territory, followed by limited interim security arrangements and the creation of central and local power-sharing measures that largely preserve today's devolved power structure rather than speedily reconstituting a highly centralised government.

Such an approach would create new challenges. The anti-Huthi camp likely would view it as sanctioning a Huthi coup d'état, as it would allow the rebels to continue to control large parts of Yemen for a time. Yet, even in this scenario, the Huthis would need to withdraw some of their forces from the capital to allow a transitional government to be seated in Sanaa. Importantly, it also risks simply delaying a new round of violence – allowing various combatants to reinforce their positions – if new transitional government and security institutions are ineffective and the political transition falters. Although the approach has risks, there arguably are few alternatives if no side is willing to hand over weapons or transfer authority to a new central government, even if they agree to it on paper. At least this way the majority of fighting can stop for a while, allowing Yemenis the opportunity to jump-start a political process.

A more gradual approach to an interim settlement would likely need to empower local institutions in the 21 governorates as part of an initial agreement. An executive in Sanaa could act as a coordinating and support mechanism for government and security bodies at the governorate level, while focusing on redeploying and monitoring front-line armed forces, as well as collaborating with local authorities to deliver services. One benefit of a governorate-centric approach is that local authorities al-

ready have strong constitutional powers that were not activated in the past but could be during the transition. The primary challenge would be the composition of governorate authorities. The Hadi government and the GPC, among others, might want to reinstate pre-2015 personnel; the Huthis, STC and local authorities in Marib and Taiz would likely say no. The sides would need to compromise. They could do so by retaining the governors already in control in existing cantons and then coming to a consensus on who to put in charge of contested governorates. This bargain might be difficult to strike, but it should not be impossible.

Not all aspects of government can or should be decentralised. As mentioned above, central institutions, such as the central bank and finance ministry, will need to be re-integrated as a matter of priority if the economy is to be stabilised and salaries paid.

C. *Learning from the Past by Prioritising Bread-and-Butter Issues and Effective Local Oversight Mechanisms*

Policymakers working on Yemen should learn the lessons of the past when setting post-conflict priorities. In this respect, addressing bread-and-butter issues as well as oversight of any new transition will be vital to the success of a political settlement. Yemen's 2012-2014 political transition did not fail just because of the Huthi-Saleh coup that ended it. Nor was the 2011 uprising sparked by the Islah-GPC rivalry alone. Political competition and finger pointing between the component parts of the unity government formed in Sanaa in 2011 only compounded grievances, which the Huthis later exploited, using protests over the Hadi government's lifting of oil subsidies in 2014 as justification for entering Sanaa and seizing power.¹⁷¹

To generate buy-in for a UN-brokered political settlement and transition, four inter-related bread-and-butter issues will need to take priority: the economy, basic security, service delivery and salaries. For the economy to start moving again, Yemen's roads, port and airports must reopen. Yemenis need to be able to travel safely throughout the country, and trade needs to resume. Regular provision of electricity, education and sanitation will ease the physical and financial burden on businesses and individuals the war has imposed. Salary payments will help get institutions working again and provide economic stimulus. Small-scale reconstruction projects of the kind that are most important to local communities – roads, schools and other basic infrastructure – will provide both much-needed jobs and visible symbols of peace's benefits.

Making these things happen in reality and not just on paper will require money, explicit policy prioritisation from the new government and international stakeholders, and oversight. Particularly given the impact of COVID-19, global economic downturn and collapse in oil prices, Yemeni resources and foreign financial assistance almost certainly will fall short of what is needed to rebuild, pay salaries and revive the economy. As a result, any new Yemeni government will need to set realistic expectations in terms of what it can deliver. What funding is available should be channelled toward salary payments and small- and medium-scale reconstruction projects that benefit local economies, rather than large-scale infrastructure projects or other ambitious schemes that are unlikely to come to fruition or help the majority of Yemenis.

¹⁷¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, op. cit.

Significant improvements can also be made without additional resources. Lifting the current, often crippling restrictions would make a big difference in terms of reviving the economy. First, as the Huthis ask, ports and airports will need to be reopened. This step will require approval principally from Saudi Arabia, potentially in conjunction with a UN mechanism to minimise the risk that arms and other war materiel will be smuggled into the country. This could happen as part of the package made up of a ceasefire, confidence-building and a return to political talks that the UN is already working on. For roads to reopen, the national military-security body formed to oversee security arrangements during a transition would have to work with local security actors and governorate-level political actors; this approach is also part of UN planning, but deserves additional focus, at first through augmented UN outreach to governorate-level security actors and subsequently through quick formation of governorate-level security committees as part of UN-led negotiations.

Just as important, effective oversight of the transition will be vital to its success. Arguably, a fatal flaw of the 2012-2014 transition was the failure of the UN, or Yemeni political parties, to establish a dispute resolution mechanism to settle disagreements over the interpretation of transitional arrangements. The UN-drafted implementation plan called for the formation of a Yemeni “interpretation committee” to settle disputes. Yet President Hadi refused to form the committee and chose to end most quarrels via presidential decree.¹⁷² Given that the confusing and contradictory array of references the parties inevitably will argue form the principles for a future transitional period (the Yemeni constitution, the GCC initiative, the National Dialogue outcomes and various UN Security Council Resolutions), such a mechanism will be crucial. The formation of a Yemeni-led, Security Council-supported oversight body early in any future transition should be a priority for Yemeni and international actors alike.

Non-combatant feedback and oversight, in particular from civil society and women’s advocacy groups, would also improve chances of success. Women already have played an important role in local peacebuilding, including in negotiating over reopening roads in places such as Taiz and Marib and in pressing the conflict parties to release prisoners.¹⁷³ Given that they have proven effective in working on these issues, it makes sense to include them in an advisory role at a minimum.

D. *Ensuring International Backing*

Only Yemenis can forge a lasting peace, but they will need external political and financial support. International actors working in Yemen will thus need better coordination among themselves. To date, a profusion of mediation initiatives has complicated international efforts to end the war. As Crisis Group has argued before, to revive diplomacy, the UN should help establish an international contact group it would chair to support the envoy’s efforts, taking a more proactive approach than the current P5 ambassadorial working group, which meets irregularly and lacks a clearly defined

¹⁷² Crisis Group Middle East Report N°125, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, 3 July 2012.

¹⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Taizi activist, Aden, March 2019; leader of local peacebuilding organisation, Marib, January 2020; leader of an NGO focused on getting civilian political prisoners released, Marib, January 2020.

agenda.¹⁷⁴ The contact group's primary objective should be to coordinate different mediation tracks, jointly determine steps that will maximise chances of successful UN-led negotiations and establish a division of labour among its members to support the peace process. Later, it should begin planning for "day zero" – the steps needed once an agreement is in place, including what role the international community could play in assuring the conflict parties that violators of any pact would face consequences, whether sanctions or otherwise.

As noted, Yemen will also need significant financial support if and when there is a deal to end the war. At a minimum, the central bank will need hard currency to stabilise the riyal and support trade and imports; the government will likely need assistance in paying salaries; central institutions will need additional funding to cover operating costs; and the country will need to be rebuilt, likely starting with small local infrastructure projects. Combined, the price tag for these four basic aspects of economic support will likely run into the tens of billions of dollars, on top of funding for humanitarian and development aid that is already being distributed.

Conversations are already under way over who will fund post-war reconstruction. The broad assumption is that, as in the past, the Gulf states will have to foot most of the bill. But these states are under mounting financial stress due to the collapse in oil prices and the impact of COVID-19.¹⁷⁵ Given these constraints, it is not realistic to assume that foreign donors will be able to meet all of Yemen's post-war financial needs. Indeed, during the previous transition, just a fraction of the money promised to Yemen (much of it for overambitious infrastructure projects) was delivered. As mentioned above, financial constraints are another reason why a post-war government ought to be streamlined and focused on vital governance functions.

¹⁷⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°74, *Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen*, 17 March 2020. This group could comprise the P5, Gulf Cooperation Council members (most importantly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Kuwait) and the EU, and be chaired by the UN envoy's office.

¹⁷⁵ See Ben Cahill, "Gulf States: Managing the Oil Crash", Center for Strategic and International Studies, 7 May 2020.

VI. Conclusion

Over the past decade, what was already the Arab world's poorest country has become the site of the world's worst humanitarian crisis as well. War in Yemen has killed as many as 112,000 people, while hunger and preventable disease have killed tens of thousands more. About two thirds of the population rely on some kind of aid, while 3.65 million people – more than 10 per cent of the population – have been displaced internally.

Despite the urgency of addressing this dire situation, the conflict parties are once again at risk of missing an opportunity to end the war, even as COVID-19 is spreading quickly among one of the world's most vulnerable populations. It should be unconscionable to both the parties and the outside powers aiding the war effort to let another chance at peace slip by. Yet, thus far, all parties still appear to think that the time is not right to make a deal.

The Huthis, who believe that the Saudis badly want out of the war, appear to think that time is on their side – that they will become more powerful and have a better bargaining position if the fighting continues. But there is no guarantee that Riyadh will keep seeking an exit if they feel that the Huthis are being overly uncompromising. The Hadi government and Saudis may also move to tighten the economic noose around Huthi-controlled areas, further constraining the Huthis' inability to pay salaries or deliver services to the population under their control.

The Hadi government may calculate that bargaining now, when the Huthis have the clear military advantage, is too risky a gamble and that it is better served by holding out for reinvigorated Saudi support. But a longer war makes little sense for either the Hadi government or Saudi Arabia. Their bargaining positions have eroded over the past five years, as the Huthis consolidated control over the north west and the anti-Huthi bloc crumbled under the weight of its own contradictions. In Kuwait, Riyadh came close to securing an agreement that would have allowed it to declare victory and leave Yemen. Failing to close the deal cost Saudi Arabia dearly. Its international reputation has suffered greatly from the war, as have its increasingly strained public finances. Continuing the war could prove a spectacularly bad gamble if the anti-Huthi bloc were to implode or one of its components were to enter an alliance with the Huthis, a distinct possibility.

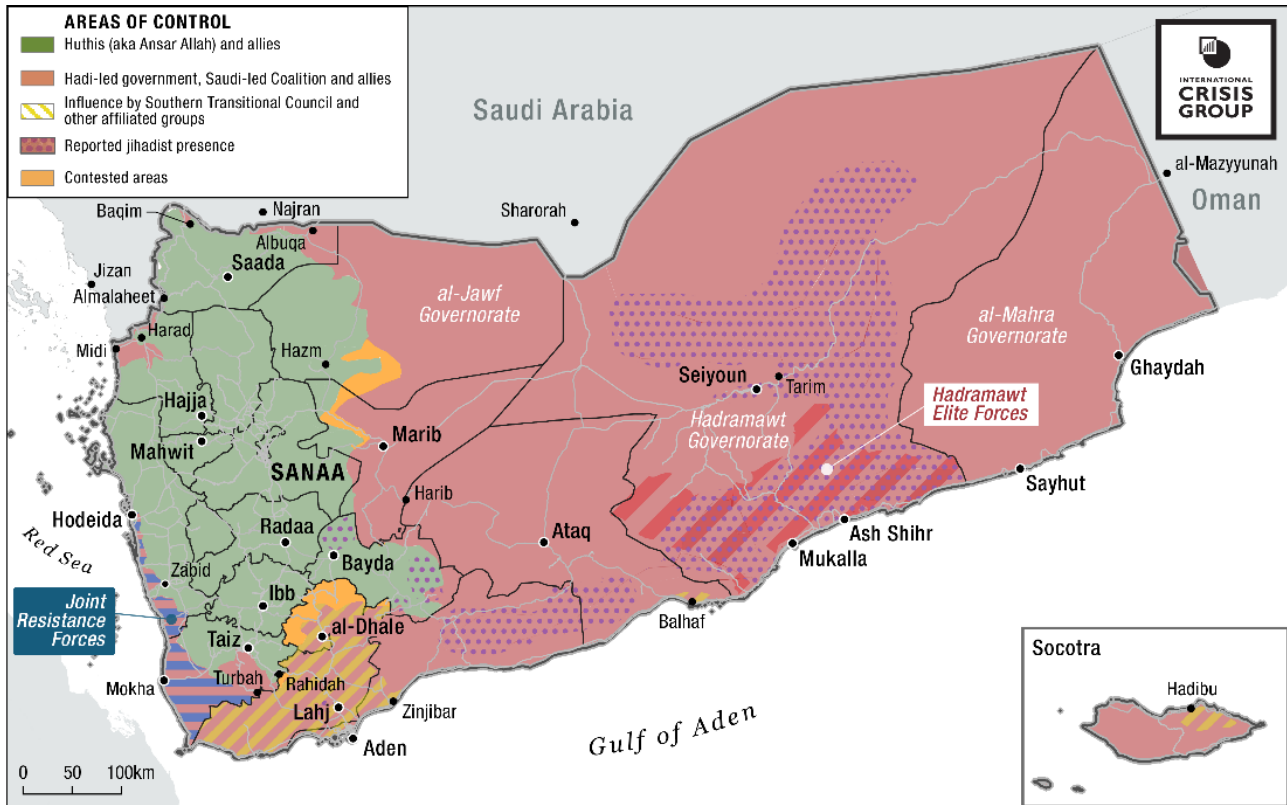
The Hadi government and its allies see any deal with the Huthis that goes further than the aborted Kuwait agreement as being tantamount to legitimising a coup. But if the government decides that no deal is better than one that gives the Huthis a significant stake in Yemen's future, it could lead to a stronger Huthi alliance in the north and a weaker anti-Huthi bloc everywhere else, ironically rendering the government's fears of a Huthi takeover more likely.

There is no justification for further delay. After five years of fighting, great human suffering and the country's fragmentation, Yemen has two paths open to it: an imperfect political settlement that halts the war and initiates dialogue and power sharing, or continued violence that yields more agony but no clear winner at the national level. All sides need to recognise that the longer the war lasts, the hollower an improbable military victory will be.

**New York/Washington/Amman/Abu Dhabi/Riyadh/Muscat/
Aden/Sanaa/Marib/Brussels, 2 July 2020**

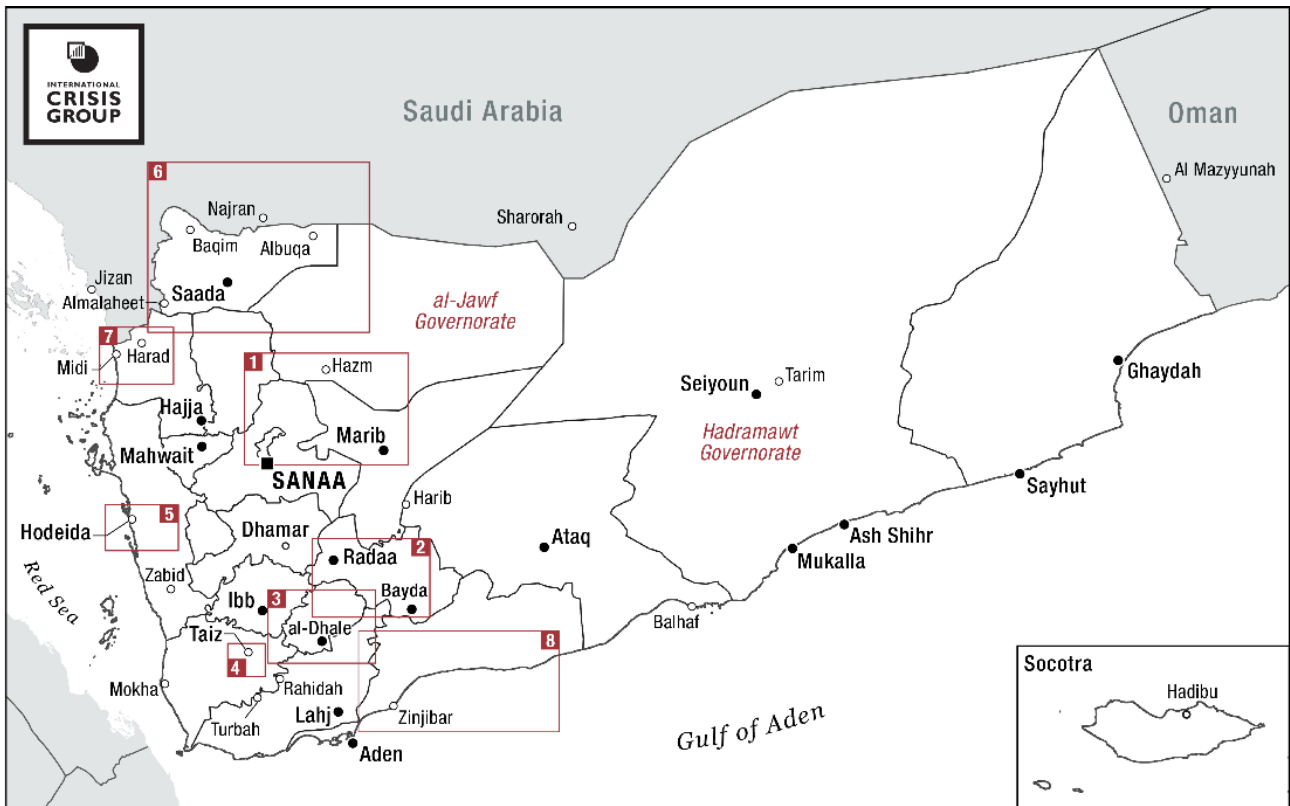
Appendix A: Maps of Yemen National Divisions and Key Front Lines

Yemen Political and Territorial Divisions as of June 2020



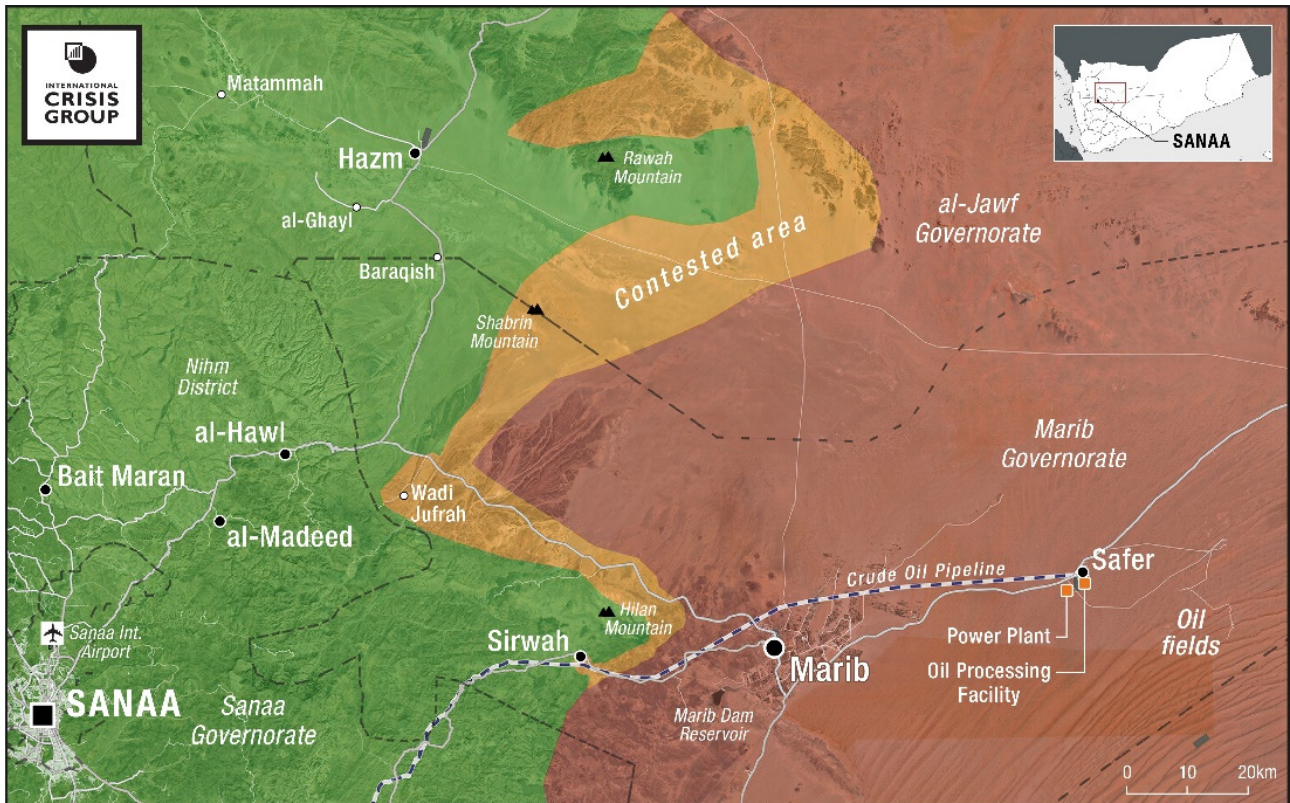
Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the International Crisis Group. [Open sources; OSM; Esri, Twitter, Local media outlets]

Yemen Key Front Lines as of June 2020



Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the International Crisis Group. [Open sources;OSM; Esri, Twitter, Local media outlets]

Front Line 1: Marib/al-Jawf/Sanaa Front Line (Huthis vs. Government-affiliated Forces) as of June 2020



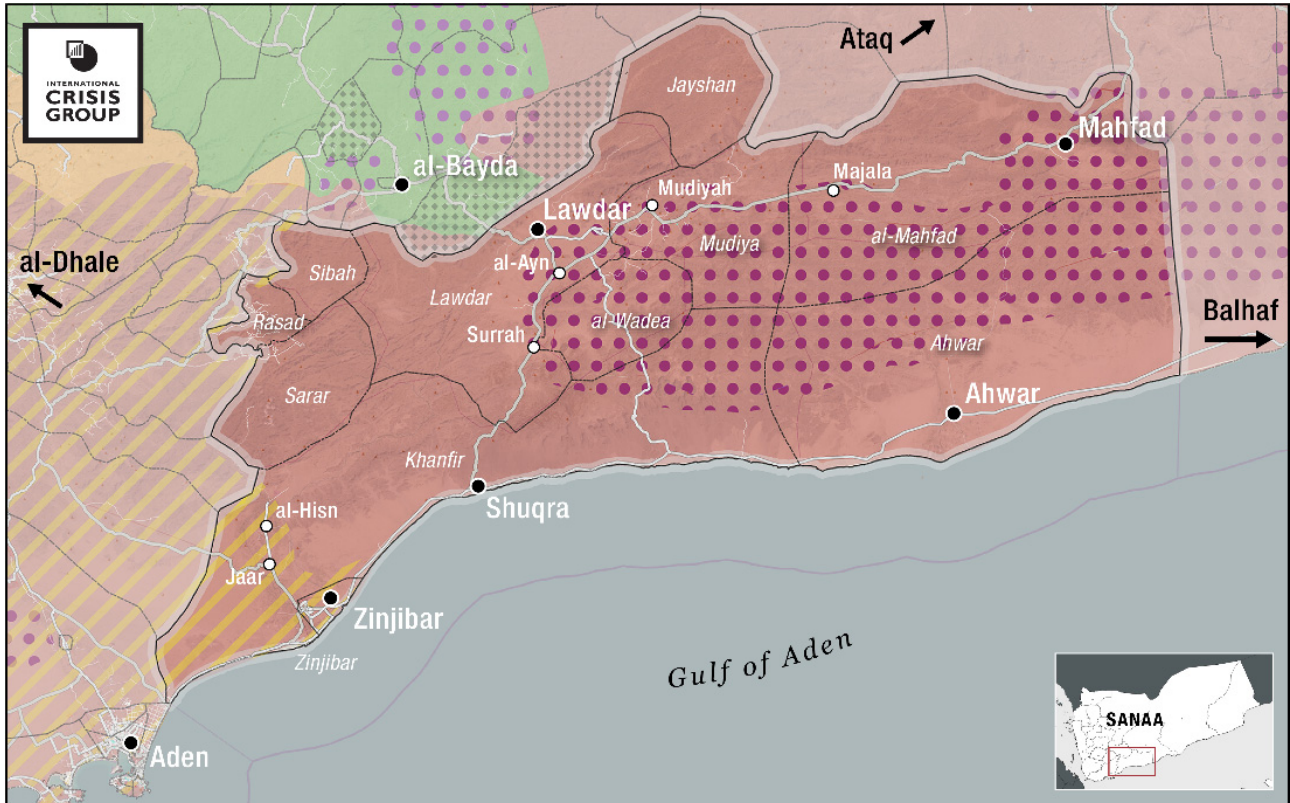
Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the International Crisis Group. [Open sources;OSM; Esri, Twitter, Local media outlets]

Front Line 6: Yemen/Saudi Arabia Border Front Line (Huthis vs. Saudi-overseen Yemeni Forces) as of June 2020



Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the International Crisis Group. [Open sources; OSM; Esri, Twitter, Local media outlets]

Front Line 8: Abyan Front Line (Southern Transitional Council vs. Yemeni Government-affiliated Forces) as of June 2020



Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by the International Crisis Group. [Open sources;OSM; Esri, Twitter, Local media outlets]

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

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Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2017

Special Reports and Briefings

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

Israel/Palestine

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

The Gaza Strip and COVID-19: Preparing for the Worst, Middle East Briefing N°75, 1 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Middle East Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°187, 21 June 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries, Middle East Report N°194, 14 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Evading the Gathering Storm, Middle East Briefing N°70, 29 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, Middle East Report N°207, 11 October 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS, Middle East Report N°208, 18 November 2019.

Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, Middle East Report N°209, 25 November 2019 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk, Middle East Report N°215, 15 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

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The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline, Middle East Briefing N°77, 23 April 2020 (also available in Farsi).

The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown, Middle East Report N°212, 27 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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