

Yemen: Is Peace Possible?

Middle East Report N°167 | 9 February 2016

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. The Principal Belligerents	5
A. The Huthi-Saleh Bloc.....	5
1. Common narratives and shared interests	7
2. Latent differences.....	9
3. Iranian support	10
B. The Anti-Huthi Bloc.....	12
1. Southern separatists.....	12
2. Sunni Islamists	15
3. Tribal and other regionally based opposition groups	19
4. General People’s Congress in Riyadh.....	20
5. The rump Hadi government.....	20
6. External support.....	21
III. Is Peace Possible?	26
A. Regional and Domestic Challenges	26
B. UN-led Negotiations	27
IV. Conclusion	31
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Yemen.....	32
B. Security Council Resolution 2216	33

Executive Summary

Nearly a year on, there is no end in sight to Yemen's war. The conflict pits Ansar Allah (Huthi) rebels and military units allied with ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh against a diverse mix of opponents, including what remains of the government of President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, backed by a Saudi-led coalition supported by the U.S., the UK and France. Ending the war requires negotiations leading to an interim settlement that must include security arrangements providing for militia withdrawal from cities, a return to the political process pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and agreement on a transitional leadership. While these are matters for Yemeni parties to decide during UN-sponsored negotiations, Saudi Arabia's buy-in will be essential, spooked as the kingdom is by what it perceives as an Iranian hand behind the Huthis and their attacks on Saudi territory. Reaching agreement will take time, a luxury Yemenis do not have. The immediate priority thus should be to secure agreement on delivering humanitarian aid and commercial goods to war-torn, besieged areas.

The descent into civil war has its roots in a post-2011 political transition that was overtaken by old-regime elite infighting, high-level corruption and inability of the National Dialogue Conference (a cornerstone of the 2011 transition roadmap) to produce consensus on power sharing and state structure, especially the status of south Yemen, where desire for independence is strong. The Huthis, a Zaydi (Shia) revivalist movement turned militia, thrived by framing itself as an uncorrupted outsider. They struck an opportunistic alliance with their old enemy, Saleh, against common domestic foes, including the Sunni Islamist party, Islah, the powerful Ahmar family and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (no relation to the family), all of whom had turned against Saleh during the 2011 uprising. When the Huthis captured Sanaa, on a wave of popular resentment against the Hadi government in September 2014, a majority of Yemenis were already disillusioned with the transition. Yet, the Huthis overstretched: trying to forcibly expand their writ over the entire country, they alienated new supporters and confirmed critics' worst fears.

In March 2015, the internal power struggle was eclipsed and reshaped by a Saudi-led military intervention. Saudi Arabia views the Huthis as part of an expanding Iranian threat in the region. Under the leadership of King Salman and his son Mohammed bin Salman, the defence minister and deputy crown prince, it decided to attempt to reverse Iran's perceived gains by pushing back the Huthis and reinstating the Hadi government. It rallied a coalition of nine mostly Sunni Arab states, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) prime among these. The U.S., UK and France have lent support to the war effort, even as they harbour reservations regarding the conflict's necessity and are concerned about its possible duration and unintended consequences, particularly the near-catastrophic humanitarian crisis (bordering on famine) and uncontrolled spread of violent jihadi groups such as the Yemeni franchises of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).

The intervention has layered a multidimensional, thus more intractable, regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran onto an already complex civil war, significantly complicating prospects for peace. It has also solidified opposing domestic fronts that have little in common save for their position on the Saudi-led military campaign. On one side, the Huthis and Saleh have wrought a tactical alliance, despite

their mutual distrust, against what they view as an existential threat. On the other, the anti-Huthi bloc is even more diverse, bringing together a range of Sunni Islamists, (mostly secular) southern separatists and tribally/regionally based fighters who reject Huthi/Saleh dominance but have radically different visions for the future of Yemen.

After nearly a year of combat, no side is close to a decisive military victory. Huthi/Saleh fighters are ensconced in the Zaydi northern highlands, while the Saudi-led coalition and its Yemeni allies are strongest in Shafei (Sunni) areas in the south and east. As the latter have pushed the Huthi/Saleh front out of southern territories, where they were largely viewed as northern invaders, a range of armed groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and southern separatists, have moved in to take their place. If the Saudi-led coalition succeeds in capturing additional territory in the north, which it appears determined to do, the result is likely to be a protracted, bloody battle producing additional chaos and fragmentation. For its part, the Huthi/Saleh bloc is significantly complicating peace prospects by increasing cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia, a move that makes it more difficult for the kingdom to halt the conflict when it cannot boast a clear military victory.

Each side's commitment to UN-led peace talks is lukewarm. Neither is defeated or exhausted; both believe they can make additional military gains; and neither has been willing to make the compromises required to end the violence. The structure of talks, too, is problematic, with Saudi Arabia, a core belligerent, conspicuously absent. Prospects for a ceasefire and productive Yemeni talks would be helped by direct high-level consultations between the Huthi/Saleh bloc and Saudi Arabia over sensitive issues such as the border and the Huthis' relationship with Iran. Moreover, to succeed, UN-led negotiations must be made more inclusive, expanding as soon as possible beyond the Yemeni government and Huthi/Saleh delegations to incorporate other Yemeni stakeholders.

The immediate future looks bleak. The war has devastated an already weak infrastructure, opened vast opportunities for AQAP and IS to expand and widened intra-Yemeni political, regional and confessional divides. The UN estimates that at least 6,000 people have been killed, including over 2,800 civilians, the majority by Saudi-led airstrikes. Even if the UN can broker an agreement to end major combat, the road to lasting peace will be long and difficult. The country is broken to a degree that requires significant time, resources and new political agreements to overcome. Without a breakthrough, it will continue descent into state disintegration, territorial fragmentation and sectarian violence. That trajectory would have calamitous consequences for Yemen's population and severely undermine Gulf security, particularly Saudi Arabia's, by fomenting a new refugee crisis and feeding radicalisation in the region to the benefit of violent jihadi groups.

Recommendations

To achieve a general ceasefire and return to a Yemeni political process

To all belligerents:

1. Abide by the law of war, refrain from media campaigns that label opponents in sectarian terms or as agents of foreign states and express support for and actively work toward a ceasefire and negotiations leading to a durable settlement.

To Saudi Arabia, the Huthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress Party (GPC):

2. Open immediate high-level consultations on priority issues, such as de-escalating tensions on the border and the Huthis' relationship with Iran, that could facilitate a UN-brokered ceasefire and meaningful intra-Yemeni talks.

To the government of Yemen, the Huthis and Saleh's GPC:

3. Participate without delay or preconditions in the next round of UN-brokered negotiations on an agenda specified by the UN special envoy.

To the Saudi-led coalition, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE):

4. Encourage government support for the UN special envoy's negotiating agenda, including implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and compromises needed to implement it and revive the Yemeni political process.

To the UN Security Council permanent members, especially the U.S., UK and France:

5. Back the UN special envoy, including by supporting a follow-up Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire by all sides and an inclusive political compromise.
6. Condition the supply of weapon systems and ammunition to Saudi-led coalition members on their support for an immediate ceasefire and inclusive political negotiations.
7. Encourage high-level, direct consultations between Saudi Arabia and the Huthi/Saleh bloc.

To improve the chances of a durable political settlement

To the UN special envoy:

8. Improve the negotiating framework by:
 - a) Integrating regional security concerns and economic reconstruction into negotiations by supporting high-level official consultations and unofficial Track II discussions between Saudi Arabia and Yemeni stakeholders, particularly the Huthis and Saleh's GPC, that are separate from but inform the intra-Yemeni negotiations.

- b) Expanding negotiations to include, as soon as possible, additional Yemeni stakeholders, among them the Sunni Islamist party Islah, Salafi groups and the Southern Resistance, so as to ensure a durable ceasefire; to be followed by inclusion of civil-society groups, political parties and women's organisations, to help resolve outstanding political challenges; and
- c) Prioritising three political challenges: i) agreement on a broadly acceptable executive leadership and more inclusive government until elections; ii) a mechanism for resolving the future status of the south and other regions seeking greater devolution; and iii) accountability and national reconciliation.

To Ansar Allah (the Huthis):

- 9. De-escalate the conflict and build confidence by: releasing political prisoners; allowing unhindered humanitarian and commercial access to civilians in Taiz; and suspending hostilities on the Saudi border for a specified period to show capacity to do so and goodwill ahead of UN talks.

To Saleh and the GPC:

- 10. Work with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemeni stakeholders to agree on the former president's departure from Yemen for a set period of time as part of the larger political settlement, ideally along with General Ali Mohsen and President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

To President Hadi and the Yemeni government:

- 11. De-escalate the conflict and support compromise by: refraining from calling for the military "liberation" of Sanaa and other cities; facilitating unhindered humanitarian and commercial access to all parts of Yemen, including Huthi-controlled areas; and recognising publicly the need for political reconciliation and a revived Yemeni political process.

To Yemeni parties and organisations currently left out of the UN negotiating framework, except groups that reject politics:

- 12. Lobby for inclusion in the negotiations and accept an invitation, if offered, to participate in them, as well as in Track II discussions, without preconditions.
- 13. Select representatives for negotiations and prepare proposals for elements of a political settlement, especially on sensitive issues such as state structure, national power sharing and militia disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR).

To the kingdom of Saudi Arabia:

- 14. Communicate specific security requirements and political concerns, especially regarding the border, disarmament issues, and the Huthis' relationship with Iran, directly to all Yemeni stakeholders involved in negotiations and the UN special envoy.

15. Participate, if requested by the UN special envoy, in official consultations and unofficial Track II discussions supporting Yemeni negotiations; make specific proposals for reconstruction, including in the north, and work toward incorporating Yemen into the Gulf Cooperation Council.
16. Suspend military action in the capital, Sanaa, for a specified period of time to show goodwill ahead of UN negotiations.

To the UAE:

17. Assist in political resolution of the southern issue by helping the Southern Resistance select its representation for future talks.

To the Islamic Republic of Iran:

18. Approach the Yemen crisis as a low-cost, high-value opportunity to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia by:
 - a) Ending inflammatory rhetoric that stokes fears of Iranian intent to use Yemen to threaten the security of Saudi Arabia;
 - b) Encouraging the Huthis to participate constructively in both UN negotiations and direct discussions with Saudi Arabia on resolving the conflict; and
 - c) Discussing directly with Saudi Arabia ways of de-escalating tensions in the region, including through actions in Yemen that could start with ending any existing military support to the Huthis.

Brussels, 9 February 2016

Yemen: Is Peace Possible?

I. Introduction

Yemen's war has its roots in a failed political transition. In 2011, youth activists inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt initiated protests against the autocratic regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled since 1978. They were soon joined by establishment political parties, including Islah (Sunni Islamist and containing the Yemeni chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood) and critical components of the Saleh regime, including the Ahmar family (the preeminent family of one of north Yemen's two main tribal confederations, Hashid) and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a powerful general and long-time Saleh ally.¹ By the summer of 2011, the old regime, including the military, had split into a camp supporting Saleh and another pushing for his ouster.²

The country was on the cusp of civil war but unlike Syria and Libya avoided widespread violence thanks to a deal supported by Saudi Arabia, the U.S., UK, European Union (EU) and eventually the UN. The initiative, sponsored by the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), gave Saleh domestic immunity from prosecution in return for resignation and transfer of power to his vice president, Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, through an uncontested February 2012 election. A UN-brokered implementation mechanism outlined a two-year transition, the cornerstone of which was an inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC) meant to guide constitutional reform before new, February 2014 elections.

The initiative was troubled from the start. Important constituencies that had joined the anti-Saleh protests, including the Huthis, a Zaydi (Shia) revivalist movement in the north that refers to itself as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), and many of the original youthful protesters, rejected it because they saw it as protecting the interests of establishment political parties and their elite backers.³ Southern move-

¹ The general, who is not a member of the Ahmar family, is from Saleh's village, the Sanhan, and was a powerful military commander and partner during Saleh's 33-year rule. At the time of the 2011 uprising, he commanded the First Armoured Division and the North-west Military Region, including Saada, the Huthi stronghold. He led the military campaign there against the Huthis, 2004-2010. He has close political ties with the Sunni Islamist party, Islah, and was viewed as a key Saleh liaison with it. Saleh charged Mohsen with integrating Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi, later his successor and other southern officers into the northern army after they were defeated during a civil war in the south in 1986. The rift with Saleh dates to at least a decade before 2011 and largely resulted from Saleh's attempts to strengthen his son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, in preparation to transferring power to him. Mohsen defected on 18 March 2011 to join the uprising, taking significant portions of the army with him.

² See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°102, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (III): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution*, 10 March 2011.

³ Zaydism is a branch of Shiism distinct from Jaafarism (also known as Twelver Shiism, found in contemporary Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon). Its religious elites, who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, ruled northern Yemen under a system known as the imamate until the 1962 revolution. Zaydis are approximately one-third of Yemen's estimated 25 million citizens, the majority of whom are Shafei, one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Zaydis are based in the northern highlands, with their main strongholds in Saada, Hajja and Dammar governorates, as well as the

ment (Hiraak) activists, some of whom had also called for Saleh's removal, dismissed it as a north-only arrangement that neglected their demands for greater autonomy and even independence.⁴

The agreement's strength – protecting the interests of traditional power centres to prevent war – was also its weakness, as reform depended on the groups it would harm. The big winners were President Hadi (and a small loyalist group around him) and the Islah/Mohsen/Ahmar coalition, which saw its share in the government and military increase at Saleh's expense. By 2013, large parts of Saleh's military, tribal and political networks felt they were losing too much.⁵ By 2014, it was clear Saleh had a tacit alliance with his old enemies, the Huthis, as a way to stay alive politically, take revenge on foes and perhaps make a comeback. The transition was hanging by a thread. The unbridled competition over state resources between Hadi, Saleh and the Islah/Mohsen/Ahmar group paralysed the political system. The biggest losers were the people, who saw living standards plummet, corruption increase and security deteriorate.

The NDC ended in January 2014 with general principles to guide constitutional reform but no consensus on national-level power sharing before elections and no resolution of the sensitive issue of state structure, particularly the status of the south.⁶ The military balance of power in the north had been upended, as the Huthis, assisted by disgruntled members of Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC), confronted and defeated the Islah/Ahmar/Mohsen coalition, which was joined by Salafi fighters, in battles throughout 2013 and 2014.⁷

In September 2014, the Huthis stormed into Sanaa, the capital, on a wave of popular resentment against the Hadi government and with help from Saleh supporters. They forced through the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which in theory could have put the transition back on track by mandating formation of a more inclusive government, withdrawal of Huthi fighters from territories they had gained and review of the state structure issue. However, neither the government nor the Huthis fully honoured their commitments.⁸

capital, Sanaa. For additional background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009.

⁴ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°125, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, 3 July 2012.

⁵ Ibid. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°139, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, 4 April 2013.

⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°s 114, *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, 20 October 2011; 145, *Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown*, 25 September 2013.

⁷ For the post-2011 Huthi expansion in the north, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°154, *The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, 10 June 2014. Salafis did not play a critical role in the uprising against Saleh, nor were they an integral part of the three-way political competition over state spoils between Saleh/GPC, the Islah/Mohsen/Ahmar coalition and President Hadi. The Salafi movement in the north has long been at odds with the Zaydi revivalist trend, which sees it as an ideological invader in traditionally Zaydi areas. In October 2013, fighting broke out between Huthis and students of Dar al-Hadith university, a Salafi institute, in Dammaj (Saada), and in 2014 the Huthis defeated Salafi fighters there and in Kitaf (Saada). The Salafis were helped militarily and politically by the Islah/Mohsen/Ahmar bloc, and they are on the same side in the current war. For further details on the various Salafi groups in Yemen, see Section II.B.2 below.

⁸ The Huthis did not withdraw from territories they had gained and government institutions they had occupied, but extended their control, facilitated by Hadi government mixed messages, which called at times for state security forces to cooperate with Huthi security committees and at other

Driven by revolutionary zeal and emboldened by the capture of Sanaa, the Huthis continued their expansion, arguing it was necessary to combat a growing threat from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (IS), which were thriving in the security vacuum.⁹ Almost immediately, they began setting up a shadow government to oversee ministries and, ostensibly, fight corruption. When Hadi attempted to push through a constitutional draft that included a federalism scheme they rejected and was in clear violation of the PNPA's spirit, they turned to violence, arresting a presidential adviser and surrounding the presidential residence. This prompted the government and Hadi to resign on 22 January 2015.

The Huthis thus bear much responsibility for triggering the civil war. Against the backdrop of stalled UN-led negotiations over a new executive leadership in February, they appointed a "revolutionary council" by "constitutional announcement" and marched south, supported by allied military units, ostensibly to prevent Aden from becoming an AQAP haven. In effect, they challenged Hadi, who had fled there, retracted his resignation and tried to reestablish a government. But if the Huthis initiated the conflict, Saudi Arabia escalated it. Motivated by a mix of regional and domestic political calculations, it launched an air campaign backed by nine other mostly Sunni-Arab states on 26 March, with the stated goal of rolling back Huthi advances and reinstating the Hadi government.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia intervened partly in response to its perception that Iran was asserting hegemonic pretensions in the Gulf, as Washington was turning away or even courting Tehran during the course of the nuclear negotiations. Seeing encirclement, it drew a line in Yemen to prevent what it viewed as a Hizbollah-like entity from threatening its southern flank.¹¹

The air assault came on the heels of a transition in Saudi Arabia from King Abdullah to King Salman that brought important changes, including concentration of power in Salman's son, Mohammed bin Salman, and preparations to shift the succession line to the grandsons of King Abdulaziz ibn Saud, the country's founder. Mohammed bin Salman, anointed deputy crown prince and appointed defence minister, became the face of the war. Many believe his political fortunes, if not the kingdom's stability, are tied to military success or failure in Yemen.

The war has had three phases. From March to June, the Huthis and their allies expanded into hostile terrain from the northern Zaydi highlands, easily taking southern territory and forcing Hadi to flee into Saudi exile. They faced pockets of local resistance, especially in the former South Yemen, the city of Taiz and the eastern governorate of Marib. Yet, the combination of Huthi militias and large parts of the army loyal to Saleh is Yemen's strongest fighting force and easily kept the advantage over its ill-trained, poorly organised foes. A punishing Saudi-led air campaign and naval

times to oppose them. Neither the Huthis nor the government proposed a clear plan for returning authority to state institutions. Hadi also did not expand the Shura (consultative) Council. More importantly, he violated the accord's spirit by backing a constitutional draft for a six-part federal division, without allowing debate that could have led to consensus on the issue.

⁹ See Section II.B.2.c below.

¹⁰ They were the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan and Pakistan. On 10 April 2015, Pakistan's parliament voted against Saudi Arabia's request for military support. The commitment of the others varies widely, with the UAE by far exceeding the others in military contributions.

¹¹ For an overview of the Huthi coup, the expansion southward and the Saudi-led military intervention, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°45, *Yemen at War*, 27 March 2015.

and air blockade slowed advances and strained supply lines but did more to terrorise civilians than harm the Huthis. The blockade, intended to prevent the Huthis from rearming, has amounted to collective punishment and significantly contributed to a potential famine.¹²

During this time, AQAP easily captured Mukalla, on the Indian Ocean, and the provincial capital Hadramout, which is part of the former South Yemen. A nascent branch of IS is also gaining strength in the south. Both groups have gained new allies and recruits by capitalising on the collapse of state authority, the Saudi-led coalition's single-minded focus on Huthis and the Huthi advance into predominantly Sunni areas.

The war entered its second phase in July, when the UAE led a ground invasion to recapture Aden. It quickly succeeded, supported by Yemeni fighters loosely allied with Hadi, and in weeks also reclaimed other southern areas, significantly aided by a population many of whom view the Huthis and the Saleh-affiliated Yemeni army as northern invaders.¹³ Divisions between the latter two over issues such as command and control and distribution of supplies also contributed.¹⁴ Yet, despite military defeats, including in parts of the former north Yemen, particularly in predominantly Shafei (Sunni) areas where opposition to the Huthis is strongest, their alliance was able to push back, especially in Taiz, Yemen's third-largest city, which is in the south but politically part of the north.

Since September, the conflict has been a bloody stalemate. Battle lines have moved into the north, with the Saudi-led coalition attempting to strangle the Huthis in their strongholds and gradually chip away at the territory they control. It has made advances along the Red Sea coast, where the Huthi/Saleh military presence is light and the terrain mostly flat. A major incursion into Hajja and Jawf governorates, bordering Saudi Arabia, made some gains in December, during UN peace talks. Then, in early February 2016, intense battles ensued approximately 70km north east of Sanaa over a strategic military base, Fardhat Nihm. It remains to be seen whether these battles in the mountainous eastern access point to the capital will turn the tide. Until now, there has been no decisive breakthrough for the coalition there or in Taiz to the south, where fighting is particularly intense.

The Huthis have upped the ante by launching cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia, including with notoriously indiscriminate Scud missiles. Their assumption appears to be that the Saudis will not halt operations until they feel pain at home. For the Saudis, however, these attacks have helped legitimise the war domestically and will complicate any efforts to end it without a clear victory. As battles have moved north, political infighting and instability have consumed the south. The war has spawned a multitude of armed, angry militias with competing agendas. Increasing lawlessness, the spread of AQAP and IS and rivalries between separatist factions are a harbinger of further violence.

¹² "Half a million Yemeni children face malnutrition: UN", Reuters, 16 October 2015; "Urgent action needed to prevent famine in Yemen, warns Justin Greening", UK Department for International Development, 27 September 2015; "Yemen coalition blocking desperately needed fuel", Human Rights Watch, 10 May 2015.

¹³ The UAE-led ground forces pushed the Huthi/Saleh forces out of Aden, Dalia, Lahj and Abyan. The Huthis mostly left the southern province of Shebwa peacefully, handing security to local tribes. Crisis group interviews, Sheikh from Shebwa, Huthi supporter, September 2015.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, GPC supporter, July 2015; former military commander, July 2015; Yemeni analyst, July 2015.

II. The Principal Belligerents

The media often describes the war as between Iranian-backed Huthis and President Hadi's Saudi-supported government. This obscures more than it reveals. Within Yemen, there are two main warring factions that enjoy varying degrees of external support: the bloc of Huthi fighters and forces allied with ex-President Saleh, which receives Iranian support but, as discussed below, much less than often asserted; and an anti-Huthi alliance of smaller groups loosely allied with the Hadi government and backed by the Saudi-led coalition. These factions are internally diverse, reflecting competing interests and priorities. There is little to no loyalty to Hadi on the anti-Huthi side; the opposing bloc is less pro-Huthi than virulently opposed to the Sunni Islamist party Islah, which supports Hadi's government, and to the Saudi-led intervention that aims to restore that government.

The fighting combines elements of three overlapping historical fault lines: the Zaydi northern highlands, where the Huthi/Saleh bloc is strongest, versus the Shafei (Sunni) rest of the county; the north versus previously independent South Yemen; and what remains of Saleh's GPC versus Islah, both struggling to maintain nationwide appeal against political fragmentation and growing regionalist sentiment. The balance of external support to these loose coalitions is starkly uneven: the Saudi-led coalition lends direct military, financial and political help to anti-Huthi fighters, while Iran operates on a shoestring budget, giving the Huthis political and moral aid but little military and financial assistance. Instead of a neat, two-sided battle, the war is multipolar, with domestic and external components, unlikely alliances and threat of more fragmentation.

A. *The Huthi-Saleh Bloc*

This awkward alliance combines the Huthis with large parts of the vast political, military and tribal networks Saleh built during his 33-year rule. Both derive the majority of their support from the northern Zaydi highlands, an area that has suffered the most from Saudi-led airstrikes.¹⁵

The Huthis bring a core of ideological supporters who consider Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi their spiritual leader, believe they are on a divine mission to reform Yemen and are driven by anti-Western, anti-Saudi and anti-Salafi/Wahhabi sentiment.¹⁶ They

¹⁵ The Huthis have their roots in a Zaydi revivalist movement that began in the late 1970s as a response to Salafi/Wahhabi proselytising in predominantly Zaydi areas. Their base is in Saada, a Zaydi stronghold and the governorate from which the Huthi family originates. Ali Abdullah Saleh is also Zaydi, from the Sanhan tribal area in Sanaa governorate. During his rule, his powerbase rested on three pillars: the military, tribal networks and Sunni Islamists, all rooted in the Zaydi north, including Zaydis who converted to Sunnism, such as the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. Within the military, he privileged tribesmen from the Sanhan and several other areas in the Zaydi highlands. His connections with Sunni Islamists primarily depended on ties with the late Sheikh al-Ahmar, the head of Islah and leader of the Hashid tribal confederation in the north, and prominent imams like Abdul-Majid al-Zindani, also from the highlands.

¹⁶ Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi became the spiritual leader of the group after his brother, Hussein al-Huthi, was killed in combat with the Yemeni government in 2004. The Huthis are one of many Hashemite (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) families from north Yemen. "Wahhabism – itself a controversial term – emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in what would become Saudi Arabia. It is based on a strict interpretation of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence in Islam that emphasises the

have a trained tens-of-thousand-strong militia forged in six rounds of fighting with Saleh's government (2004-2010) and, more recently, in battles against Sunni Islamists and tribal opponents in the north.¹⁷ The Huthis can also rely on fighters from a network of local popular committees they established as part of their post-2011 military expansion. These fighters have some training but are mostly locals who joined as the Huthis spread southward, usually because of common animosity toward Islah or the Ahmars.¹⁸ Huthi support from popular committees and tribes often overlaps with Saleh's networks.¹⁹

When they toppled the Hadi government in February 2015, the Huthis took control of what remained of state security services, thereby acquiring additional access to military power. Huthi militia commanders became the majority on the Supreme Security Committee, which also includes the chief of staff, the defence and interior ministers and others, many close to Saleh. It manages and coordinates the war effort.²⁰ The Huthis say they are gaining the army's loyalty over time, a possibility that concerns Saleh loyalists.²¹ Saleh has extended military, tribal and political loyalist networks. By virtue of his years in power, these extend throughout the country but are strongest in the highlands. Some say he was the driving force behind the Huthis' ascent and plays an integral part of the war.²² Others, including Huthi supporters, say he has limited influence.²³ Saleh supporters often deny they direct the war and say the Huthis are in charge.²⁴

Whatever Saleh's exact role, large parts of the GPC and his tribal and military allies have temporarily joined with the Huthis and proven critical in sustaining the fight. The portions of the military that are fighting with the Huthis are predominantly those officers/soldiers affiliated with Saleh who are the best-trained and equipped. GPC

unity of God (*tawhid*) and rejects the Hashemites' claim to power. Salafism is a Sunni movement that seeks to revive 'original' Islam, drawing on the so-called pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-salih*). It emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and is characterised in religious matters by a desire to transcend the four traditional Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Shafeism, Hanafism, Hanbalism and Malikism) and politically by a distrust of party politics and a stigmatisation of Shiite Islam". Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit., fn. 28.

¹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis*, op. cit. Estimates of the size of the Huthi militia vary. According to a tribal sheikh who has fought them multiple times, they number between 20,000 and 30,000. Crisis Group interview, April 2015. A GPC supporter familiar with the security sector estimates 30,000-40,000. Crisis Group interview, October 2015.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, October 2015.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporter, GPC supporter, March 2015.

²⁰ In each battle zone/district, the Huthis also rely on local militia commanders to coordinate operations with military units and local tribal fighters. Crisis Group interview, GPC supporter, October 2015.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, Saleh loyalist in army, May, July 2015. A Huthi supporter said, "Officers and soldiers ... are becoming loyal to the Huthis ... even ideological supporters The Huthis are not only leading the army against the Saudi forces ... they are teaching soldiers and officers about their ideology. The war is proving [they] were right to warn ... of the dangers of ... Western policy toward Yemen and Muslims in general". Crisis Group interview, January 2016.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Saudi official, GPC supporter, Western diplomat and Islah member, April 2015; a political independent, June 2015; Aden politician, July 2015.

²³ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Islah member, April 2015; Huthi supporter, June 2015; and Huthi supporter, August 2015.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Saleh supporter, May 2015; GPC members, June 2015; Saleh supporter, October, November 2015.

networks and tribal affiliates have been critical in areas such as Taiz, where opposition to the Huthis is strong.²⁵

1. Common narratives and shared interests

The Huthi/Saleh bloc is bound together by common enemies. The roots of cooperation are in mutual frustration with the post-2011 transition and their assessment that it benefited primarily their political rivals. At first, in 2011, the Huthis joined with Islah, the Ahmars and Ali Mohsen to confront Saleh, but that quickly soured over deep ideological and political differences: the Huthis trace their roots to a grass-roots movement to protect Zaydi culture and religious traditions from encroachment by Wahhabi/Salafi teachings, activities supported by the Islah/Ahmar/Mohsen group and even, at times, by Saleh.²⁶ During the 2011 uprising, the Huthis rejected the GCC initiative and championed radical overhaul of the old-regime elites, including Saleh and the Islah/Ahmar/Mohsen group.

While the Huthis were alienated by the GCC initiative from the start, Saleh became disillusioned over time. He and his close supporters initially assumed they could still be dominant in politics, since Saleh was allowed to remain GPC president. Yet, both his political opponents and the GCC agreement's international backers, including the UN special representative, the U.S., UK and EU, supported Hadi's efforts to gradually exclude Saleh and his family from political life. In 2012, there was widespread domestic support for removing the family members from key military and security posts. As this effort cut deeper into Saleh's networks, a well-spring of resentment began to build against Hadi, also a GPC member, who made little to no effort to be transparent in his mid-level reshuffling or to assure the GPC leadership of its future in the transition.²⁷

By 2014, a dizzying reshuffling of alliances had taken place.²⁸ Saleh and the Huthis struck what may yet prove a Faustian bargain to defeat the Islah/Ahmar/Mohsen alliance politically and militarily in the north. The level of their coordination is debatable, but Saleh's tribal, military and political affiliates either tacitly or directly supported the Huthis' dramatic military expansion against the Ahmars, especially within the Hashid tribal confederation's traditional areas.²⁹ Hadi was either unable or unwilling to effectively use the divided army or negotiate.³⁰ International actors, including GCC members supportive of the transition, were largely quiet, focusing on regional priorities such as Syria and Iraq or on completing the NDC. There was wide speculation in Islah that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were pleased to see the Huthis

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Taiz politician, July 2015; prominent GPC politician, August, September 2015; Taiz politician, October 2015.

²⁶ For background on Huthi origins, see Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.; Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, (RAND, 2010); and Shelagh Weir, "A Clash of Fundamentalism", *Middle East Report*, no. 204 (Fall 1997).

²⁷ Over 50 Crisis Group interviews, senior and mid-level GPC members, Sanaa, 2012-2015.

²⁸ The start of the Huthi-Saleh alliance is a matter of intense debate. It began before 2014, possibly in 2012 as he and close supporters became increasingly disillusioned with the transition.

²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis*, op. cit.

³⁰ There were many opportunities for the Hadi government to broker a ceasefire. For more on what one could have looked like, see Crisis Group's "Yemen: Conflict Alert", 26 February 2014.

and Islah weaken each other.³¹ When the Huthis entered Sanaa in September, only Mohsen put up serious resistance, but he was forced to flee to Riyadh.

Like many political marriages of convenience, the Huthi-Saleh match is highly unstable. Not all GPC/Saleh supporters were pleased; even those who facilitated the Huthis' advance began to mobilise against them once they took Sanaa. In March 2015, before the Saudi military intervention, the Huthis and Saleh-allied former Republican Guard special forces in the Raymat al-Humayd military camp north of Sanaa clashed, as the Huthis sought to control it.³² Politically, the GPC and other parties opposed the 11 February "constitutional announcement", in which the Huthis created a revolutionary committee to oversee state operations.

What could have precipitated a brusque divorce was temporarily eclipsed by the Saudi-led intervention. Airstrikes targeted the Huthis and the Saleh-affiliated military bases and arms caches throughout the country, and the latter arguably suffered disproportionately, as they were stationary and prominent. But instead of breaking the army's will to fight, the attacks prompted significant portions to work even closer with the Huthis.³³ Attacks on the homes and other properties of Saleh and his family and prominent GPC members had the same effect, as did attacks on tribal areas sympathetic to the GPC and/or the Huthis.³⁴ Since then, the Huthis and the Saleh camp have cooperated to defend themselves against what they view as an external aggression and existential threat. Their shared narrative of defending the nation and honour against a foreign foe resonates in the highlands, even among those who support neither. However, the Huthis tend to emphasise a Saudi/U.S. conspiracy to dominate Yemen and import Sunni extremists, while Saleh supporters are angered more by Saudi Arabia.³⁵

While they have different explanations for how the transition failed and who bears primary responsibility for initiating violence, their constituent parts generally agree that Hadi's transitional presidential term had expired; he had lost legitimacy at the time of the Huthi coup (since he resigned) and became a traitor by calling the Gulf states to his aid. They tend to downplay the domestic resistance to their military campaign. When asked about their opponents, they emphasise Islah, Salafis, AQAP and IS, all of whom they often lump together as al-Qaeda or Daesh, the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.³⁶

Some Huthi/Saleh opponents say they suspect the ties run much deeper than political or military expediency. They frame the conflict in overlapping sectarian and regional terms, arguing that the Huthis and Saleh joined to reconstitute a strong coalition in the Zaydi north and so prevent governmental power, centred in the north, from being devolved to other regions.³⁷ The brutality of fighting in areas like Taiz and

³¹ Crisis Group interview, prominent Islah member, Sanaa, February 2014.

³² Crisis Group interviews, former republican guard soldier, Sanaa, March 2015; Saleh supporter, October 2015.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, sheikh from Bakil confederation, Huthi supporter, June 2015; ex-Yemeni military officer, Saleh supporter, August 2015; GPC supporter from Taiz, January 2016.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, GPC supporter, independent Yemeni journalist, sheikh from Bakil confederation, prominent GPC member, June 2015; GPC member from Taiz, January 2016.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, February 2014; Huthi supporters, June 2015; Huthi supporter, January 2016; GPC members, June, August, September 2015.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Huthi and GPC representatives, June, August, September 2015.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Yemeni businessman, Sanaa, March 2015; adviser to Hadi government, October 2015; Yemeni activist from Ibb, November 2015.

Aden, where they have routinely shelled civilian areas and blocked food and supplies, reinforces their critics in this belief.

Southerners often add another layer to this, arguing that the alliance is northern Zaydi, aimed at preventing southern secession.³⁸ The majority of Huthi and GPC supporters are unquestionably pro-unity. In the NDC, the GPC opposed separation and a two-region federal structure, while the Huthis showed some flexibility, even willingness to consider a proposal by their NDC allies, the southern Hiraak, for a north-south federal arrangement.³⁹ Hiraak supporters say, however, this was disingenuous.⁴⁰ The Huthis are still nominally supportive of federalism, but say detailed study is needed before determining the number of regions.⁴¹

2. Latent differences

Common interests notwithstanding, profound differences threaten to overtake this alliance of convenience. Saleh's GPC supporters, many proud of belonging to a centrist, non-religious-based party, view the Huthis as young religious radicals who opened the door to sectarianism and unnecessarily provoked conflict by a rash military campaign.⁴² A prominent GPC politician said, "the GPC's relationship with the Huthis is like America's uncomfortable relationship with Saudi Arabia. The GPC does not agree with the Huthis' ideas or actions but needs to influence the Huthis for the good of the country against common enemies".⁴³

Like Islah and other critics, many in the GPC suspect the Huthis harbour an anti-republican agenda privileging the Hashemites (descendants of the Prophet Muhammad).⁴⁴ Saleh-affiliated soldiers complain of interference in the chain of command and worry that the war, which has destroyed the military infrastructure, will empower Huthi and other militias once it ends.⁴⁵ The Huthis have suspicions about Saleh and his supporters. They hold him at least partially responsible for the 2004 death of their leader, Hussein al-Huthi (Abd-al-Malik's brother), and for much suffering between then and 2010. They see Saleh and his close circle as part of a corrupt past and their movement as representing the future.⁴⁶ They say they largely have already incorporated Saleh's tribal, political and military affiliates into their own networks.⁴⁷

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni politicians, June 2015.

³⁹ The GPC accepted the option of federalism in principle, but many of its members tend to support strong local governance over a federal model.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Aden politicians, May 2015; Aden journalist, April 2015.

⁴¹ According to a Huthi representative, "our position on federalism has not changed. We want the issue to be given to an expert committee for further study. We are not opposed to two-part federalism or any other federal division on principle. The most important thing for us is a proper study to determine what is best for Yemen and Yemenis". Crisis Group interview, September 2015.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, prominent GPC members, March, June-September 2015. A prominent GPC leader offered a common view of the Huthis within the party: "young, inexperienced and deeply suspicious. The GPC is working with them now, despite all their mistakes, because all Yemenis need a solution. But it is frustrating". Crisis Group interview, August 2015.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, prominent GPC leader, August 2015.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Saleh supporters, November 2014; GPC member, February 2015; GPC member, September 2015. Hashemites are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. The Huthis are a Hashemite family. Some Yemeni Hashemites are Sunni.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, military officers supportive of Saleh, May, August 2015.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, February 2015. He further said: "In the past, excluded parts of Yemeni society [such as the Huthis] could not get rid of the dominance of traditional forces

Supporters of both groups acknowledge that their alliance is uncertain at best and likely to weaken once the war is over.⁴⁸ GPC leaders and others argue that the only effective way to challenge the Huthis is to end the war and return to politics.⁴⁹ One important policy difference is that the Huthis say they want, before elections, a transition period with a consensus-based government, during which the country can be stabilised and unresolved issues like state structure, addressed. They are not specific about length, but argue for at least a year.⁵⁰ The GPC, betting it will reap the benefits of war exhaustion and longing for stability, also wants a transition, but with elections as soon as possible, even before issues such as state structure are fully resolved.⁵¹

Much of the focus of the Saudi-led coalition, including the U.S., UAE and Saudi Arabia itself, has been to dilute Saleh's influence and split the GPC from the Huthis. The Saudis have hosted and supported an anti-Saleh GPC group in Riyadh, and rumours abound of efforts to cut a deal for the ex-president to leave Yemen.⁵² However, the air campaign has increased his popularity and preserved a place for his party; he has defiantly stayed in Yemen, an advantage he would lose if he left or resigned from his GPC leadership while the war continued.⁵³ In many ways, the Huthi/Saleh camp is primarily being held together by the war.

3. Iranian support

Saudi Arabia, its GCC coalition partners and the Hadi government accuse the Huthis of being Iran's hand in Yemen. They see the Huthis as radicalised Zaydis, with a political leadership tied to and directed by Tehran. They say Iran and its Lebanese ally Hizbollah give them significant amounts of military equipment, advice and training. U.S. and UK officials offer a slightly more modest assessment of Iran's influence and support.⁵⁴

The Huthis deny receiving Iranian military support and that Tehran is even important in their political decision-making.⁵⁵ They admit that Iran and Hizbollah offer

in the military and the government, including Saleh, his people, the Socialists, Islah, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars. Now this is changing".

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, January 2016.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, GPC and Huthi supporters, August and September 2015. Some GPC and Huthi representatives disagree, arguing that the two will likely form a political coalition even after the war, given their common political position on issues such as the country's territorial unity and their animosity toward Islah. Crisis Group interviews, GPC leader, Huthi representative, February 2016.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders allied with Saleh, June, August, September 2015; Huthi sympathiser, June 2015; Bakil sheikh, June, September 2015; political independent from the south, August 2015.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, prominent Huthi representative, September 2015.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, prominent GPC leaders associated with Saleh, September 2015.

⁵² See Section II.B.4 below for more details. Crisis Group interviews, GPC politicians supportive of Saleh, June, August and September 2015; GPC politicians opposed to Saleh, June, July, August, September 2015; political independent, June, August 2015; U.S. and EU officials, September-November 2015; GCC official, October-November 2015.

⁵³ A close source said, "Saleh cannot leave the Huthis to the coalition and Islah. If he were to abandon them ..., he would be a traitor". Crisis Group interview, July 2015.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government officials and GCC diplomats, May, June 2015; senior U.S. official, May 2015; UK official, May 2015; UK diplomat, August 2015.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, two Huthi representatives, September 2015.

advice, but say they reject it as often as not, a claim supported in some quarters.⁵⁶ They make no secret of admiration for Iran's and Hizbollah's anti-Western positions and certainly have borrowed political slogans and tactics extensively. Yet, they are quick to point out there are religious differences between Iran's and Hizbollah's Twelver Shiism and their own Zaydi beliefs.⁵⁷ Some in the movement also acknowledge an active internal debate on how closely to align with Iran and whether/when to take its advice.⁵⁸

While the exact degree of support is unclear, several things can be said. The Huthis receive political, moral and, likely, some degree of military support and training from Iran and Hizbollah.⁵⁹ This is much less than what the GCC funnels to the anti-Huthi bloc and is not decisive in the Huthi/Saleh camp's ability to fight. The Huthis have extensive insurgent experience fighting state security forces in 2004-2010. The majority of their weapons come from government stockpiles – looted or, in the past year, taken as they seized what was left of the state. They also fight beside the most capable of the security forces, those who followed Saleh and can fire Scud missiles and operate combat vehicles and other equipment the Huthis might otherwise not have been able to fully utilise.

Inflammatory statements by Iranian politicians and opinion makers extolling the Huthis stoke Saudi and Gulf fears. In September 2014, for example, Ali Reza Zakani, a lawmaker, boasted that with Sanaa's fall, Iran could claim it controls four Middle East capitals (the others being Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut).⁶⁰ Media bluster aside, Iranian officials say their influence in Yemen is much exaggerated, even as they admit the Huthis' progress has been a strategic windfall:

The reality is that Iran's influence in Yemen is minimal, and the Saudis know this. Yemen is far from our shores. We didn't need to send arms to Yemen before the war, and now it is practically impossible to do so. But from a strategic perspective, the conflict in Yemen has no cost for us and even has some benefits. The reality is

⁵⁶ The Huthis claim, for example, that the Iranians advised against forming the revolutionary council to replace the government in February 2015. Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, August 2015. Iranian officials and a senior UN official separately said the Huthis ignored advice not to move south after taking Sanaa in September 2014. Crisis Group interviews, UN, April 2015; Iranian, Tehran, May 2015.

⁵⁷ For example, Zaydis part way with Twelver Shiites concerning the fifth generation of the line of succession after Imam Ali. For Twelvers, the fifth imam is Muhammad bin Ali; for Zaydis it is his brother, Zaid bin Ali.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, two Huthi supporters, August 2015; Huthi supporter, January 2016.

⁵⁹ The Huthis admit political advice and support. For example, Hizbollah allows their TV station, al-Masira, to operate from Beirut. Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, September 2016. Military aid is harder to verify. U.S., UK, GCC and Yemeni officials say the Huthis get military training and advice from embedded Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hizbollah advisers. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. official, Washington, May 2015; GCC and Yemeni officials, May, June 2015; UK official, August 2015. There is some evidence Iran ships weapons; after Yemen seized the *Jihan*, an Iranian ship, in 2013, Yemen and the U.S. said it carried weapons for the Huthis. A 2 June 2015 UN panel of experts report to the Iran sanctions committee supported this and suggested the shipment was part of a pattern of sea deliveries since 2009: "The analysis further suggests ... Iran was the origin ... and that the intended recipients were the Houthis in Yemen or possibly in some cases further recipients in neighboring countries". "Final report ... pursuant to resolution 1929 (2010), 2 June 2015, S/2015/401.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, GCC diplomats, April, June 2015. "Iran continues to boast of its regional reach", *Middle East Eye*, 10 March 2015.

that the Saudis are bogged down there. The war is inflicting a tremendous cost in blood, treasure and reputation on them amid serious financial difficulties.⁶¹

Indeed, Iran's limited pre-war investment seems to have paid off beyond expectations, and over time its influence could grow. The war has made the Huthis more militantly anti-Saudi, and they admit they would readily take more aid from any side that opposed the war, including Iran or Hizbollah.⁶² Ironically, the conflict may be creating the relationship Saudi Arabia fears. Despite evident reluctance to date, Tehran could choose to increase involvement due to the growing regional tensions or if the Huthis lose too much ground.

B. *The Anti-Huthi Bloc*

The opposing bloc has even more unlikely bedfellows. Domestically it combines three main anti-Huthi pillars: southern separatists, Sunni Islamists and other tribally/regionally based adversaries, all overlapping and internally diverse. It includes the internationally recognised government, as well as the GPC defectors in Riyadh, but these have symbolic political more than military or on-the-ground political value. In fighting and building on local political support, it has proven strongest in the south and east, historically (Sunni) Shafei areas. It depends on external political and military backing, but its international supporters have complex, competing priorities. The common thread is opposition to the Huthis or what the Huthis are doing. Differences abound, including over political visions.

1. Southern separatists

The majority of anti-Huthi/Saleh fighters in the ex-South Yemen, independent before 1990, are separatists. Prior to the war's outbreak in March 2015, the main political grouping in the south, Hiraak, was a mostly peaceful movement calling for southern independence or at least greater autonomy.⁶³ It has now evolved to include loosely allied militias calling themselves the "Southern Resistance".

This alliance is divided along intra-southern regional lines and politically on whether to push for immediate independence, accept a transition before separation or – much less popular – settle for greater autonomy.⁶⁴ For the Southern Resistance, the fight is about independence and protecting the south from "northern invaders".⁶⁵ Its attitude toward the government ranges from ambivalent to hostile. After the Huthi/Saleh bloc's defeat in Aden in July, President Hadi nominally reestablished the government on Yemeni soil and appointed a small group of loyalists to key ministries and security positions. His support base comes from government officials, a very small

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Iranian official, October 2015.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representatives, September 2015.

⁶³ On Hiraak, Crisis Group Reports, *Breaking Point; Yemen's Southern Question*, both op. cit.

⁶⁴ According to a Southern Resistance leader from Lahj, "the strategic objective of the liberation, independence and restoration of the fully sovereign state of South Yemen has not changed. But [tactically] there are different views. Some believe the South should have an immediate referendum ... Others support federalism ... before full independence. Others want to continue the struggle by all means until direct negotiation ... over southern independence". Crisis Group interview, Aden, October 2015.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni activists, May 2015; Adeni journalist, September 2015; Southern Resistance supporter, October 2015.

percentage of whom are loyal to him, and others who work with him out of necessity as they pursue independence. There was also a small group of fighters calling themselves the “Legitimacy Resistance”, to indicate recognition of Hadi and his government; these have since been integrated into the beginnings of a new national army.⁶⁶

Most southern groups dismiss or are openly hostile to the government, even if Hadi is a southerner, because they see it as rejecting secession.⁶⁷ They showed their priorities by resisting calls from the Hadi government and Saudi-led coalition to pursue the Huthis north toward Taiz after the Aden battle, focusing instead on securing the old border with the north and southern power struggles.⁶⁸

The struggle over Taiz shows the deep divisions in the anti-Huthi camp and the challenge of coordinating its military and political fronts. Many southerners, especially Adenis, accuse Taiz of giving the Huthis and their allies free passage toward Aden, while anti-Huthi fighters in Taiz resent southern fighters’ refusal to help them regain their city.⁶⁹ A Taiz political activist described the divisions:

The map of Yemen now looks like a series of isolated rooms. Each group stands in its own room and screams about injustice, but no one can hear the others. The people of Aden say: “No one is with us”. In Taiz they say: “No one stands with us”. And in Dalia: “No one is helping us”. And so on.⁷⁰

For many southerners, the war, especially the brutal five-month battle for Aden, has unlocked a torrent of long-festering anger and hatred against the north, feeding their desire for separation.⁷¹ “Us versus them” narratives appear to be solidifying, encouraging blatant discrimination and attacks against northerners and their property.⁷² Pro-unity Yemenis recognise it will be an uphill battle to preserve a single state after the war.⁷³ A Huthi supporter acknowledged: “The reputation of Ansar Allah [the Huthis] has been burned in Aden. The same happened in Dalia If and when the war ends, cycles of revenge will continue between north and south and between Sanaa and Taiz”.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni analyst, October 2015 and January 2016.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni activists, May 2015; Adeni analyst, Hiraak supporters, October 2015. Another reason for frustration with the government is perception it is corrupt and inefficient in providing security and services. An Aden resident expressed an often-heard view: “I think the government is corrupt and has failed us when we needed it during the war. Now that the Huthis have left, there have been few positive changes, despite the UAE and Saudi Arabia providing millions of dollars for reconstruction”. Crisis Group interview, September 2015.

⁶⁸ Crisis group interview, southern journalist, September 2015.

⁶⁹ Crisis group interviews, Adeni activists, May 2015; Aden resident, July 2015; two Taiz politicians, October 2015.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, October 2015.

⁷¹ Crisis group interviews, Adeni journalist, October 2015; Aden resident, October 2015; Hiraak leader, November 2015.

⁷² Locals say robberies and looting have disproportionately targeted property of persons originally from the north. Crisis Group interviews, Aden resident, Adeni journalist, September 2015. Even political moderates in Aden routinely express blanket scepticism about the motivations of Yemenis from the north. A professor, for example, said he believed that “all northerners living in Aden helped the Huthis during the battle for Aden”. Crisis Group interview, May 2015.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Taiz businessman, two prominent GPC leaders, August 2015; Aden civil servant, Huthi supporters, northern tribal leader, ex-northern commander, September 2015.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter from the south, September 2015.

Even as the desire for independence grows, divisions among Southern Resistance fighters are multiplying. Before the war, the Hiraak was highly decentralised, without a coherent leadership structure. Its successor is even more decentralised, with a growing cadre of new local leaders. In Aden alone, there may be some 300 neighbourhood leaders, each controlling a small armed group.⁷⁵

Regional differences are another major southern fault line. Adenis, suspicious of their hinterland, claim that fighters from other parts of the south abandoned them against the Huthis during the battle for the city, and they are being marginalised in the process of rebuilding and securing the city.⁷⁶ There is also a political divide between fighters from Dalia and Lahj governorates and those from Abyan over control of Aden and its resources, including salaries and benefits of fighters' integration into the national army being created there with Saudi-led coalition money.⁷⁷ Many southerners accuse Hadi, from Abyan, of favouring his governorate's people.⁷⁸ The distrust between Dalia/Lahj and Abyan mirrors the 1986 civil war in the south, in which Dalia/Lahj fighters (the Tuqma), defeated opponents from Abyan and Shebwa (the Zumra), in battles that killed as many as 10,000 in ten days.⁷⁹

There are also tensions between Islamists and non-Islamists. There has always been a Salafi/Islamist component within the Hiraak that has been viewed with suspicion by more nationalist or leftist adherents. Similarly, Hiraak has always had tense relations with Islah, given that party's pro-unity position and the preference of its local leaders for decentralisation over independence.⁸⁰

Hostilities are high between the Southern Resistance and AQAP, as well as the nascent IS branch. During the battle against the Huthis, most resistance fighters denied the presence of AQAP and IS fighters, downplaying their threat to the south's future.⁸¹ Today, AQAP and IS are in open confrontation with both the Hadi government and the separatist forces, and expelling them from Aden and other parts of the south is proving difficult in the absence of a strong central authority in Aden and lack of coordination between resistance fighters.⁸²

A general state of lawlessness in Aden feeds and underscores divisions among the Southern Resistance and highlights the anti-Huthi/Saleh bloc's governance challenges. Since the Huthis' departure, the city has been plagued by dozens of assassina-

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, November 2015. There are lower estimates: an Aden resident said some twenty prominent Southern Resistance commanders in the city. Crisis Group interview, September 2015. Other estimates are higher. An Aden journalist estimated some 400 local leaders in the greater Aden area. Crisis Group interview, November 2015.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Aden doctor, June 2015; resident, July 2015; southern Yemeni political analyst, August 2015; two prominent Aden civil-society activists, September 2015.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Aden resident, September 2015; southern journalist, October 2015; Hiraak leader, December 2015; southern entrepreneur, January 2016.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Aden resident, September 2015; Aden analyst, August, October 2015.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Point?*, op. cit.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak activist, May 2015; southern youth activist, December 2015.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Aden journalist, October 2015. IS claimed responsibility for an attack on a hotel housing the Yemeni government and two buildings used by Saudi-led coalition troops. "Yemen rocket attacks on government hotel kill 15 in Aden", *The Guardian*, 6 October 2015. Many southerners believe AQAP and IS are controlled by "northern" political elites, particularly Saleh or Mohsen, a narrative that underscores the distrust of the north. Separatists often suggest AQAP/IS growth in the south is a northern attempt to undermine independence by showing the region is unstable, prone to extremism and unable to manage its own affairs.

tions and attacks on government buildings, most claimed by IS.⁸³ While locals often blame Saleh, who they believe manipulates Islamist extremists to sow chaos, others see a genuine threat and blame the government, which is widely viewed as corrupt and ineffective.⁸⁴ Residents also report that some of the Southern Resistance fighters associate with AQAP or IS because these groups can pay, and the government is not meeting their financial needs.⁸⁵ Others in the Resistance have turned to criminal activity, controlling parts of the city or government for profit.⁸⁶

2. Sunni Islamists

The anti-Huthi/Saleh bloc includes a broad range of Sunni Islamist groups that vary significantly in political ambitions and tactics but are united in ideological opposition to the Huthis. Like them, their rank-and-file are driven by religious fervour. While the Huthis rally their base against Sunni extremists – called generically *takfiris* (Muslims who accuse other Muslims of apostasy) or Daesh (the Arabic abbreviation for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) – these groups urge followers to resist the Shiites, whom they refer to derogatorily as *rawafedh* (rejecting what Sunnis consider the legitimate successors of the Prophet Muhammad).⁸⁷ The pervasive use of inflammatory religious rhetoric by both sides further polarises a power struggle in ways that encourage sectarianism and will complicate post-war efforts at political reconciliation.

a. Islah

The most important Sunni group is Islah (the Yemeni Grouping for Reform), which, like the GPC, is a political party with significant national appeal, combining the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood with Salafi, tribal and business components. It accepts the democratic process and has shown considerable pragmatism since its 1990 founding. It allied with socialists and Zaydi-based parties in 2001 to form the anti-Saleh Joint Meeting Parties alliance, then worked with a variety of actors, including the Huthis, in 2011 to topple Saleh's regime.

Despite their brief cooperation, Islah and the Huthis are mostly political and ideological opponents. Today, Islah is allied with the Hadi government against the Huthi/Saleh bloc. Much of its leadership fled to Riyadh in March 2015. The party's narrative hews closely to Riyadh's, and it used the war to reconcile with Saudi Arabia, which under King Abdullah had designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation and shunned the Yemeni branch.⁸⁸ Many Islah members joined the fight against the Huthis, especially in Marib and Taiz governorates, where they are strong. The party's support for the Saudi-led coalition has given the Huthis additional rea-

⁸³ The most prominent attacks have been assassination of the Aden governor on 6 December 2015 and the 6 October attack, also claimed by IS, on a hotel housing the Yemeni government.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Aden resident, September 2015; Hiraak leader, October 2015; Aden civil-society activist, December 2015. Crisis Group interviews, Southern Resistance leader, November 2015; southern youth activist, December 2015.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, southern youth activist, December 2015; Aden politician, Hiraak leader, January 2016.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Aden resident, September 2015; Hiraak leader, December 2015; southern journalist, November 2015, January 2016; southern entrepreneur, January 2016.

⁸⁷ On first use of *rawafedh* during Iraq's post-2003 sectarian conflict, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Islah members, May 2015.

son to target it, and they have imprisoned, disappeared and allegedly tortured many Islah leaders and followers during the war.⁸⁹

Unlike the Huthis, but similar to the GPC, Islah lacks a standing militia. Instead, it has a network of affiliated tribal fighters and loyalists inside the security services that is important for the opposition's fight in the north, especially in Marib and Taiz governorates and its own strongholds such as Arhab in Sanaa governorate. The ties to the security services mainly run through the extensive networks of General Mohsen, the long-time Islah ally who led the six rounds of fighting against Huthi rebels between 2004 and 2010. During the 2011 political transition, he and his Islah allies benefited when their followers gained positions in the civil and security services. What remains of their networks, including prominent generals like Mohammed al-Maqdashi, the army chief of staff allied with Hadi, has mostly been incorporated into pro-government forces fighting the Huthis. However, Mohsen's forces were intentionally neglected during the latter part of Saleh's rule, so the military's most capable parts are now Huthi allies.⁹⁰

The rivalry between Islah and Saleh's GPC is a critical driver of the war, at once separate from and connected to Islah's enmity toward the Huthis. The GPC holds Islah and Mohsen largely responsible for the protests that broke out in 2011 (as part of the Arab Awakenings). It views the GCC-sponsored transition as an Islah power grab, facilitated by Hadi, to displace Saleh, marginalise the GPC and stack the government and security services with Islah clients.⁹¹ Islah and its allies blame Saleh and the GPC for hijacking and obstructing reform initiatives during the transition, especially by allying with the Huthis and facilitating their advance on the capital. They interpret current events as Saleh's revenge.⁹²

GPC-Islah competition is an important element of battlefield dynamics. Taiz is a case in point. The Huthis have only a narrow base – reportedly a number of Hashemite families primarily – in the governorate, where the GPC and Islah have significant appeal.⁹³ Saleh-affiliated military units, supported by many but not all tribal GPC sheikhs, have been critical for the Huthis' ability to continue to fight Islah-affiliated tribesmen and others, despite open antagonism of the many GPC affiliates who consider them but the lesser of two evils.⁹⁴

Islah is far more anti-Huthi than pro-Hadi. There are deep rifts between Hadi and the Islah/Mohsen/Ahmar alliance. The latter views Hadi as partly responsible for the Huthis' capture of Sanaa without a fight.⁹⁵ The alliance supports him only because

⁸⁹ Their most prominent Islah prisoner is Mohammed Qahtan, in Huthi custody since March 2015. A Human Rights Watch report cites a Yemeni lawyer as saying the Huthis have over 800 detainees, mostly from Islah. "Yemen: Arbitrarily Held by the Houthis", 10 January 2016.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group Reports, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts*; *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*, both op. cit.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders and members, Sanaa, 2013, 2015.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, Islah leaders and party members, Sanaa, 2013-2015.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, civil-society activist, November 2015; prominent Taiz politician, December 2015.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, GPC politician from Taiz, July 2015. Another Taiz politician said GPC-Islah competition is an important part of the conflict, but targeting of GPC leaders' homes and property by the Saudi-led coalition has been a prime reason why his group stands with the Huthis. Crisis Group interview, January 2016. Not all GPC members are fighting on the Huthi side. GPC affiliates are on both sides, but those opposed to the coalition side have been critical in sustaining the war and are at least partly motivated antagonism toward Islah.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Islah leader, Sanaa, March 2015.

he still heads the internationally recognised government and has external support for the fight against Saleh and the Huthis. Islah also has an uncomfortable relationship with the pro-independence Southern Resistance, given the party's pro-unity stance, which has cost it much southern support over time.

b. Salafi fighters

Yemen has many types of Salafis.⁹⁶ Most are non-political and non-violent. Some, like the Rashad party, have embraced politics. Its members are harsh Huthi critics and Islah partners, but even many uninvolved in politics have fought the Huthis. Salafi fighters have been prominent on several fronts, notably Aden and Taiz. How they are funded and organised and what they seek from the war is unclear. Many were educated in the Dammaj and Kitaf religious institutes in the north and have a history of conflict with the Huthis, who saw them as intruders. The Salafis say they were defending their right to practice their religion and proselytise. After the Huthis beat them in 2014, they fled to other areas to regroup and fight the Huthis there. Some received military training in Saudi Arabia and at Saudi-coalition bases in the south beside other anti-Huthi fighters.⁹⁷

Salafi groups based in the south have joined the fight to defend their areas against Zaydi/Shiite encroachment.⁹⁸ Fighters from both the south and Dammaj fought at Aden from March to July, and Salafi fighters have been increasingly prominent in Taiz.⁹⁹ Their leader, Abu Abbas, a local man schooled in Dammaj, is considered one of the most capable anti-Huthi field commanders.¹⁰⁰

c. AQAP and IS

AQAP and IS are arguably the war's principal beneficiaries.¹⁰¹ They are the Huthis' ideological enemies, seeing Shiites as *rawafedh* and *murtadeen* (apostates), so enthusiastically joined the war, while also rejecting the Hadi government as apostate. As fighting spread, drawing in both internal and external forces, and its centre moved northward, they moved their fighters into the spaces vacated by the two sides, and AQAP imposed control, especially in Hadramout governorate. The Huthis blame the

⁹⁶ Laurent Bonnefoy, *Salafism in Yemen: Transnationalism and Religious Identity* (London, 2011).

⁹⁷ Crisis Group Report, *The Huthis*, op. cit. Crisis Group interviews, Southern Resistance leader, October 2015; Yemeni security officer supporting the Saudi-led coalition, January 2016.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Salafi leader from Aden with Hiraak ties, Aden, February 2014.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak supporter from Aden, May, 2015; Taiz businessman, October 2015; southern journalist, November 2015; Taiz politicians, September, December 2015; development expert responsible for Taiz, November 2015.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Taiz politician, December 2015, who said Taizi Salafis are more effective against the Huthis than Islah: unlike Islah, they receive financial backing from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which view them as less of a long-term political threat, since they lack clear ambitions beyond defeating the Huthis.

¹⁰¹ The U.S. considers AQAP, formed in January 2009 out of a merger between al-Qaeda's Yemen and Saudi branches, al-Qaeda's most dangerous branch because it can strike outside Yemen, particularly against the U.S. It claimed responsibility for the December 2009 attempt to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight and tried to send parcel bombs on a flight to the U.S. in October 2010. It claimed responsibility for the January 2015 Paris attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. Unlike IS, which is new to Yemen, it has a long history and an extensive social and family network there. It captured and governed territory in Abyan and Shebwa provinces in 2011, until defeated by the army and local tribesmen in 2012. Crisis Group Report, *Breaking Point?*, op. cit.

Saudi-led coalition and Hadi government for allowing these groups to extend their reach in the south; the coalition and government blame the Huthis. They are equally culpable, however.

The Huthis' military expansion into predominantly Sunni areas gave AQAP/IS an additional reason for fighting them and opened new opportunities for recruitment and/or cooperation with local tribes and Sunni groups. The Saudi-led war effort accelerated this by de-emphasising the threat from violent Sunni jihadis for the sake of defeating the Huthi/Saleh bloc. Weapons and resources directed to the anti-Huthi opposition have seeped into AQAP/IS hands, a trend likely to continue if the Huthis retreat further.¹⁰² Most importantly, these groups benefit from the collapse of local government authority and services in the south, stepping into the void left by the unpopular Hadi government by offering money and purpose to frustrated youth, and, in AQAP's Mukalla case, a modicum of governance and services.

The Huthi/Saleh bloc routinely inflates the roles of AQAP and IS and conflates Islah and the (non-Islamist) Southern Resistance with them, despite their very different goals and tactics.¹⁰³ It does this to delegitimise its opponents, but thereby contributes to the conflict's radicalisation by feeding a new and dangerous Sunni-versus-Shiite sectarian narrative that grows in the war environment.

Given the deepening sectarian polarisation and the grey areas between fighting groups, it is difficult to specify AQAP/IS's relative influence, but they are an important component of the broad anti-Huthi opposition, fighting on several fronts beside others who share their goal of pushing the Huthis out of their territory. Thus, AQAP fought in Aden and participates in the attempt to recapture Taiz.¹⁰⁴ In al-Bayda, it is allied with local Sunni tribes.¹⁰⁵ Such cooperation appears mainly a product of having a common enemy. Following Aden's liberation, AQAP and IS have come into open conflict with both Southern Resistance fighters and the re-established Hadi government. In Taiz, a wide array of anti-Huthi fighters has expressed alarm at the AQAP/IS presence and, as in Aden, can be expected to turn against it if and when the common enemy is driven out.¹⁰⁶

There are important differences as well. AQAP is well-established, with deep roots in Yemen. Consistent with al-Qaeda's global priorities, its leaders aim to use the country as a base to plan, organise and launch attacks against external enemies and have been frequently targeted by U.S. drones. Unlike IS, it focuses on addressing local grievances and has proved willing to work, to an extent, within the limits of local norms and sensibilities. Since its arrival in April 2015 in Mukalla, for example, it has established and ruled through a local Salafi council, the "Sons of Hadramout", and sought to provide electricity, security and swift justice.¹⁰⁷ It has a wide network of local affiliates, known collectively as Ansar al-Sharia, which acknowledge association with al-Qaeda but do not pledge allegiance to its leader, Ayman Zawahiri. Ansar

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Western journalist, November 2015; Aden journalist, October 2015; Arab diplomat, tribal sheikh from Shebwa, August 2015.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi and GPC supporters, August, September 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, anti-Huthi politicians from Taiz, July 2015; prominent Taiz independent politician, September 2015; Taiz politician, December 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, anti-Huthi tribal sheikh from al-Baydah, May 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Taiz politician, civil society activist, November 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Mukalla resident, October 2015.

al-Sharia fighters occupy a large grey zone between AQAP and other parts of the anti-Huthi bloc and reportedly were the bulk of AQAP fighters on fronts such as Aden.¹⁰⁸

IS is comparatively new in Yemen, an AQAP breakaway that announced its presence in November 2014 and claimed its first attack – killing over 140 – on 20 March 2015 against Zaydi mosques in Sanaa. The group appears strongest in Hadramout, Aden and Lahj, with a growing presence in Abyan. It indulges in brutality more than AQAP and appears less concerned about heeding local norms and forging local alliances. The barrier for entry, as with Ansar al-Sharia, is low, and recruiting is active from the south's disillusioned and impoverished youth. According to a journalist based in Aden during the fighting:

Levels of violence in Aden were extreme and the destruction difficult to imagine. Aden's youth became accustomed to violence and many who were sympathetic to al-Qaeda have now graduated, so to speak, to IS. The Huthis' pretext for going to Aden to fight Daesh [IS] has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁰⁹

Tension is high between AQAP and IS, reflecting their competition for essentially the same recruits. IS accuses AQAP of collaborating with the Hadi government against the Huthis and has called on its leader, Qasim al-Raymi, to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi.¹¹⁰ AQAP lost several key figures to U.S. drone strikes in 2015, which could undermine its ability to fend off IS efforts to poach its affiliates.¹¹¹ The two groups appear to be heading toward open conflict, especially in Abyan, an Ansar al-Sharia stronghold, where IS is trying to expand its networks.¹¹² Both, however, have made substantial political and territorial gains in the war and are likely to continue to do so while there is no capable, broadly acceptable government that could marginalise and ultimately defeat them.

3. Tribal and other regionally based opposition groups

The Huthi/Saleh bloc faces important pockets of tribally based opposition, even in the north. Tribes see protecting their territory against invaders as part of defending their honour. For some, though not all, the Huthis are external invaders. This has been an important dimension of the fight in Marib, whose tribes have long resented political and economic marginalisation. Many of those fighting are motivated at least in part by desire to protect their areas from the new dominant power in Sanaa, the Huthis, who have been unable to capture either Marib city or the governorate's lowlands, despite numerous attempts since they reached the capital.¹¹³

While the Huthis hold an advantage in the Zaydi highlands, some suggest that even there the dynamics may be shifting, as they are blamed for the war's economic hardships.¹¹⁴ An important component of the Saudi-led coalition's strategy is an at-

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Iona Craig, freelance journalist, November 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ "IS releases propaganda video targeting al-Qaeda in Yemen", *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 20 November 2015.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Katherine Zimmerman, research fellow, American Enterprise Institute, November 2015.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, southern journalist, Western diplomat, December 2015.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Nadwa Dawsari, Yemeni analyst and non-resident senior fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy, May 2015.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa resident, October 2015; civil society activist, November 2015.

tempt to turn tribes against the Huthi/Saleh bloc by financial inducements, but this has had limited success, in part because when tribes are hit by airstrikes, they blame Saudi Arabia.¹¹⁵ The Huthis can take advantage of tribal alliances in some cases, but these may also play against them because of their high fluidity, though the tipping point is often unclear.

4. General People's Congress in Riyadh

The majority of the GPC leadership and rank-and-file, particularly in the north, is solidly opposed to Islah and the Saudi-led coalition, even as it is deeply suspicious of its temporary Huthi allies. Saleh remains its centre of gravity and the glue that holds it together, though a few prominent party leaders and tribal sheikhs have defected to the Hadi government. Some of this group, which includes Rashad al-Alimi, Ahmed Bin Dagher and Sheikh Mohammed Najih Shayf, among others, have historical ties with Saudi Arabia; all strongly opposed the Huthis' Saleh-assisted power grab.¹¹⁶ From their new perch in Riyadh on 12 October 2015, they announced they had removed Saleh as party leader and vowed to put him on trial for supporting the Huthis.¹¹⁷ While symbolically important, this had no impact on the ground in Yemen: the bulk of the party remains staunchly against Hadi and foreign military intervention.

Still, the defections highlight the uncertain future of the GPC, which, like Islah, is struggling to maintain its national appeal and influence in the face of regionalisation and new domestic competitors. A prominent GPC leader said the party is divided into three parts: Saleh's faction, the largest and most influential; the Riyadh group, with several prominent members; and a group of individuals who are trying to hold the party together by mediating between the two.¹¹⁸ What remains is a diminished version of the GPC's old self, which lost significant membership during the 2011 uprising, particularly in the south, where many erstwhile followers shifted to the Hiraak/Southern Resistance.

5. The rump Hadi government

The Hadi government is at once the anti-Huthi bloc's most and least important component. As the internationally recognised government, headed by a president who gained his position due to the GCC-sponsored transition, it is the cornerstone of the Saudi justification for war. By any measure, Hadi's removal from power by the Huthis in February 2015 was a coup d'état. But beyond his legitimising function, Hadi is a weak figure presiding over a shadow of a government, utterly dependent for political survival on Gulf sponsors who might drop him if and when a desirable alternative presents itself.

On its face, the Hadi-Saudi relationship is one of mutual dependence; in reality, the kingdom, with its vast resources, has the clear upper hand. Hadi has no popular base in Yemen, and his legitimacy was shaky at best when the war began: his term had expired in February 2014, and he resigned under pressure in January 2015,

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, tribal sheikh from al-Bayda, sheikh from Hashid confederation, Yemeni security officer, May 2015.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders, May 2015.

¹¹⁷ Saeed al-Batati, "Saleh fired by his own party, to be put on internal trial", *Gulf News*, 14 October 2015.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, GPC leader associated with the third group, September 2015.

awaiting the outcome of the UN-led negotiations over a new government. He and his colleagues spent most of 2015 as Saudi guests in luxury accommodations in Riyadh, with all activities paid for, a fact deeply resented in Yemen especially among those who suffer the war's hardships in-country.

The Saudis and their allies have no illusions about Hadi's weakness and unpopularity but lack a better alternative. Prime Minister and Vice President Khaled Bahah, appointed by Hadi in October 2014 with the support of Western powers who view him as capable of improving government management and prospects for reconciliation, could be a possible replacement. The two have been rivals more than partners during their year of working together, but the Saudis have been reluctant to support a change, in part because they appear to believe removing Hadi now could undermine the claim to be intervening on behalf of an elected government.¹¹⁹

The Hadi-Bahah rivalry has added a further layer of fragmentation to the anti-Huthi/Saleh alliance. While Bahah is viewed positively by Western diplomats and reportedly has good relations with the UAE, Saudi Arabia appears less enthusiastic.¹²⁰ Differences flared up publicly on 1 December 2015, when Hadi unilaterally reshuffled the government, appointing three deputy prime ministers. Bahah called the changes illegitimate because Hadi did not consult him.¹²¹ Such power struggles may have to be resolved if the Saudi-led coalition is serious about a negotiated end to the war, since a sustainable solution would need to derive from talks between relatively cohesive adversaries, each of which could deliver its side.

6. External support

In its pursuit of military victory, the anti-Huthi front receives significant external military, financial and political support. Its primary backer is Saudi Arabia, which leads the military campaign, with close UAE support and a cobbled-together coalition of mainly regional states, including the other GCC members except Oman.¹²² Saudi Arabia and the UAE bankroll the training and equipping of anti-Huthi fighters, while the Saudis appear to bear the lion's share of the Hadi government's expenses.¹²³ The U.S., UK and France, in particular among Western states, also back the war effort through arms sales to the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. The U.S. goes significantly further, providing logistical (including inflight refuelling) and intelligence support.

These states, with Russian and Chinese tolerance, handed their Gulf allies a political gift in UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (14 April 2015), which Saudi Arabia – a party to the conflict – and other Arab states were heavily involved in drafting and which unequivocally took the Yemeni government's side in the civil war. The resolu-

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi, Emirati officials, June, August 2015; Western diplomats, June, July 2015.

¹²⁰ Crisis group interviews, Bahah adviser, October 2015; Western diplomat, October, November 2015.

¹²¹ "Yemeni PM rejects cabinet reshuffle ordered by the president: government source", Reuters, 1 December 2015.

¹²² Of the nine mostly Sunni countries that expressed support for the war (see fn. 10 above), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan and Morocco have sent token military support. From the start, GCC member Oman refused to join and urged a political solution, a position that has further strained its relationship with Saudi Arabia and other GCC members.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, Yemeni security expert with close ties to the Saudis, December 2015, January 2016.

tion makes demands only on the Huthis, including withdrawal from territories taken, surrender of weapons to the state and cessation of all activities that are prerogatives of government. It also levels travel bans and asset freezes on Huthi leader Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi and Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, and establishes an inspection mechanism designed to prevent the Huthis from rearming.¹²⁴

a. Saudi Arabia

In name, Saudi Arabia leads a coalition of nine other Arab states, but it and the UAE are the two most important players. They see the war as between the legitimate government and an Iranian-backed militia bent on imposing its will on Yemen by arms, thereby threatening the stability of the Arabian Peninsula. For them, it is a war of necessity forced on them when the Huthis overthrew the government, pursued Hadi as he fled to Aden and moved Scud missiles to the Saudi border.¹²⁵ Like the Huthi/Saleh narrative, theirs tends to brush over the complexities of Yemeni politics, downplaying legitimate grievances against the Hadi government, popular support for the Huthis and Saleh, especially in the highlands, and – after the war started – deep anger toward the Saudi-led coalition for bombing cities and imposing a suffocating air and naval blockade.

Saudi Arabia's motivations are based on both regional and domestic calculations. Considering itself encircled by Iran, it wants to flex its muscles against the Huthi presence on its southern border. Saudi officials routinely express their conviction that the Huthis are Iranian proxies, who only understand force and whose agenda is tied to Tehran's ambitions.¹²⁶ Those familiar with Yemen acknowledge the religious doctrinal differences but accuse the Huthis of politicising and radicalising traditional Zaydism in pursuit of an anti-Saudi, pro-Iranian regional agenda.¹²⁷

Complex domestic calculations are also in play. A large Saudi constituency views the war in sectarian terms and supports a pre-emptive strike against Iranian expansion. Some in the Gulf even argue that Saudi policy tries to get ahead of a powerful Wahhabi constituency that, had the kingdom not intervened, would have independently mobilised Yemen's Sunnis to fight the Huthis. A UAE official took this a step further, asserting that Saudi Arabia and the UAE were forced to act to prevent a Syria-type civil war and forestall a scenario whereby the Sunnis, lacking protection, would turn to groups like AQAP and IS.¹²⁸

Equally important, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily shortly after the transition from King Abdullah to King Salman that concentrated unprecedented power in the new king's son, Mohammed bin Salman who, as defence minister and deputy crown

¹²⁴ See Appendix C for the text of Resolution 2216.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, GCC officials, May, June 2015; UAE officials, May, April 2015. According to a Saudi official, "Saudi Arabia only reacted with military force after all other avenues were exhausted. Saudi Arabia had supported a political solution in Yemen through the GCC initiative and had supported the Yemeni government economically. But the Huthis insisted on using military force to impose their will over other Yemeni groups. They [the Huthis] only understand force. Saudi Arabia did not use force even after the Huthis captured the capital in September 2014. It intervened only when the Huthis attacked Hadi in Aden and threatened Saudi Arabia's border". Crisis Group interview, January 2016.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi officials, May 2015, June 2015.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Saudi official, June 2015.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi official, Yemeni businessman with close Saudi ties, June 2015; UAE official, May 2015.

prince, has become the face of the war. The new assertiveness appears to have played well with domestic constituencies that saw Saudi interests threatened by Abdullah's different priorities and more cautious regional posture.¹²⁹ In particular, Abdullah viewed the Muslim Brotherhood (including Islah, albeit to a lesser extent than its Egyptian counterpart) as a security threat, labelling it terrorist and repressing it severely. Salman revised the threat perception, easing up on the Brotherhood, particularly in Yemen, and naming Iran the top priority. While popular support of the war is difficult to gauge, Saudi Arabia specialists broadly agree that the military intervention would likely not have happened under Abdullah.¹³⁰ This makes victory, or at least its perception, critical for the kingdom's stability and, in particular, Mohammed bin Salman's political future.

b. The UAE

The UAE has been Saudi Arabia's principal coalition partner, dedicating major resources to the war, including a significant number of troops. These were largely responsible for taking Aden and have been heavily involved in trying to secure and rebuild the city. They have fought also in Marib, where 52 soldiers died in a single missile strike on one of their bases in September, the largest loss of life in UAE military history. Government officials share the Saudi perception of Iran's role in Yemen, but the war decision appears to have been informed primarily by desire to stand with Saudi Arabia at a time of need.¹³¹

The UAE's threat assessment and priorities in Yemen, which have played an important role in shaping the conflict, differ, however, from the Saudis'. Most importantly, while King Salman embraced Islah, the Emirates have not; they continue to view the Muslim Brotherhood as a domestic and regional political threat. They have funnelled their support to others in the anti-Huthi bloc, particularly the Southern Resistance. This divergence has been on display in the battle for Taiz, from which UAE soldiers have largely stayed away due in part to Islah's prominence. Tensions between the two became manifest when Anwar Gargash, the UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, tweeted in November that "had it not been for the failure of al-Islah and the Muslim Brotherhood to act", Taiz would already have been "liberated".¹³²

The UAE has concentrated its political and military efforts on the south, especially Aden, where Islah is weak, while the Saudis are focused further north, where the strongest anti-Huthi components are affiliated with Islah. Many southerners believe the UAE is primarily driven by commercial interest in Aden's port and might sup-

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Riyadh resident, May 2015; Saudi businessman, August 2015; foreign expert on Saudi Arabia, October 2015.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi businessman, August 2015; two former Western diplomats to Saudi Arabia, October 2015.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interviews, UAE officials, May, April, December 2015. They emphasise that the UAE joined at Saudi request, and Riyadh leads the war effort. Diplomats and analysts familiar with UAE foreign policy suggest the involvement largely stems from desire to send a strong message to the new Saudi leaders that security is interlinked, and they stand by them. Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, May, June, October 2015; UAE academic, September 2015.

¹³² Crisis Group interviews, UAE political analyst, September 2015; two anti-Huthi Taiz politicians, October 2015. "UAE blames Islamists for delay in anti-Huthi operations", *The Daily Star*, 24 November 2015.

port an independent south.¹³³ UAE officials and commentators deny this, saying the Aden emphasis is due to desire to strengthen the Hadi government by a success.¹³⁴

Following the Marib attack, and particularly since a troop rotation in November 2015, Adenis report a decrease in the UAE's military presence in their city.¹³⁵ Emirati soldiers are still in the south, but they are gradually being replaced with Sudanese troops and, reportedly, Colombian mercenaries, while the UAE continues to aid its Yemeni allies with military hardware and supplies.¹³⁶ It seems prepared to continue to support the war, albeit with fewer nationals on the ground, as long as Riyadh is determined to continue. Yet, its preferences for Yemen's future, especially regarding Islah, will likely continue to diverge from the Saudis'.

c. The U.S., UK and France

Despite reservations regarding the war's necessity, duration and unintended consequences, particularly the spread of AQAP and IS, the U.S., UK and France have given Saudi Arabia and the UAE critical military support and political cover, deferring to Riyadh's sensibilities on how best to address Yemen's political crisis. While they call for an end to the violence, unhindered humanitarian access and a return to a Yemeni-led transition, their Security Council actions and military aid have in effect enabled the war and delayed prospects for political compromise.

The April Security Council resolution essentially called on the Huthis to surrender, legitimised the Saudi-led military action and has been used as a justification to avoid a political deal. The Security Council later issued several press statements, the first on 12 May, that were more balanced, calling on all parties to return unconditionally to UN-facilitated talks. But it has yet to rectify its political blunder, which severely undermines the perception of UN impartiality in Yemen, by passing a new legally binding resolution. In fact, Western states have been reluctant to press the Saudis publicly, given Yemen's sensitivity for their ally. When questioned, U.S. and UK officials say privately that their influence over Saudi decision-making is limited and most effective when pursued quietly.¹³⁷

Their actions, particularly military help, appear to contradict any advice aimed at ending the conflict. For the U.S., in particular, support for the Saudi-led coalition appears to be part of the price for Saudi acquiescence to the nuclear deal with Iran, which antagonised Washington's Gulf allies and has required extensive reassurance. Washington has given logistical and intelligence aid to the war, including in-air refuelling of Saudi fighter jets. On 25 March, the day airstrikes began, a White House statement condemned Huthi military moves against the Hadi government and outlined support for the Saudi-led coalition:

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni journalist, October 2015; Southern Resistance leader, November 2015.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, UAE official, August 2015; UAE academic, September 2015.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni journalist, businessperson and civil-society activist, January 2016.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, May, June, October 2015. Emily Hagar and Mark Mazzetti, "Emirates Secretly Sends Colombian Mercenaries to Yemen Fight", *The New York Times*, 25 November 2015.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, May-July, October 2015.

In support of the GCC actions to defend against Huthi violence, President Obama has authorized the provision of logistical and intelligence support to GCC-led military operations. While U.S. forces are not taking direct military action in Yemen in support of this effort, we are establishing a Joint Planning Cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate U.S. military and intelligence support.¹³⁸

Since the war's start, the U.S. has approved almost \$21 billion in new arms sales to the Saudis, much of it to replenish Yemen-expended missiles and munitions.¹³⁹

The U.S. and UK may have thought the price of support manageable, as the war has been mostly out of their publics' view, but it has not been insignificant in civilian casualties, the humanitarian catastrophe and counter-terrorism setbacks efforts regarding AQAP and IS.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, both governments have come under increasing scrutiny especially from international organisations, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Oxfam, for help to operations said to violate international humanitarian law.¹⁴¹

In many ways, Saudi Arabia's Western allies are in a lose-lose situation. Withdrawing military support would confirm Saudi fears of being abandoned for Iran. Continuing the support contributes to a humanitarian disaster, heightens Saudi-Iranian tensions, increases the AQ/IS threat and possibly renders the West complicit in war crimes. Any leverage gained on Saudi policy through participation in the war effort has failed to yield much, if any, fruit.

¹³⁸ Statement by U.S. National Security Council spokesperson Bernadette Meehan.

¹³⁹ U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) website. State Department approved arms sales include: MH-60R multi-mission helicopters, \$1.9 billion (May 2015); ammunition, \$0.5 billion (July 2015); Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missiles, \$5.4 billion (July 2015); UH-60M Black Hawk utility helicopters, \$0.495 billion (October 2015); multi-mission surface combatant ships, \$11.25 billion (October 2015); and air-to-ground munitions, \$1.29 billion (November 2015). Dates are formal notification dates to U.S. Congress.

¹⁴⁰ "Yemen is simply not important enough for these countries to spend political capital opposing the Saudis". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, June 2015.

¹⁴¹ "UK Government breaking law supplying arms to Saudi Arabia, say leading lawyers", 17 December 2015; "Yemen: Coalition used UK missile in unlawful airstrike", 25 November 2015; "Yemen: Call for the suspension of arms sales to the coalition and accountability for war crimes", 7 October 2015, all Amnesty International. "US: Reject Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia", 18 November 2015; "Yemen: Coalition fails to investigate unlawful airstrikes", 26 November 2015; "Dispatches: Special UN Treatment for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen", 22 December 2016, all Human Rights Watch. U.S. lawmakers have expressed concern over civilian casualties and humanitarian crisis. Thus, Representative Ted W. Liew wrote a letter to the Joint Chiefs in September 2015 supporting a pause in U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition until there are safeguards to prevent civilian casualties. "Saudis face mounting pressure over civilian deaths in Yemen conflict," *The New York Times*, 29 September 2015. At a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, lawmakers questioned rearming Saudi Arabia. Julian Pecquet, "Senate Democrats hold up arms sales for Saudi war in Yemen", *Al-Monitor*, 7 October 2015.

III. Is Peace Possible?

A. *Regional and Domestic Challenges*

Domestic and regional dynamics bode poorly for peace. What started as an intra-Yemeni power struggle has been overlaid by a more intractable fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While not the main driver of conflict, their rivalry provides the geo-strategic context in which Yemeni domestic battles are unfolding, serving to polarise and radicalise an already difficult situation.

Unfortunately for Yemenis, as Saudi-Iranian relations worsen in the wake of the kingdom's execution of Shiite dissident cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016, both states may escalate their proxy war, including in Yemen. Already 2016 has seen some of the heaviest bombing of Sanaa, with Iran accusing Saudi Arabia of striking its embassy there on 7 January. The increased tensions could harden the Saudis further against the Huthis, further complicating any political compromise and emboldening radicals in the Huthi movement who see events in the region as the beginning of the end for the Saudi monarchy.¹⁴²

More worrying are Yemen's domestic political challenges. The problems that led to the violence are unresolved and compounded by war and resulting fragmentation. Many in the south are more committed to independence than ever, are heavily armed and believe they can eventually gain Gulf support for secession.¹⁴³ AQAP and IS run rampant in the south, taking advantage of political and security vacuums. Elsewhere, too, the war has stirred regionalist sentiment. Taiz-Sanaa and Taiz-Aden divisions are at new heights, with Taizis discomfited at being in either orbit.¹⁴⁴ In Marib, which has fended off the Huthis and controls much of Yemen's oil and all its gas, autonomy demands have increased.¹⁴⁵ Never a strong state, Yemen has become semi-autonomous warring regions that will be difficult to return to a coherent framework.

National-level power sharing has also become more complex. There are two governments: one in Sanaa run by the Huthis, one in Aden, internationally recognised and associated with President Hadi. Neither is effective or representative; both will try to keep maximum authority in any transitional arrangement. The security sector will be one of the knottiest problems. In the past, the army's main internal rift was between the forces of Saleh and Mohsen; today, it must take into account Huthis and the Southern Resistance, who have integrated their fighters into competing parts of the military they each control. Multiple militias must be disarmed and demobilised.

Sectarianism, historically not a conflict driver or mobilising frame for violence, is now widespread. Revenge issues, ever-present in the past, have increased exponentially. Tribally based vendettas will outlast the conflict.

¹⁴² According to a Huthi supporter, "the Saudi regime believes the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr will make them stronger. But the execution will also encourage Iran to take stronger steps in support of the Huthis in Yemen, if not publicly, then secretly. The Huthis are the only fighting force that can directly challenge the Saudi royal family, and they expect this will bring them more support from Iran and the Shia community". Crisis Group interview, January 2016.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, southern journalist, October-November 2015; southern activist, January 2016.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Taiz politicians, October-November 2015.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Nadwa Dawsari, Yemen analyst and non-resident senior fellow, Project on Middle East Democracy, November 2015.

Existing agreements and negotiation frameworks, including the GCC initiative, the NDC and Security Council Resolution 2216, will not suffice to resolve these challenges. The NDC, which brought together a wide range of political actors including youth, women, civil-society activists, political parties, the Huthis and part of the southern movement, produced a long list of general principles – political inclusion, rule of law, social justice and devolving power through a federal system – that could be a starting point for reforming the political system. It did not, however, resolve the two most pressing challenges: the specifics of state structure and national power sharing before elections. Resolution 2216 addresses only a small portion of the security issues. It includes important elements for a future deal, including Huthi withdrawal, militia disarmament and restoration of responsibilities to the elected government, but the Huthis are no longer the only ones violently imposing their will, and none of these steps can be taken without a broadly-accepted, inclusive executive authority.

B. *UN-led Negotiations*

It should not be surprising that UN-brokered peace talks have made little headway. The special envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, has tried since the war began to bring the Huthi/Saleh bloc and the Yemeni government to the table to arrange a ceasefire and return to a political track. But neither side is defeated or exhausted, and both believe they can achieve a better bargaining position by military means. They also have vastly different views of what constitutes a reasonable compromise: for the Huthi/Saleh group, it means changing the government, gradually disarming all militias (not just theirs) and then moving to elections; for the government, it means quick implementation of Resolution 2216, ie, their foes' surrender.

Finding a middle ground is difficult, not least because Resolution 2216's heavy favouritism of the government's and Saudi Arabia's position does not reflect the balance of power on the ground or the need for a durable, inclusive settlement. The structure of negotiations, guided by 2216, is problematic. The Huthi/Saleh bloc has a significant, militarily strong constituency but does not represent the political diversity of Yemen's north. Hadi is a southerner, but his government is not representative of the south or east, or even of the anti-Huthi alliance. Saudi Arabia, with its vast financial assets, guides the war effort on the anti-Huthi side, but its preferences and concerns are not directly represented. It has thus far been unwilling to engage directly in high-level discussions with its Huthi/Saleh opponents (who have expressed willingness to talk) over de-escalation measures that could pave the way for a ceasefire and meaningful UN-led negotiations.

Under intense UN, U.S., UK and EU diplomatic pressure, Yemeni delegations have gone to Switzerland twice for UN-sponsored talks. In June, both sides went only to make demands and avoid being labelled as the one that refused to meet. The Huthi/Saleh bloc was then dominant and in no mood to compromise. The other side insisted the basis for negotiations was simply full implementation of Resolution 2216. The December round was slightly better. The sides met face to face and began substantive talk on issues, including humanitarian access, confidence-building and a durable ceasefire, but the only firm agreement was to meet again in early 2016.

Such progress as there has been occurred between rounds. At UN-facilitated consultations in Oman between July and September 2015, the Huthi/Saleh bloc increasingly expressed willingness to take seriously the demands for its withdrawal and dis-

armament and its recognition, at least for a limited time, of the government.¹⁴⁶ This shift was due to military losses in the south and mounting financial pressures caused by a collapsing economy and lack of external financial backing. The government came under increasing pressure to engage constructively, most consistently from the U.S., UK and EU, which are eager for the war to end because of deteriorating humanitarian conditions and AQAP/IS expansion. More importantly, in public and private statements in November, Saudi Arabia appeared closer to genuinely supporting a political settlement. Western diplomats confirmed it was leaning on the Hadi government to attend talks.¹⁴⁷

Since the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia has claimed to want a return to a Yemeni political process that includes the Huthis, albeit in the context of their capitulation to the Hadi government and rapid disarmament. Saudi officials also emphasise the importance of the Huthis cutting their ties with Iran, although it is unclear what this means in practice, as well as ending cross-border attacks.¹⁴⁸ Given the increasing cost of the war to all sides – the kingdom is spending \$6 billion a month on the war at a time of belt-tightening due to low oil prices¹⁴⁹ and its reputation has been hurt by alleged law-of-war violations and a metastasising humanitarian crisis – many diplomats and politicians close to the negotiations are convinced the Saudis, like the Huthi/Saleh bloc, want a way out, but have yet to find an acceptable compromise.

Some positive signs notwithstanding, the general trend is for more violence. The conflict intensified dramatically during the December talks, as both sides violated a ceasefire the Saudi-led coalition announced and the Huthi/Saleh bloc accepted. The latter increased cross-border raids and missile strikes into Saudi Arabia and maintained its blockade on Taiz. Saudi-backed Yemeni forces, mostly associated with Mohsen and Islah, launched a major ground offensive that captured some territory in the northern governorates of Hajja and Jawf. Fighting in early 2016 has increased, with the coalition threatening to move on Sanaa.

Both sides' commitment to talks is lukewarm at best, and they remain far apart on substance. Ensnared in predominantly Zaydi territory, the Huthi/Saleh bloc is far from defeated; its actions suggest it believes it can buttress its bargaining position by more attacks into Saudi Arabia, which makes compromise from the Saudi side more difficult. The government and its backers show they intend to regain control over additional northern territory, possibly even the capital. There is a real risk both may use UN-led talks to avoid greater criticism while pursuing military gains and ignoring humanitarian consequences.

Without a lessening of Iranian-Saudi tensions and/or a clear shift in the military balance, both unlikely, the prospect for a quick diplomatic breakthrough is slim. Since fighting will probably continue, the first priority for UN mediators, either in or independent of a new round of talks, must be an agreement on mechanisms for improving humanitarian conditions, especially in cities like Taiz, and including unhindered humanitarian access, regardless of progress on a ceasefire and political

¹⁴⁶ "Houthis reaffirm acceptance of Security Council resolution aimed at ending violence in Yemen-UN", UN News Centre, 7 October 2015; "al-Houthis, ex-president's party accept peace terms", *Gulf News*, 7 October 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi, UN officials, November 2015; UAE official, EU diplomat, December 2015. "Saudi Supports Peace Talks: FM", *Gulf Times*, 12 November 2015.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi official, GCC official, Western diplomatic sources, January 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Bruce Riedel, "Saudi Arabia's Mounting Security Challenges", *Al-Monitor*, 28 December 2015.

compromise. Meanwhile, several steps could help improve chances for the success of a ceasefire and durable political settlement:

- ❑ Saudi Arabia and the Huthi/GPC bloc should engage in direct high-level consultations aimed at de-escalating tensions and paving the way for a ceasefire and meaningful UN-led intra-Yemeni negotiations. Talks should address, among other issues, border security, the Huthis' relationship with Iran and Saleh's future.
- ❑ To ensure Saudi Arabia's legitimate security and political concerns are integrated into a final Yemeni settlement, the UN should encourage discussions between Yemeni and Saudi stakeholders, both through official talks and informal Track II discussions that are separate from but complementary to UN negotiations. Discussions could include border security, relations with Iran, countering AQAP/IS and Yemen's economic integration into the region. The latter goal would not only assist reconstruction, but also address Saudi Arabia's fundamental concern that Yemen not slip from its orbit into Iran's.
- ❑ UN talks must be more inclusive. Other core belligerents, notably Islah, Salafi groups and the Southern Resistance, should be added quickly to ensure a durable ceasefire. Civil society, women's organisations and the full range of political parties should be included in negotiations over outstanding political issues, such as the timing of future elections, state structure, disarmament/demobilisation/reintegration.
- ❑ UN talks must aim at agreement on a broadly acceptable executive leadership and unity government. The Hadi government would be the principal victim of a re-configuration, but that is the only way to overcome the conflicting Huthi/Hadi claims to governing legitimacy.
- ❑ Regionalism should be addressed head-on, particularly southerners' desire for more autonomy and even independence. A comprehensive resolution needs time, so the priority should be a dialogue mechanism. Meanwhile, and to facilitate militia withdrawals from cities without ushering in lawlessness or AQAP/IS, local security and governance should be strengthened. Arrangements will vary place by place, but the goal should be to empower local authorities, integrate local fighters into police/security agencies, remove militias and return army units to barracks.
- ❑ Accountability must be a priority. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN panel of experts have indicated that all sides, including Yemeni combatants and the Saudi-led coalition, have committed law-of-war violations.¹⁵⁰ Any settlement will likely be a compromise, so parties are unlikely to agree to criminal prosecutions, but they should allow an independent, impartial, internationally led investigation into war crimes and crimes against humanity by all sides. Based on its findings, Yemeni and regional actors should agree on an accountability formula.
- ❑ Timely, but not immediate, elections are also important for national reconciliation. A central problem with the previous transition period was that it was extended

¹⁵⁰ www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/yemen; www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/yemen; Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2140 (2014), 26 January 2016.

far beyond its original two-year mandate, allowing for erosion of the transitional government's legitimacy and deepening corruption. A bridging period will be needed before elections, but it should not be extended, if at all possible. If an extension is needed, it should be effected by a mechanism approved by a broad range of Yemeni stakeholders.

- The time may be right for a new effort to remove controversial figures. In 2011, a cross-section of citizens lobbied for Saleh, Mohsen and others, including some from Islah, to leave for a time to provide space for reconciliation and change. There are Yemeni precedents for temporary exile. In 2011, the proposal failed because particularly the U.S. considered supporting it would be too great an interference in domestic affairs.¹⁵¹ The temporary exit of three persons could facilitate a revived peace process: Saleh, Mohsen and Hadi. Saleh's would be a win for Saudi Arabia and the anti-Huthi bloc. He has publicly offered to resign from the GPC if and when the war ends and the blockade is lifted.¹⁵² This might be expanded to include temporary departure from Yemen if his and his party's arch-rivals, Mohsen and Hadi, were to leave as well, and sanctions were lifted against the ex-president and his son. Negotiating a deal would need support from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UN special envoy and finally the UN Security Council.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. official, Sanaa, April 2012.

¹⁵² "Yemen's Saleh says ready to commit to UN peace terms", Reuters, 13 October 2015.

IV. Conclusion

In the Middle East's convulsions, the Yemen war is relatively unnoticed, but over 2,800 civilians have been killed, the majority from airstrikes, and the country is suffering an acute humanitarian crisis that could trigger catastrophic famine and refugee flows that would further destabilise the region.¹⁵³ International pressure has been muted at best. Regional actors, particularly Saudi Arabia, appear stuck in a war that was easy to launch but is much more difficult to end. Thus far they have resisted engaging directly in talks to help end the fighting. The Huthi/Saleh bloc and Hadi government are willing to talk but not to commit to the necessary de-escalation, reconciliation and compromise. The immediate future looks bleak. Even if major combat ends, Yemen will not return to the status quo ante. The combatants are digging in for a fight that is likely to feed a thriving war economy, multiple internal power struggles and regional instability for years.

Brussels, 9 February 2016

¹⁵³ "Yemen civilian casualties top 8,100 as airstrikes and shelling continue, UN reports", UN News Centre, 5 January 2016. In early 2015, more people died in Yemen from explosive ordnance than in any other country. "State of Crisis: Explosive Weapons in Yemen", Action on Armed Violence and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), September 2015. At least ten of the 22 provinces are at emergency levels of food insecurity, a step below famine. "On the brink of famine in Yemen", World Food Program USA, 10 December 2015.

Appendix A: Map of Yemen



Appendix B: Security Council Resolution 2216

Resolution 2216 (2015)

Adopted by the Security Council at its 7426th meeting, on 14 April 2015

Security Council,

Recalling its resolutions 2014 (2011), 2051 (2012), 2140 (2014), 2201 (2015), and 2204 (2015) and presidential statements of 15 February 2013, 29 August 2014, and 22 March 2015,

Noting the letter dated 24 March 2015 from the Permanent Representative of Yemen, to the United Nations, transmitting a letter from the President of Yemen, in which he informed the President of the Security Council that “he has requested from the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and the League of Arab States to immediately provide support, by all necessary means and measures, including military intervention, to protect Yemen and its people from the continuing aggression by the Houthis”, and *noting* the letter dated 26 March 2015 from the Permanent Representative of the State of Qatar, S/2015/217, transmitting a letter from the Representatives of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait, the State of Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,

Recalling the resolution of Summit XXVI of the League of Arab States on the developments in Yemen, stressing inter alia the necessity to resume Yemen’s political transition process with the participation of all Yemeni parties in accordance with the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism and the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference,

Reaffirming its strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen, and its commitment to stand by the people of Yemen,

Condemning the growing number of and scale of the attacks by Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP),

Expressing concern at the ability of AQAP to benefit from the deterioration of the political and security situation in Yemen, mindful that any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable regardless of their motivation, whenever, wherever and by whomsoever committed,

Reiterating its support for the efforts of the Gulf Cooperation Council in assisting the political transition in Yemen and *commending* its engagement in this regard,

Reaffirming its support for the legitimacy of the President of Yemen, Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and *reiterating its call* to all parties and Member States to refrain from taking any actions that undermine the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen, and the legitimacy of the President of Yemen,

Expressing grave alarm at the significant and rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Yemen, and *emphasizing* that the humanitarian situation will continue to deteriorate in the absence of a political solution,

Recalling that arbitrary denial of humanitarian access and depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supply and access, may constitute a violation of international humanitarian law,

Emphasizing the need for the return to the implementation of the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism and the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, including drafting a new constitution, electoral reform, the holding of a referendum on the draft constitution and timely general elections, to avoid further deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in Yemen,

Reaffirming its full support for, and commitment to, the efforts of the United Nations and the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Yemen, in particular to the UN-brokered negotiations, and its support for the efforts of the Group of Ambassadors in Sana'a,

Alarmed at the military escalation by the Houthis in many parts of Yemen including in the Governorates of Ta'iz, Marib, AlJauf, Albayda, their advance towards Aden, and their seizure of arms, including missile systems, from Yemen's military and security institutions,

Condemning in the strongest terms the ongoing unilateral actions taken by the Houthis, and their failure to implement the demands in resolution 2201 (2015) to immediately and unconditionally withdraw their forces from government institutions, including in the capital Sana'a, normalize the security situation in the capital and other provinces, relinquish government and security institutions, and safely release all individuals under house arrest or arbitrarily detained, and *reiterating* its call on all non-State actors to withdraw from government institutions across Yemen and to refrain from any attempts to take over such institutions,

Deploring any attempt by the Houthis to take actions that are exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen, and *noting* that such actions are unacceptable,

Expressing alarm that such actions taken by the Houthis undermine the political transition process in Yemen, and jeopardize the security, stability, sovereignty and unity of Yemen,

Noting with concern the destabilizing actions taken by the former President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, including supporting the Houthis' actions, which continue to undermine the peace, security and stability of Yemen,

Welcoming the intention of the Gulf Cooperation Council to convene a conference in Riyadh, upon the request of the President of Yemen, with the participation of all Yemeni parties to further support the political transition in Yemen, and to complement and support the UN-brokered negotiations,

Recalling its resolution 2117 (2013) and expressing grave concern at the threat to peace and security in Yemen arising from the illicit transfer, destabilising accumulation and misuse of small arms and light weapons,

Recognizing that the continuing deterioration of the security situation and escalation of violence in Yemen poses an increasing and serious threat to neighbouring States and *reaffirming its determination* that the situation in Yemen constitutes a threat to international peace and security,

Acting under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations,

1. *Demands* that all Yemeni parties, in particular the Houthis, fully implement resolution 2201 (2015), *refrain* from further unilateral actions that could undermine the political transition in Yemen, and *further demands* that the Houthis immediately and unconditionally:

- (a) end the use of violence;
- (b) withdraw their forces from all areas they have seized, including the capital Sana'a;
- (c) relinquish all additional arms seized from military and security institutions, including missile systems;
- (d) cease all actions that are exclusively within the authority of the legitimate Government of Yemen;
- (e) refrain from any provocation or threats to neighbouring States, including through acquiring surface-surface missiles, and stockpiling weapons in any bordering territory of a neighbouring State;
- (f) safely release Major-General Mahmoud al-Subaihi, the Minister of Defence of Yemen, all political prisoners, and all individuals under house arrest or arbitrarily detained; and

- (g) end the recruitment and use of children and release all children from their ranks;
2. *Requests* the Secretary-General to report on the implementation of this resolution and resolution 2201 (2015), in particular paragraph 1 of this resolution, in 10 days from the adoption of this resolution; and in case of further non-implementation, *expresses* its intent to consider designating additional individuals and entities who are engaged in or providing support for acts that threaten the peace, security or stability of Yemen, to be subject to the measures imposed by paragraphs 11 and 15 of resolution 2140 (2014);
 3. *Decides* that the individuals listed in the annex of this resolution shall be subject to the measures imposed by paragraphs 11 and 15 of resolution 2140 (2014);
 4. *Reiterates* the importance of the implementation of all measures imposed by resolution 2140 (2014), as extended in resolution 2204 (2015);
 5. *Calls upon* all Yemeni parties, in particular the Houthis, to abide by the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism, the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, and the relevant Security Council resolutions and to resume and accelerate inclusive United Nations-brokered negotiations, including on issues relating to governance, to continue the political transition in order to reach a consensus solution and *stresses* the importance of full implementation of agreements reached and commitments made towards that goal and *calls on* the parties, in this regard, to agree on the conditions leading to an expeditious cessation of violence, in accordance with the United Nations Charter and relevant Security Council resolutions, including this resolution and resolution 2201 (2015);
 6. *Demands* that all Yemeni parties adhere to resolving their differences through dialogue and consultation, reject acts of violence to achieve political goals, and refrain from provocation and all unilateral actions to undermine the political transition and *stresses* that all parties should take concrete steps to agree and implement a consensus-based political solution to Yemen's crisis in accordance with the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and its Implementation Mechanism and the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference;
 7. *Urges* all Yemeni parties to respond positively to the request of the President of Yemen to attend a conference in Riyadh, under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to further support the political transition in Yemen, and to complement and support the UN-brokered negotiations;
 8. *Calls on* all parties to comply with their obligations under international law, including applicable international humanitarian law and human rights law;
 9. *Reaffirms*, consistent with international humanitarian law, the need for all parties to ensure the safety of civilians, including those receiving assistance, as well as the need to ensure the security of humanitarian personnel and United Nations and its associated personnel, and *urges* all parties to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, as well as rapid, safe and unhindered access for humanitarian actors to reach people in need of humanitarian assistance, including medical assistance;
 10. *Calls on* all parties to facilitate the evacuation by concerned States and international organizations of their civilians and personnel from Yemen and *commends* steps already taken in this regard;
 11. *Reaffirms* the principle of the inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises and the obligations of host Governments, including under the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and under the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, to take all appropriate steps to protect diplomatic and consular premises against any intrusion or damage, and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of these missions or impairment of their dignity;
 12. *Requests* the Secretary-General to intensify his efforts in order to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance and evacuation, including the establishment of humanitarian

pauses, as appropriate, in coordination with the Government of Yemen, and *calls on* Yemeni parties to cooperate with the Secretary-General to deliver humanitarian aid to those in need;

13. *Further requests* the Secretary-General to intensify his good offices role in order to enable a resumption of a peaceful, inclusive, orderly and Yemeni-led political transition process that meets the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Yemeni people, including women, for peaceful change and meaningful political, economic and social reform, as set out in the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative and Implementation Mechanism and the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue conference, and *stresses* the importance of the United Nations' close coordination with international partners, in particular the Gulf Cooperation Council, Group of Ambassadors in Sana'a, and other actors, in order to contribute to a successful transition;

Arms embargo

14. *Decides* that all Member States shall immediately take the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to, or for the benefit of Ali Abdullah Saleh, Abdullah Yahya Al Hakim, Abd Al-Khaliq Al-Huthi, and the individuals and entities designated by the Committee established pursuant to paragraph 19 of resolution 2140 (2014) (hereinafter referred to as "the Committee") pursuant to paragraph 20 (d) of this resolution, the individuals and entities listed in the annex of this resolution, and those acting on their behalf or at their direction in Yemen, from or through their territories or by their nationals, or using their flag vessels or aircraft, of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment, and spare parts for the aforementioned, and technical assistance, training, financial or other assistance, related to military activities or the provision, maintenance or use of any arms and related materiel, including the provision of armed mercenary personnel whether or not originating in their territories;

15. *Calls upon* Member States, in particular States neighbouring Yemen, to inspect, in accordance with their national authorities and legislation and consistent with international law, in particular the law of the sea and relevant international civil aviation agreements, all cargo to Yemen, in their territory, including seaports and airports, if the State concerned has information that provides reasonable grounds to believe the cargo contains items the supply, sale, or transfer of which is prohibited by paragraph 14 of this resolution for the purpose of ensuring strict implementation of those provisions;

16. *Decides* to authorize all Member States to, and that all Member States shall, upon discovery of items the supply, sale, or transfer of which is prohibited by paragraph 14 of this resolution, seize and dispose (such as through destruction, rendering inoperable, storage or transferring to a State other than the originating or destination States for disposal) of such items and *decides* further that all Member States shall cooperate in such efforts;

17. *Requires* any Member State when it undertakes an inspection pursuant to paragraph 15 of this resolution, to submit promptly an initial written report to the Committee containing, in particular, explanation of the grounds for the inspections, the results of such inspections, and whether or not cooperation was provided, and, if prohibited items for supply, sale, or transfer are found, further *requires* such Member States to submit to the Committee within 30 days a subsequent written report containing relevant details on the inspection, seizure, and disposal, and relevant details of the transfer, including a description of the items, their origin and intended destination, if this information is not in the initial report;

Additional designation criteria

18. *Reaffirms* the designation criteria set out in paragraph 17 of resolution 2140 (2014), the measures imposed by paragraphs 11 and 15 of the same and *stresses* the importance of their full implementation;

19. *Reaffirms* paragraph 18 of resolution 2140 (2014), and *underscores* that acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen may also include the violations of the arms embargo imposed by paragraph 14 or obstructing the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Yemen or access to, or distribution of, humanitarian assistance in Yemen;

Mandate of the Sanctions Committee

20. *Decides* that the Committee established pursuant to paragraph 19 of resolution 2140 (2014) shall also undertake the following tasks:

- (a) monitoring implementation of the measures imposed in paragraph 14 of this resolution;
- (b) seeking from all States whatever information it may consider useful regarding the actions taken by them to implement effectively the measures imposed by paragraph 14 above;
- (c) examining and taking appropriate action on information regarding alleged non-compliance with the measures contained by this resolution;
- (d) designating as may be necessary additional individuals and entities subject to the measures imposed by paragraph 14 above;

Mandate of the Panel of Experts

21. *Decides* that the mandate of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to paragraph 21 of resolution 2140 (2014) and renewed by resolution 2204 (2015) shall also include monitoring implementation of the measures imposed by paragraph 14;

22. *Requests* the Secretary-General, having due regard for the increased mandate of the Panel of Experts, to increase the Panel to five members, and make the necessary financial and security arrangements to support the work of the Panel;

23. *Calls upon* the Panel of Experts to cooperate actively with other Panels or Groups of Experts established by the Security Council, including the 1267 Monitoring Team, as relevant to the implementation of their mandate;

Commitment to review

24. *Reaffirms* its readiness to take further measures in case of non-implementation by any Yemeni party of this resolution and resolution 2201 (2015);

25. *Decides* to remain actively seized of the matter.

Annex

1. Abdulmalik al-Houthi

Abdul Malik al Houthi is a leader of a group that has engaged in acts that threaten the peace, security, or stability of Yemen.

In September 2014, Houthi forces captured Sanaa and in January 2015 they attempted to unilaterally replace the legitimate government of Yemen with an illegitimate governing authority that the Houthis dominated. Al-Houthi assumed the leadership of Yemen's Houthi movement in 2004 after the death of his brother, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi. As leader of the group, al-Houthi has repeatedly threatened Yemeni authorities with further unrest if they do not respond to his demands and detained President Hadi, Prime Minister, and key cabinet members. Hadi subsequently escaped to Aden. The Houthis then launched another offensive towards Aden assisted by military units loyal to former president Saleh and his son, Ahmed Ali Saleh.

2. Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh

Ahmed Ali Saleh has engaged in acts that threaten the peace, security, and stability of Yemen.

Ahmed Ali Saleh has been working to undermine President Hadi's authority, thwart Hadi's attempts to reform the military, and hinder Yemen's peaceful transition to democracy. Saleh played a key role in facilitating the Houthi military expansion. As of mid-February 2013, Ahmed Ali Saleh had issued thousands of new rifles to Republican Guard brigades and unidentified tribal shaykhs. The weapons were originally procured in 2010 and reserved to purchase the loyalties of the recipients for political gain at a later date.

After Saleh's father, former Republic of Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh, stepped down as President of Yemen in 2011, Ahmed Ali Saleh retained his post as commander of Yemen's Republican Guard. A little over a year later, Saleh was dismissed by President Hadi but he retained significant influence within the Yemeni military, even after he was removed from command. Ali Abdullah Saleh was designated by the UN under UNSCR 2140 in November 2014.