



# After al-Bayda, the Beginning of the Endgame for Northern Yemen?

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**Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°84**

New York/Brussels, 14 October 2021

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**What's new?** After consolidating their hold upon al-Bayda, a strategically located governorate in central Yemen, the Huthi rebels are making a multi-front push into government-controlled territory to isolate, eliminate or co-opt tribal and other rivals. Their immediate objective is Marib, whose capture they hope will mark a turning point in the war.

**Why does it matter?** After al-Bayda, a Huthi victory in Marib seems more likely. It could deal a fatal blow to the Yemeni government and throw UN mediation efforts into further disarray. Nevertheless, Marib's fall would far more likely shift the conflict into a new and potentially bloodier phase than end it.

**What should be done?** The new UN special envoy should travel to Sanaa and Marib as soon as possible to launch intensive intra-Yemeni and regional diplomacy and, with support from the Security Council's permanent members, engage with any and all proposals to prevent a destructive battle for Marib.

## I. Overview

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At least for the time being, Yemen's Huthi rebels have won the battle for the strategically important al-Bayda governorate. As al-Bayda lies next to oil- and gas-rich Marib province, the northernmost part of the last contiguous bloc of government-controlled territory, taking it was a significant victory. The Huthis soon made rapid gains in Marib as well as Shebwa and Abyan provinces – all of which border al-Bayda – apparently to cut supply lines connecting their various foes and expand their Marib offensive. These advances could strike a decisive blow to the government. The rebels have also divided their opponents, geographically and politically. A renewed Huthi push toward Marib city is now likely, as is massive displacement. Yemen's UN envoy, backed by the UN Security Council's five permanent members, should travel to Yemen to meet the country's armed factions and their outside sponsors to seek a halt to fighting. In particular, he should get to the capital Sanaa and Marib, exploring all options to prevent a deadly showdown. He should also articulate a strategy for ending the wider war, given the failure of past approaches.

Developments in al-Bayda are arguably as important to the balance of power as the Red Sea coast battles in 2018 and the Huthi breakthroughs in northern Yemen in early 2020 and 2021 that brought the rebels to Marib's gates. The Huthi consolidation in al-Bayda also makes deep-seated patterns clearer. The Huthis are running a well-coordinated and constantly evolving military campaign on several fronts. In parallel, they are reaching out to local tribal leaders in an effort to negotiate their way into Marib. They are aided in these endeavours by infighting and institutional decay among the anti-Huthi forces on the ground and within the Saudi-led coalition that backs them. Inertia is setting in among foreign policymakers, who ran out of ideas some time ago and, in many cases, are losing interest in Yemen as other international priorities emerge. Many foreign officials working on Yemen appear unaware of the significance of the Huthis' territorial gains. They still make pleas for an end to fighting and peace talks but lack a common and practicable vision for achieving either.

The al-Bayda consolidation appears to be the last step toward what could be a final battle defeating government-aligned forces in Marib city or at minimum encircling and isolating them. If the Huthis win this battle, they will become the unchallenged military and political hegemon in Yemen's north, marking an endgame of sorts for the conflict's current phase. But the war itself would not be over and nor would the Yemeni people's suffering. The Huthis' capture of Marib city in itself would likely send thousands fleeing from their homes. Moreover, the rebels would probably then push southward to confront the southern secessionists in a bid to seize the whole country or at least force the southerners into a deal favourable to the Huthis over a division of territory and spoils. Such an offensive would inaugurate a new phase of war, one in which the internationally recognised government would have a much smaller role and over which would-be outside mediators would have less influence.

The new UN envoy, Hans Grundberg, has his work cut out. He will need to do two things at once. First, he should quickly engage in face-to-face talks with the warring parties to explore all options to avert a battle for Marib city and, ideally, set the stage for a nationwide ceasefire and talks over a political settlement. The starting point would be to hear out, without necessarily accepting, the Huthis' proposals and push the government to articulate a position of its own that reflects the reality of today's power balance. At the same time, Grundberg and his office will have to forge consensus behind a broader mediation strategy tailored to the war's current dynamics. As Crisis Group has argued in the past, such an approach needs to include a far wider range of actors in peace talks: Yemen's war is a multiparty conflict, not a binary power struggle between the Huthis, on one side, and the government and its Saudi backers, on the other. Given the increasing importance of economic factors in the war, a new strategy also requires the UN team to form a dedicated unit tasked with integrating an economic pillar into the mission's peacemaking.

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## II. Al-Bayda Breakthrough

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Since 2020, Yemeni and international observers have viewed the battle for Marib governorate as a potential tipping point in Yemen's six-and-a-half-year-old civil war, in which Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) all play important roles. Huthi military breakthroughs in Sanaa and al-Jawf governorates in early 2020

provided the group with a staging ground for a concerted offensive in western Marib.<sup>1</sup> But the Huthis were constrained in their ability to launch a similar campaign in the province's south, where the city, their ultimate objective, is located. To enter southern Marib, the Huthis needed to control more territory in neighbouring al-Bayda and Shebwa governorates.

Al-Bayda thus became a strategic prize.<sup>2</sup> It borders the last three governorates where government-aligned forces are in majority control: Marib to the north, Shebwa to the east and Abyan to the south. (Al-Bayda also abuts al-Dhale and Lahij governorates, which are controlled by the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council, or STC, which is anti-Huthi but sees the government as an equally existential threat.) Marib and Shebwa are also home to large oil and gas fields, representing a major proportion of government and local authority revenues, which the Huthis accuse government-aligned factions of looting.<sup>3</sup> Along with towns in northern Hadramawt, which borders Marib and Shebwa to the east, the three governorates have been functioning as an integrated bloc.<sup>4</sup> Military forces and materiel, as well as basic goods like food, fuel and cooking gas, regularly transit between these governorates, making the connecting roads into lifelines. Yet the al-Bayda conflict, which has cut off many of these roads, has not attracted the same international attention that the earlier Red Sea coast and Marib campaigns did.

The Huthis and the government saw al-Bayda as crucial to the conflict before 2020. In a signal of its importance, the fighting there has been sharper and more sustained than on most other fronts.<sup>5</sup> From the moment the Huthis launched their campaign in Marib in early 2020, pro-government military officials and tribal leaders agitated for a move into al-Bayda to divert the Huthis' attention and shut them out of southern Marib for good.<sup>6</sup> Government-aligned forces and other fighters intensified their efforts across the width of the province, leading to a year of back-and-

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°74, *Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen*, 17 March 2020. Additional gains in February 2021 brought Huthi forces to within 10km of Marib city, the government's last urban stronghold in northern Yemen, and tightened the Huthis' grip on the western district of Sirwa.

<sup>2</sup> Maged Madhaji, "Al-Bayda Governorate: Too Strategic to be Forgotten", Sana'a Center for Strategic and International Studies, 4 June 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "Conflict Escalation in Marib and Potential Humanitarian and Economic Impacts: Scenarios", ACAPS, July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Hadramawt governorate, to the east, is also under the government's nominal control. It is politically divided between coastal areas controlled by UAE-backed forces and a sparsely populated desert interior held by a government-aligned faction. Both forces in Hadramawt have largely stayed out of the conflict.

<sup>5</sup> The Huthis sought to control al-Bayda in its entirety when the war began but were unable to hold key districts. The government, its local allies and its backers in the Saudi-led coalition have long sought to disrupt the Huthi war effort by staging attacks inside al-Bayda, as have militants of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the local franchise of the Islamic State, whom the Huthis accuse the government and Saudis of enlisting on their side. Government officials, including senior military leaders, have argued repeatedly that their side's complete takeover of al-Bayda could change the course of the war with the Huthis. They question why the government and Saudi-led coalition have not devoted more men and resources to the cause.

<sup>6</sup> "The battle of al-Bayda confuses the Huthis and pushes them to talk about peace", *Al-Arab*, 7 July 2021 (Arabic).

forth battles.<sup>7</sup> Since mid-2021, the Huthis have turned the tide in al-Bayda while keeping up the pressure in Marib. In late September, the Huthis declared that they had “liberated” the governorate (the Huthis frame the conflict as a defensive war of necessity pitting their nationalist forces against Yemeni mercenaries abetting Saudi-led aggression) and turned their attention once again to Marib.<sup>8</sup>

### **III. Strangle and Negotiate, Divide and Conquer**

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Since late September, the Huthis have used al-Bayda as the launching pad for a multi-front campaign in western Shebwa and northern Abyan. They simultaneously began pushing harder along the southern Marib front they had opened in June 2020, when they seized Radman al-Awadh district on the al-Bayda-Marib border.<sup>9</sup> These moves appear to be aimed at cutting off the major roads linking the three governorates, and the various anti-Huthi forces based inside them, as well as at providing Huthi forces with new routes into southern Yemen.

A two-pronged Huthi strategy now appears to be in play. In the north, they are strangling their rivals militarily while offering a way out through non-aggression pacts. Meanwhile, in southern and western Yemen, they are trying to divide and conquer anti-Huthi forces by deepening the fault lines among them.

#### **A. Strangle and Negotiate**

In northern Yemen, the Huthis have long paired military pressure aimed at isolating, demoralising and weakening enemy forces with offers of talks as a way to gain territory. They have put this strategy on clear display in Marib, where they have tried to broker deals with tribal leaders to allow themselves to move on Marib city unhindered.<sup>10</sup>

Leaders of the Murad tribe, who control Marib’s southernmost districts, have been a particular target for the Huthis’ attempts to bargain their way into the governorate. After seizing Radman al-Awadh in 2020, the Huthis moved into three Murad-controlled districts in southern Marib. They then began to push into Jebel Murad, the last line of defence for neighbouring al-Juba district, the Murad heartland, and

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>8</sup> “Army reveals details of ‘Dawn of Freedom’ operation to liberate Bayda”, Saba News, 23 September 2021; and “Yemeni government forces again on the backfoot”, Al Jazeera, 14 September 2021. Both the government and the Huthis regularly make claims about territorial gains that later prove to be false. In the case of al-Bayda, anti-Huthi sources from al-Dhale, Aden, Abyan, Shebwa and Marib, as well as Riyadh, have confirmed that the Huthis have been in effective control of the entire governorate since late September. Crisis Group interviews, four contacts in Aden, Shebwa, Marib and Riyadh, September 2021.

<sup>9</sup> “The Houthis announce control of the center of a district in al-Bayda”, Anadolu Agency, 19 June 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Based on their experiences elsewhere in the north, the Huthis appear to calculate that tribal and other local leaders will seek to protect their communities when they are confronted with overwhelming force and bereft of outside support. Over the past decade, numerous local groups have retreated, entered into non-aggression pacts or even joined the Huthis’ side so as not to fight them. Crisis Group telephone interviews, tribal leaders, senior governorate official, June 2020 and December 2020.

the site of the main road connecting Ataq, capital of Shebwa, with Marib city, which al-Juba borders to the north.<sup>11</sup> After moving into two districts in northern Shebwa in late September, the Huthis seized Marib's Harib district, to al-Juba's east, and began a renewed push into the Murad stronghold from the south, east and west.<sup>12</sup> Since then, tribal leaders say, the Huthis have tried harder to convince the Murad to agree to a truce. The leaders have rebuffed the overtures so far.<sup>13</sup>

The Huthis seem to have a similar game plan at the governorate level. Early in their offensive in 2020, senior Huthi officials announced a nine-point initiative to prevent a battle for Marib.<sup>14</sup> In June 2021, Abdulmalik al-Huthi, the movement's leader, presented a formal version of this initiative to members of a visiting Omani delegation, who passed it on to Saudi officials in Riyadh.<sup>15</sup> The Huthis propose that their de facto authorities in Sanaa form a joint administration with Maribi leaders, as well as joint security and resource management structures that would oversee distribution of fuel from the governorate's oil and gas facilities throughout Huthi-controlled territories, which would include Marib. The joint administration would use fuel sales revenue to pay civil servants their salaries.<sup>16</sup> Since early 2021, the Huthis have sought to increase pressure on local authorities by launching a string of missile and drone strikes on rival forces in Marib, including reportedly targeting Marib's governor, Sultan al-Arada. Local media claim that these strikes have caused civilian casualties.<sup>17</sup>

The Huthis' proposal is similar in some ways to the Stockholm Agreement, inked to prevent a battle for Hodeida city in December 2018. That agreement outlined a deal for joint security and revenue management along with a ceasefire in and around Hodeida. But it remains largely unfulfilled, with the Huthis and government repeatedly tussling over questions of who should secure the city and how port revenues should be collected and distributed. The Marib initiative is far more explicit in saying the Huthis' Sanaa-based civilian authorities would play a leading role in administering Marib.

Tribal and governorate authority leaders have thus far rejected the initiative, as have Yemeni government and Saudi officials. But Huthi supporters with ties to the group's leadership say they are sure the other side will change its mind as the rebels tighten the noose around Marib.<sup>18</sup> The Huthi takeover of Harib cut another section

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<sup>11</sup> "Marib: The fall of 'Jebel Murad' and a number of sites at the Huthis' hands", Hayrout, 16 September 2020 (Arabic); "Battles intensify in Marib", Hayrout, 25 October 2020 (Arabic).

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Murad tribal leader, 29 September 2021. See also "A new war on Marib ... The first strong tribal response to the Houthi initiative", *Al-Mashhad*, 23 August 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>14</sup> Text of the Huthi proposal on file with Crisis Group.

<sup>15</sup> "A great deal of movement on Yemen ... The Huthis welcome discussions about the peace process and the humanitarian situation, and the Yemeni foreign minister visits Muscat", Al Jazeera, 5 June 2021 (Arabic). Oman has sought throughout the conflict to mediate among the Huthis, the government, local forces and Saudi Arabia. At the beginning of 2020, the U.S. asked Muscat to play a stepped-up role. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Omani officials, May and September 2021.

<sup>16</sup> The proposal also calls for power plants in Marib to be reconnected to the national grid in Huthi areas and for an oil pipeline running from Marib to Huthi-held Hodeida to be switched back on. Text of the Huthi proposal on file with Crisis Group.

<sup>17</sup> "Yemeni gov't says Houthis bombed Marib governor's house", Debrief, 28 September 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi supporter, September 2021.

off the road connecting Marib with Ataq, leaving only one major road linking Marib city to the rest of the country, the 400km eastbound desert highway to Seiyoun in northern Hadramawt.<sup>19</sup> But Huthi confidence has yet to translate into a military win. Local forces have put up much stiffer resistance to the Huthis' takeover attempts than the rebels appear to have anticipated. Tribal leaders and residents say they are preparing for bloody street battles in Marib city.<sup>20</sup> Such a standoff is all but guaranteed to deepen Yemen's internal displacement and humanitarian crises.<sup>21</sup> At minimum, it would leave Marib besieged from all sides.

### B. *Divide and Conquer*

In southern and western Yemen, the Huthis are seeking to exploit a rich seam of intra-Yemeni divisions. In Abyan governorate, for example, government-affiliated forces have been battling both the Huthis and fighters from the STC. After the STC took over Aden in August 2019, its forces attempted to seize Abyan and Shebwa.<sup>22</sup> Tensions between the government and STC have ebbed and flowed since Saudi Arabia brokered a deal between the two sides to end the fighting in November 2019, the Riyadh Agreement, which neither side has yet fully implemented.<sup>23</sup>

Huthi officials have played up STC-government tensions in their statements, joining the STC in labelling pro-government forces as Islah or al-Qaeda members. Islah is Yemen's main pre-war Sunni Islamist political party, whose military and tribal networks have played a crucial role in filling the ranks of anti-Huthi forces in Marib, Shebwa, Abyan and Taiz.<sup>24</sup> The STC, which is closely aligned with the UAE, shares Abu Dhabi's distaste for the Muslim Brotherhood, to which Islah has historical ties. Like the Emiratis, the STC conflates Islah and the Brotherhood with jihadist groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Huthi officials have also sought to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and the STC, alleging that the Saudis are trying to build their own "takfiri", or Salafi-jihadist, forces to rival the STC in areas the group controls.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Huthis, who are best suited to warfare in Yemen's rugged mountains, will be hard pressed to control this road. It traverses a flat desert that is wide open to Saudi airstrikes. Throughout the conflict, the Saudi-led coalition has been able to hold such terrain and, for this reason, a Huthi push to seize this road seems unlikely any time soon. But additional gains in northern Shebwa could position the Huthis to attack the road with small cells of fighters, as they have done along the Red Sea coast since UAE-backed Yemeni fighters occupied the main roads there in 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Maribi tribal leader, April 2021; senior official, May 2021; resident, July 2021. See also "Houthis face a pivotal stage: victory in Marib or sanctions", *Al-Arab*, 5 May 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>21</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen*, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°71, *After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape*, 30 August 2019.

<sup>23</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Commentary, "Heading Off a Renewed Struggle for Yemen's South", 29 April 2020.

<sup>24</sup> For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°216, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, 2 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup> In a 3 October 2021 Twitter thread, Mohammed al-Bokhaiti, a senior Huthi leader, accused Saudi Arabia of attempting to oust the STC using Salafist fighters. Those who embrace "takfiri" ideology,

The STC has sought to exploit the disorder caused by the Huthi gains in al-Bayda. STC President Aydrous al-Zubaidi proclaimed “emergency law” in southern Yemen on 15 September, providing STC-aligned security forces with stepped-up powers of arrest that government officials argue are not Zubaidi’s to give, and in which they see the latest in a series of breaches of the Riyadh Agreement.<sup>26</sup> STC officials have called for government-affiliated military units in Abyan to stand aside and let STC forces enter the governorate to mount a defence, not of Marib but of southern Yemen, where the STC wants to restore an independent republic.<sup>27</sup> In response, some government officials and local fighters blame the STC for the Huthis’ success in al-Bayda, charging that the secessionists deliberately blocked a government advance into al-Bayda from the south in June 2021. Some even accuse the STC of collusion with the Huthis.<sup>28</sup>

It was not only the STC-government relationship that came under renewed strain with the Huthis’ breakout from al-Bayda. Huthi gains in Shebwa’s north-western districts of al-Ain and Bayhan, where the rebels have tribal allies, also spurred re-tribinations among tribal leaders, local authorities, the Yemeni government and the STC over what caused the losses.<sup>29</sup> Some local leaders accused government forces of withdrawing without a fight, blaming corruption and the government’s failure to pay its troops for a number of months.<sup>30</sup> Even before fighting entered the governorate for the first time since 2017, tensions were rife among the government’s local officials, tribes and other groups that had worked together with the UAE’s backing before 2019. In August, these frictions led to a military standoff between government- and UAE-aligned forces around the UAE-controlled port of Balhaf (between Aden and Mukalla) that local mediation has paused but not resolved.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, a war of words flared between government officials and leaders from Taiz city, on one side, and Tareq Saleh, a one-time Huthi ally – and nephew of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh – who commands the UAE-backed forces arrayed against the Huthis on Yemen’s Red Sea coast, on the other.<sup>32</sup> Some Taizi leaders suspect that Saleh is more interested in controlling Taiz than he is in helping defeat the Huthis.<sup>33</sup> Senior government officials echo these complaints, arguing that Saleh should

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as some jihadist circles do, arrogate to themselves the right to excommunicate from Islam those Muslims whom they deem to have fallen away from true religion.

<sup>26</sup> Ahmed Al-Haj, “Yemen separatists declare emergency amid protests in south”, Associated Press, 15 September 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, STC official, Aden, 30 September 2021. The People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen, also known as South Yemen, was an independent state from 1967 to 1990, when it unified with the north.

<sup>28</sup> “Pro-government military commander blames STC for setback in Bayda”, *Debrief*, 16 July 2021.

<sup>29</sup> “The Huthis achieve an important breakthrough in Shabwa: A new detour to encircle Marib”, *The New Arab*, 21 September 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>30</sup> “The fall of the ‘Bayhan districts’ into the Huthis’ hands: causes and consequences”, *South 24*, 30 September 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>31</sup> “Tribal and social factions in Shabwa and Abyan call for a popular escalation against Emirati forces in Balhaf”, *al-Mahra Post*, 31 August 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>32</sup> Khaled Farouq, “Taiz: A Hotbed of Irregular Militias”, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, 14 September 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Taizi official, July 2021.

reopen the Red Sea front and move upon the Huthi-held port of Hodeida, where a UN-brokered deal halted an imminent offensive in 2018.<sup>34</sup>

The Huthis may also have played up unrest sparked by the economic crisis in government-controlled areas. Aden and Mukalla, two major port cities, have witnessed protests since mid-2021, with people taking to the streets to decry the government's failure to pay public-sector salaries, ensure reliable electricity and fuel supplies, and contain the rapidly rising cost of living, the latter being the result primarily of severe currency depreciation.<sup>35</sup> Similar demonstrations have erupted in Taiz, generally a pro-government territory, where residents called upon the internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, to step down.<sup>36</sup> Protesters have held Saudi Arabia in similar opprobrium, because, as local officials also say, it has been unwilling or unable to boost support for its Yemeni allies during the Huthis' Marib campaign, an accusation Riyadh denies.<sup>37</sup>

#### **IV. International Inertia**

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The international response to events in al-Bayda has been muted. Until late September, many Western officials believed that the Huthis' failure to enter Marib city after a year and a half of trying meant that the entire conflict was a stalemate. Foreign officials say they have also been waiting to see how the new UN envoy to Yemen will approach his mission.<sup>38</sup> The Swedish diplomat Hans Grundberg, who started the job on 5 September, less than two weeks before the Huthi consolidation in al-Bayda, inherited stalled negotiations over a four-point initiative proposed by his predecessor, Martin Griffiths, to avert a battle for Marib.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, government official, September 2021.

<sup>35</sup> In September, the Yemeni riyal fell below 1,100 to the U.S. dollar in Aden for the first time ever, translating into a reduction of Yemenis' purchasing power by more than 80 per cent over the course of the conflict. "Yemeni rial plunges to record low in Aden", *Al-Mayadeen*, 8 August 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>36</sup> This demand is becoming increasingly common among Yemenis who previously limited their criticism of the president and his government, for fear of boosting the Huthis' confidence and bolstering their international positioning.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Saudi official, March 2021; Taiz resident, Taiz governorate authority official and local Marib governorate authority official, September 2021. Protesters in Taiz have focused mainly on the currency crisis and deteriorating economic conditions in the city. Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, September 2021. See also "Yemen: Protests in Taiz over currency crisis", *Middle East Monitor*, 19 September 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, New York, Washington and London, September 2021.

<sup>39</sup> The UN initiative seeks to barter Huthi demands for the reopening of Hodeida port and Sanaa International Airport for the nationwide ceasefire the government wants and the national political talks for which the UN has long pushed. Text on file with Crisis Group. Negotiations over the initiative have been deadlocked since 2020. In early 2021, the Huthis began saying they will not discuss a ceasefire until Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government reopen the port and airport unilaterally, a position the government has rejected out of hand. Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, September 2021. Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, September 2021. The Huthis have also begun to promote their own initiative to end the war, in effect a Saudi withdrawal and agreement to pay reparations in exchange for border security. They handed this proposal to the Omani delegation that visited Sanaa in May. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Omani official, Huthi representative, Muscat, September 2021.



All signs point to continued inertia among outside powers rather than a reinvigorated approach. The U.S. in particular looms large over the conflict but is unlikely to take active new measures to change its course. Saudi air support for local forces has been key to preventing a Huthi breakthrough in Marib. But Saudi officials have warned that bombing can do little more to stop the Huthis from gaining ground. The Biden administration froze transfers of precision-guided munitions to Saudi Arabia in February, citing concerns about violations of international humanitarian law.<sup>40</sup> President Joe Biden said at the time that while the U.S. was committed to Saudi Arabia's defence, it would halt all offensive support for the Saudis' war in Yemen.<sup>41</sup> Some Western officials believe that, at current usage rates, the shrinking Saudi stockpile of U.S.-made precision-guided munitions, employed for close air support of Yemeni forces in Marib, could force the Saudis to slow their use within the next year.<sup>42</sup>

Yemeni and Saudi officials had hoped that the U.S. could be convinced to reverse this policy, on the basis that air support in Marib is defensive rather than offensive in nature.<sup>43</sup> But it has become clear that the Biden administration, which is generally sceptical of the utility of extensive U.S. military engagement in Yemen and also contends with an anti-war faction in the Democratic Party and increasing bipartisan criticism of Saudi Arabia, sees additional military support of any kind for the Saudi war effort in Yemen as a red line.<sup>44</sup> In a 27 September meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan is reported to have pressured Riyadh to end restrictions on the entry of goods into Hodeida port, negotiate arrangements that would enable Sanaa International Airport to reopen and work out a deal with the Huthis to end its participation in the conflict.<sup>45</sup>

Sullivan is also reported to have warned bin Salman that pending Congressional legislation, including amendments to the National Defense Authorization Act, could force the administration to further constrain U.S. military cooperation with Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup> The Saudis' local allies argue that Riyadh could and should provide more arms, including battle-changing technology. But they say the Saudis are quietly downgrading their military presence in Marib, surmising that Riyadh is slowly divesting itself from Yemen under U.S. pressure.<sup>47</sup> Yemeni government officials contend that the Huthis, who dissect broadcast news reports emerging from Washington on social media, interpret political discourse in the U.S. as swinging in their favour.<sup>48</sup>

Some Yemeni observers have pinned their hopes for an end to the fighting on Saudi-Iranian discussions brokered by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the most recent round of which took place on 21 September, and on back-channel Saudi-

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<sup>40</sup> Joe Gold and Aaron Mehta, "Boeing, Raytheon missile sales to Saudi Arabia paused by Biden administration", *Defense News*, 5 February 2021.

<sup>41</sup> "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World", White House, 4 February 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, New York, September 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Saudi official, February 2021; Yemeni government official, May 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, U.S. officials, March, May and September 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, September 2021. See also Barak Ravid, "Jake Sullivan discussed human rights and Yemen with Saudi crown prince", *Axios*, 28 September 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, September 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Maribi tribal leaders, January 2020; governorate officials, June 2020; senior military leaders, December 2020.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government official, New York, September 2021.

Huthi talks, including with Omani mediation.<sup>49</sup> Saudi and Iranian officials are reported to have discussed Yemen during their talks, leading to speculation in regional media that the war may soon come to a close.<sup>50</sup> But Huthi and Iranian officials alike insist that Tehran has no veto power over Huthi decision-making.<sup>51</sup> Further, with a victory in sight in Marib that would considerably strengthen the Huthis' hand, it is not clear why Iran would push its Yemeni allies to negotiate a conclusion to the conflict now rather than later when they might have full control of northern Yemen.

Huthi-Saudi talks are no panacea, either. Riyadh and Sanaa are still far apart on the question of what ending the war entails. The Huthis point to the twelve-point plan first proposed by senior leaders in 2020 and later transmitted to Saudi Arabia via Oman by Abdulmalik al-Huthi as the war's solution. In response, Saudi officials cite a March 2021 statement that repackaged the Saudi position in negotiations overseen by Griffiths, then still the UN envoy, as a peace initiative.<sup>52</sup>

Some U.S. policymakers believe that additional pressure on Saudi officials could lead to a compromise that would see Riyadh curtail its airstrikes and support for anti-Huthi groups in exchange for a halt to Huthi missile and drone attacks in Saudi Arabia.<sup>53</sup> But the differences between Huthi and Saudi demands go far beyond the issue of border security. The Saudis, for example, believe a settlement should mean an end to Huthi ties with Iran and dismantlement of the rebels' missile stockpile, conditions that the Huthis reject. A deal would likely require lengthy, in-depth negotiations rather than quick consultations. Regional officials are sceptical that the Huthis and Saudi Arabia have the capacity to reach such an agreement bilaterally, while noting that the two sides often spurn outside help when it is offered.<sup>54</sup>

While some form of Huthi-Saudi understanding will be essential to ending the conflict, a deal alone will not end the bloodshed. Yemeni armed groups that have lined up against the Huthis over the past six years have demonstrated how loath they are to fall under the rebels' rule. In the event of a Huthi-Saudi deal, they could well continue the fight, including in the form of an insurgency in Huthi-controlled areas, while some could seek to exploit the new conflict to recruit fighters on a more overtly religious basis.<sup>55</sup> If the Huthis take Marib, they are likely to pursue additional gains in the south, potentially drawing the UAE, which claims to be out of the Yemen war, back in to support the STC and its other local allies. The Huthis are also likely to try brokering a deal with the STC, but such an accord would need approval from the STC's main external ally, the UAE, placing both the STC and Abu Dhabi in a delicate position if Saudi Arabia opposes the pact. The UAE and Saudi Arabia strengthened their ties in the war's early days, but their relations have reportedly cooled since then as their regional agendas diverge.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, former Yemeni official, Yemeni politician, September 2021.

<sup>50</sup> "Exclusive: Iran, Saudi Arabia agree to create mechanism to end Yemen war, restore ties", *Amwaj*, 4 October 2021.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi representative, April 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> "Saudi Arabia announces Yemen peace initiative", *Arab News*, March 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, New York, August-September 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, regional officials, May and September 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Salisbury, "Misunderstanding Yemen", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 September 2021.

<sup>56</sup> "Saudi, UAE leaders hold call amid rising regional rivalry", Reuters, 7 September 2021.

The question of sovereignty would also rear its head. To date, Saudi Arabia has endorsed Hadi as Yemen's legitimate president. It could switch this position as part of a deal with the Huthis or out of a loss of confidence in Hadi should Marib fall. That reversal could mean an end to the Hadi presidency, leaving Yemen in legal limbo, with no group or individual seen internationally as the lawful authority. Hadi's failures as president are widely understood in Yemeni and diplomatic circles. But his international recognition, and the Huthis' lack of it, has acted as a form of leverage for mediators seeking a political settlement to end the war. Were he to be removed, the Huthis could credibly argue that his replacement has no such legitimacy and refuse to negotiate with any internationally backed government, pressing instead for their own leaders to be recognised as Yemen's sovereigns.

## **V. The Beginning of the Endgame?**

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While an endgame of sorts may be in sight in the war for Yemen's north, a Huthi victory there is unlikely to mean an end to the war writ large. Instead, Yemen may be on the verge of a new, bloodier and more sectarian phase of conflict, as the Huthis extend their reach southward and their opponents fight back, with or without Saudi or other regional support.

Grundberg, the new UN envoy, has a mountain to climb. If the Huthis take Marib during his early days in the job, the UN and major powers involved may well lose any remaining credibility as players able to end the conflict. Already, many anti-Huthi Yemenis grumble that the world favours the Huthis, citing international outcry over the deal to end the UAE-led advance on Hodeida and the relatively muted response to the rebels' push into Marib. The envoy also has little to work with. The Hadi government has refused to countenance compromise measures or talks before a ceasefire, arguing that parley with the Huthis will simply strengthen their hand.<sup>57</sup> As for the Huthis, they refuse truce talks until restrictions are lifted on Hodeida port and Sanaa airport is reopened to commercial flights.<sup>58</sup> Both parties concur that any ceasefire must be nationwide and not limited to Marib or any other single front. Yet they do not hold a duopoly over the use of force. Yemen's is a multiparty conflict.<sup>59</sup> For a ceasefire to work, other parties fighting on the ground will need to agree to it.

As Grundberg, who was previously EU ambassador to Yemen, knows full well, the UN alone cannot strong-arm any party into a deal. In particular, it cannot force the Huthis into simply ceding their position of strength for no strategic gain. Grundberg may also want to avoid getting sucked into dealing exclusively with narrow, tactical concerns. His predecessor, Griffiths, spent much of the first three years of his tenure trying to prevent a battle for Hodeida and then resolving spats between the Huthis and the government over the deal that he had brokered.

Another challenge is that, as of now, Grundberg lacks a realistic framework for political talks, even if he is able to broker a ceasefire. He appears to recognise that the UN's two-party mediation strategy, which was formulated in 2015 and includes only

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<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yemeni government official, Cairo, October 2021.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, op. cit.

the Huthis, on one side, and the Hadi government and its Saudi backers on the other, is badly outdated.<sup>60</sup> But if he is to change the approach and make the process more inclusive – and thus more effective – he will need time to consult the Yemeni and regional conflict parties and cajole them, with the help of major powers and others on the Security Council, into enrolling in the new scheme. It will be no small challenge for the new envoy to revise and build consensus for a new framework, all the while responding to the urgent near-term imperative of averting a battle for Marib city.

To stand any chance, Grundberg will have to do two things at once: first, intensify the UN's efforts to work with conflict parties inside Yemen; and, secondly, begin the hard work of developing a conflict resolution strategy that deals with ground realities and lays out a common international vision for ending the war sustainably. As ever, what is needed is intensive, UN-led face-to-face talks among Yemen's multiple armed factions and their outside sponsors.

In the near term, the new envoy should, with the support of the UN Security Council's five permanent members, travel to Sanaa and Marib to explore every available option for averting a battle for Marib city. He should ask the U.S. and UK to ensure that Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government do not stand in the way of any travel or consultations he plans. He should ask China and Russia to assist him in travelling to Sanaa to meet with senior Huthi representatives. Grundberg should also seek support in this endeavour from Oman and Iran, which can speak directly with the top Huthi leaders, who have reportedly refused so far to receive the envoy in Sanaa.

As for the substance of talks, Grundberg will have to at least engage with the Huthis' demands, given their battlefield advantage. Travelling to Sanaa in the hope of persuading the Huthis to negotiate a truce in Marib will be futile unless he also listens to them lay out their perspective on the war as a whole. The Huthis will insist on discussing the Marib initiative and the proposal for a nationwide settlement they shared with Oman, and their demands for Sanaa airport to be reopened and restrictions on Hodeida lifted before they engage in negotiations of any kind. The UN envoy cannot simply disregard the Huthis' bargaining position. Nor, once he has heard them out, is he obliged to accept their position as a *fait accompli*, as some in the anti-Huthi camp fear would happen. He will, however, have to explain his understanding of the Huthis' position to Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government.

While the government in particular is likely to reject the Huthis' views out of hand – officials say they will discuss any and all proposals, but only once a ceasefire agreement is in place – Grundberg could impress upon them three things. First, the benefits of preventing a battle for the city arguably outweigh the costs of the Huthis gaining an administrative hold over the governorate. Those costs can be kept low especially if the parties can strike a deal that does not lead to *de facto* Huthi control of Marib and if they can broaden talks to encompass the key economic questions of revenue sharing and civil service salaries.

Secondly, if Hadi and Saudi Arabia reject the Huthi proposal, the UN envoy should push them to make a counter-offer. International frustration is growing not only with the Saudi stranglehold upon Sanaa airport and Hodeida, but also with the Hadi government's apparent resistance to developing its own negotiation platform beyond

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<sup>60</sup> "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen", Office of the Special Envoy to the Secretary-General for Yemen, 10 September 2021.

the “three references” (to the 2011 initiative brokered by Gulf powers, the outcomes of the 2014 national dialogue and the 2015 UN Security Council resolution) and Saudi Arabia’s March 2021 proposal, which in reality simply articulates its position on the UN’s stalemated four-point initiative.<sup>61</sup>

Thirdly, Grundberg could encourage the government and Saudi Arabia to lift their fuel embargo on Hodeida without surrendering sovereignty over the port. They might also publicly notify the UN that they will allow commercial flights into Sanaa airport, with the understanding that the issue would require highly technical discussions over how such flights could operate.<sup>62</sup>

Overall, the government does not have a strong hand. Officials argue that the Marib offensive is not putting the Huthis in a winning position but instead slowly bleeding the rebel forces.<sup>63</sup> They also posit, however, that the Huthis *perceive* themselves as winning and thus have no reason to negotiate. They expect the rebels to use talks to regroup for a fresh offensive.<sup>64</sup> Yet the government began making the first argument in early 2020, and the Huthis have made considerable gains since then. The Huthis have proven better at running a multi-front, attritional offensive than many anticipated. Government officials also acknowledge that their side lacks a coherent strategy for pushing back the Huthis and that their internal divisions obstruct formulation of such an approach.<sup>65</sup> Diplomats generally agree that if the war continues on its current trajectory, the government will lose more ground.<sup>66</sup> Sooner or later, the government will have to grapple with its precipitous recent deterioration and the decline in its leverage in negotiations with the Huthis. If Marib falls, as some of its own officials say, the government may not survive.<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, the new UN envoy should also task his office with formulating a wider strategy to resolve the war that better reflects the nature of fighting. As Crisis Group has long argued, to reckon with Yemen’s fragmentation and the multiple armed actors vying for power the UN will need a more inclusive political framework.<sup>68</sup> Just as important, if Yemen’s slide into economic collapse cannot be halted, intra-Yemeni fighting may soon become so chaotic as to make a coherent political approach, no matter how inclusive, unworkable. For this reason, the UN must place the economy, which is increasingly entangled with the military conflict, on an equal footing with political and military issues.

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<sup>61</sup> See footnote 39.

<sup>62</sup> The airport issue is particularly complex because any deal to reopen it to international commercial flights would need agreements on flight destinations, airport staffing and security, and the validity of Huthi-issued passports. The Huthis have asked for the airport to be connected with all possible airports and carriers, with their security services overseeing passport control. The government and Saudi Arabia have asked that flights be limited to a small number of carriers and destinations, and that they oversee passport and visa verification. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yemeni government official, March 2021; Western official, April 2021; and UN official, May 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni official, New York, September 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni official, New York, September 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yemeni officials, March, August and September 2021.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, September 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yemeni officials, March, August and September 2021.

<sup>68</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, op. cit. See also Middle East Report N°221, *The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen*, 18 March 2021.

Addressing the war's economic aspects will require a dedicated team focused on the topic, rather than a few individuals covering the economy along with other duties, as is now the case.<sup>69</sup> As Yemeni economic experts have recommended, the envoy should form a specialised unit that can analyse and integrate economic factors into the mission's broader approach to ending the war.<sup>70</sup> If a deal were brokered to prevent a battle for Marib, for example, the UN might find itself overseeing two mechanisms, in Hodeida and Marib, that are supposed to collect and disburse revenues among civil servants. It might even find itself committed to working on a nationwide plan for revenue collection and distribution that sidesteps political control. Either of these schemes will require detailed analysis, planning and operational capabilities that the UN does not possess at present.

None of these tasks is easy. In fact, some may be nearly impossible. But progress on one track – whether fine-grained mediation to avert the Marib offensive based on face-to-face meetings or articulation of a strategy that accords with the conflict's complexity – will falter without movement on the other. An agreement to stop the fighting in Marib and/or a nationwide ceasefire will be sustainable only if anchored in a political framework that all parties can buy into, even if grudgingly. Grundberg and his staff will need to figure out how to move at two speeds simultaneously – working in crisis mode but with an eye to the long term – if they are to have any success in the coming weeks and months.

Grundberg will need support to update the UN approach, given the likely push-back from the conflict parties and their backers, as well as the capacity crunch in his office. Crisis Group has repeatedly advocated for formation of an international working group chaired by the envoy's office. This group's primary objective should be to endorse a long-term vision for the conflict's resolution, 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. The contact group should at minimum include the UN Security Council's five permanent members, representatives from the Gulf Cooperation Council states and perhaps the European Union.

## **VI. Conclusion**

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Too often over the course of the Yemen war, diplomats and policymakers have been lulled into a false sense of security. They have at times tricked themselves into believing that the conflict has few more twists and turns to offer and argued that it will soon wind down. Yet in 2016, one year into the war, UN-led peace talks broke down, and an economic conflict erupted alongside the military one, deepening ordinary Yemenis' suffering. In 2017, the Huthis killed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president and their erstwhile enemy turned ally, muddying mediation efforts. In 2018, the UAE-led push northward up the Red Sea coast almost led to a bloody battle for Hodeida and widespread famine. Then, in 2019, STC-government infighting left the

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<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, September 2021.

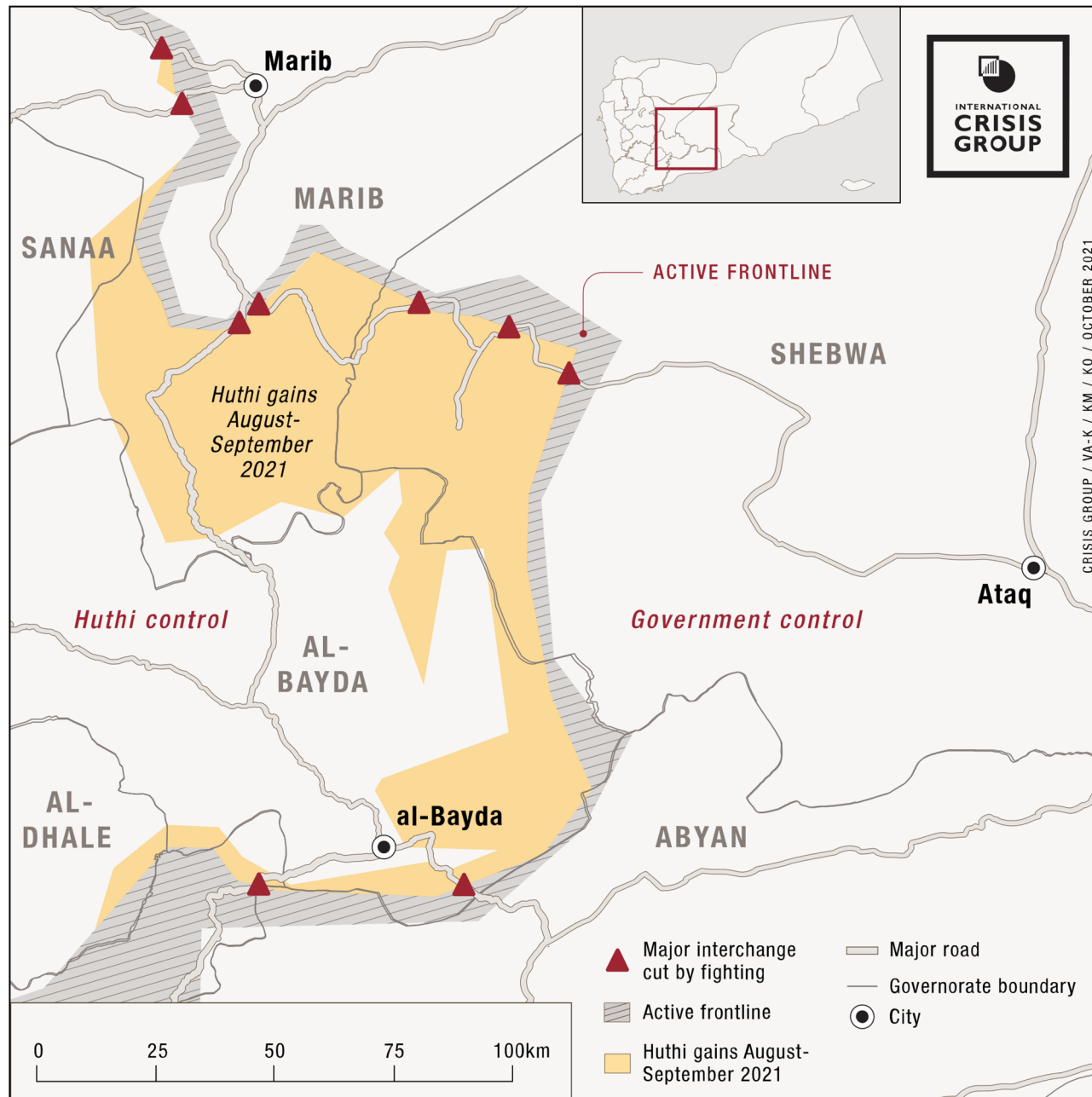
<sup>70</sup> Rafat al-Akhali, "Yemen's most pressing problem isn't war. It's the economy", *Foreign Policy*, 8 October 2021.

secessionists in control of Aden and nearly caused a civil war within a civil war. The Huthi offensive in Marib that began in 2020 came after a short period of Huthi-Saudi de-escalation. In the weeks before the Huthis consolidated their positions in al-Bayda, officials in Washington and elsewhere intoned that the Marib battle was a stalemate and that the parties would soon look for mediators.

The time for such wishful thinking is long past. If outsiders want to see the war ended, they will need to adapt to its complexity and start working on solutions based on ground realities. They should meet the parties to the conflict face to face and engage with their bargaining positions (without necessarily accepting or adopting them). They should work at the same time to develop a practicable political framework to halt the conflict and initiate a transitional period during which political competition replaces violent conflict. Lastly, they should more carefully consider the war's economic dimensions and integrate thinking about the economic conflict into the UN's mediation approach. Key to all these endeavours will be Grundberg's readiness to think and work in both high and low gears, as well as international actors' commitment to backing him up.

**New York/Brussels, 14 October 2021**

Appendix A: Map of Huthi Gains in September 2021





## Appendix B: Central Yemen Conflict Timeline

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### **April-June 2020**

Huthi forces move into northern districts of al-Bayda governorate in an apparent effort to push into southern Marib.

### **15 June 2020**

Huthi-affiliated media outlets announce full control of Radman al-Awadh in northern al-Bayda.

### **November 2020**

Huthi forces encircle and seize the strategically important Mas camp north west of Marib city, after taking control of surrounding districts.

### **February 2020**

Huthi forces launch a major assault in western Marib, seizing much of the western half of Marib's Sirwa district. Huthi fighters reportedly come within 10km of Marib city.

### **July 2020**

Huthi counter-attack pushes rival fighters out of al-Bayda's southern al-Zahir and much of al-Sawmaa districts. Huthi forces also control Naman and Nati districts in northern al-Bayda.

### **4 August 2021**

Government-affiliated fighters push into al-Bayda's northern Nati and southern al-Sawmaa districts.

### **6 August 2021**

Huthi forces advance into Marib's southern Rahaba district.

### **1 September 2021**

Huthi forces announce full control of Marib's Rahaba district.

### **8-12 September 2021**

Huthi forces repel a government-led assault on their positions in Marib's Sirwa district and in southern al-Bayda.

### **15 September 2021**

Huthi forces seize full control of al-Bayda's al-Sawmaa district, pushing into Shebwa's Bayhan district for the first time since 2017. Huthi forces also seize control of the Sherjan mountain range in Abyan's Mukayras district.

### **15 September 2021**

STC President Aydrus al-Zubaidi announces a state of emergency in southern Yemen.

### **17 September 2021**

Huthi military spokesman Brigadier General Yahya Saree claims the Huthis have full control of Marib's Majzar and Meghdal districts.

### **21 September 2021**

Huthi-aligned media sources report gains in Jebel Murad, southern Marib.

### **22 September 2021**

Huthi-aligned media sources report that their forces have control of Marib's southern Harib district.

### **23 September 2021**

Saree claims the Huthis have consolidated control over al-Bayda governorate.

### **25 September 2021**

Huthi forces enter al-Abduya and al-Juba districts in southern Marib.

### **29 September 2021**

Intense fighting around the strategically important al-Khashima military base in southern al-Juba.

## Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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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](http://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.

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After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

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**October 2021**





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