



How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine

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Principal Findings

What's new? At the end of October, fighting reached the outer edges of the city of Hodeida, a gateway on Yemen's Red Sea coast for trade that is a lifeline for some two thirds of the country's population. It has subsided for now but could resume at any moment.

Why does it matter? A final battle for Hodeida city and port would likely plunge millions of Yemenis into famine. It would also undermine talks between Huthi rebels and the Yemeni and Gulf Arab forces arrayed against them, thereby prolonging the population's suffering.

What should be done? International stakeholders should strive to spare Hodeida and facilitate the port's transfer to the UN. The U.S. and others should stop enabling the Saudi-led coalition's offensives. The Security Council should pass a resolution calling for a nationwide ceasefire and for all parties to protect vital transport infrastructure.

Executive Summary

The stop-start battle for control of Yemen's Red Sea coast, currently the most active theatre in the country's multifaceted civil war, has reached the outskirts of the city of Hodeida. Unless the fighting is brought to a sustained halt, it could soon enter the port and city, which Huthi rebels have held since 2015. Such expanded fighting would block the country's primary gateway for importation of goods, including humanitarian aid, and thus tip a desperate population into what UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock has called "a great big famine". International stakeholders thus face a stark yet simple choice: prevent a destructive battle for Hodeida or assume complicity, through inaction, in mass starvation. They should not only choose the former but also move quickly to end the siege of Hodeida so that the present emergency does not recur.

A belated U.S. call at the close of October for a resumption of Yemen peace talks prompted a "pause" in the Saudi-led coalition's advance on Hodeida. But every similar past such announcement was soon followed by a new military push, and coalition forces converging on Hodeida appear impatient to proceed with the final onslaught, persuaded that it would mark a turning point in the war. Yet they underestimate the Huthis' resilience and ignore the humanitarian consequences. The UN Security Council should urgently pass the resolution now under consideration calling, *inter alia*, for a cessation of hostilities in and around Hodeida, an end to Huthi attacks against Yemen's neighbours and coalition attacks on populated areas, and provisions for the unhindered flow of essential goods. It should add a demand for a nationwide ceasefire and the establishment of a UN-led arrangement for Hodeida port.

More is needed. The Security Council's five permanent members – the U.S., UK and France, and to a lesser extent China and Russia – all supply arms to the Saudi-led coalition, from high-tech bombs and missiles to lowly AK-47 rifles and ammunition that play a critical role in fighting on the ground. The U.S., UK and France are Abu Dhabi and Riyadh's largest vendors of advanced offensive weapons systems. U.S., British and French military advisers and contractors play a crucial role in sustaining the coalition's military forces and by extension the Yemen war. They should end military support to the coalition's offensive operations, including intelligence sharing and the transfer of relevant weapons and materiel, as it is the coalition's advance that is increasing the likelihood of a final Hodeida battle and humanitarian disaster. The recent U.S. announcement that it will stop in-air refuelling of coalition aircraft is welcome, but only as a first step.

President Donald Trump has made clear that he plans to stand by the Saudis and Emiratis, and prevent any further punitive action against Riyadh. So Congress may need to act in his stead.

The Huthis, too, would have to be bound by a UN-decreed ceasefire. In Hodeida, they have a clear choice between agreeing to a negotiated exit from the port and joining a battle that would prove devastating to millions of people in territories currently under their control. They have little contact with the outside world and trust virtually no one; few have any leverage over them, with the possible exception of Iran and Oman. Iran has played a damaging role, assisting the Huthis in order to bleed Saudi

Arabia; while Tehran has told European countries it is prepared to cooperate in ending the war, evidence is sparse and its incentive to do so at a time of heightening tensions with Washington and Riyadh is low. Muscat has avoided expending significant political capital on pressuring the rebels since the collapse of a U.S.-sponsored plan in late 2016. The time has come, however, for both Iran and Oman to use their influence to persuade the Huthis to accept the UN proposal to hand over Hodeida port to international stewardship, to abide by a cessation of hostilities and to participate in peace talks.

UN Envoy Martin Griffiths faces the sternest test of his young tenure. If his mediation efforts succeed in preventing a destructive battle for Hodeida, he could build momentum toward reviving a peace process that has been stalled for the past two years. But if he fails, peace in Yemen will look increasingly remote and the prospects for its embattled population increasingly dire.

Abu Dhabi/Washington/New York/Brussels, 21 November 2018

How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine

I. Introduction

It has been almost two years since Yemeni fighters backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) began their campaign to win control of the coastal plains along Yemen's Red Sea coast, including the critical port of Hodeida. In May 2018, after more than a year of stalemate, they broke through Huthi lines and raced northward, taking most of the road that links Mokha with Hodeida. In June, they reached the outskirts of Hodeida city, stopping at the airport to its south and the eastward highway linking the city with Sanaa, Yemen's highland capital.

An on-again, off-again fight for the port and city has ensued. As Crisis Group has argued on three previous occasions this year, this fight threatens to dramatically deepen what is already the world's worst humanitarian crisis – most ominously, by turning the country's mass hunger into famine.¹ It is imperative that the battle for Hodeida be stopped.

This report assesses the status of this battle amid sharpening international scrutiny of how Saudi Arabia and the UAE (and, to a degree, the Huthis as well) have conducted the Yemen war and mounting pressure on the coalition from Washington and other Western capitals to wind down the conflict. It explains in detail why an all-out assault on Hodeida would imperil millions of Yemeni lives. It then argues for concrete steps the UN and Western powers can take to banish the spectre of a lethal battle for Hodeida and hasten the war's end. It is based on intensive fieldwork in the port city's environs along Yemen's Red Sea coast, as well as interviews with UAE and Yemeni government officials, Huthi representatives, independent analysts, and U.S., UK and UN officials handling the Yemen file.

¹ See Peter Salisbury, "Yemen's Hodeida Offensive: Once Avoidable, Now Imminent", Crisis Group Commentary, 20 September 2018; Crisis Group, "Yemen Conflict Alert: Last Chance to Avoid a Destructive Battle for Hodeida", 22 June 2018; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°59, *Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida*, 11 June 2018.

II. A Push for Peace?

The fall's events around Hodeida have unfolded alongside fitful efforts to revive Yemen peace talks, stalled since the collapse of negotiations in Kuwait in 2016. The UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, had hoped to bring the peace process back to life by getting the Huthis and the internationally recognised government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to sign up to a new framework plan. But the Huthis failed to turn up to pre-peace talk consultations in Geneva this September. Mutual recriminations ensued: the Saudi-led coalition accused the Huthis of intransigence, while the Huthis blamed Riyadh for preventing an Omani plane from flying injured Huthi fighters along with Huthi delegates from Sanaa to Muscat.² A fresh military push by UAE-backed forces along the Red Sea coast also did little to bring the Huthis to the table, and perhaps much to discourage them.

Griffiths then redoubled efforts to bring the sides to the table by engaging vigorously with the Huthis, the coalition, the Hadi government and Western powers. In the third week of October, in meetings with U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis, senior State Department officials and members of Congress in Washington, he requested express U.S. support for the peace process and pressure on the coalition to support consultative talks and a new framework peace plan.³ He arrived in Washington amid uproar over the 2 October murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi Arabian journalist, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, which led to fresh scrutiny of Riyadh's foreign policy, particularly in Yemen. Even before the murder, the U.S. Congress had shown bipartisan interest in cutting off day-to-day support to the coalition, including arms sales and in-air refuelling of its aircraft, in an effort to dissociate the U.S. from a brutal war and help end it.⁴ Amid the furore over the Khashoggi affair, the UK government began drafting a new UN Security Council resolution aimed at halting the deterioration of conditions in Yemen.

As U.S. lawmakers mulled legislation ranging from ending refuelling and intelligence assistance to restricting the sale of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration stepped up pressure on its Gulf allies, possibly in part to pre-

² In interviews conducted by messaging app in September, October and November, the Huthis said they rejected an alternative to the Omani flight proposed by the UN, namely that the delegates and fighters could depart on a UN-chartered flight screened, not by the coalition, but by the UN itself. They did not explain their reticence on this issue. The Huthis additionally demanded assurances that their delegation would be allowed to return to Sanaa directly after the talks, citing past meetings following which senior members of the group had been stranded outside Yemen for months. Although the Huthis bear primary responsibility, the UN cannot escape all blame insofar as it failed to finalise details of the Omani flight, or a viable alternative, well ahead of time, despite a well-known history of such issues coming up.

³ In London, too, Griffiths sought stronger public backing from his hosts. Crisis Group interviews, UN, U.S. and UK officials, New York, Washington and by phone, October-November 2018. See also Joyce Karam, "UN envoy to Yemen holds talks in Washington seeking to jump-start political process", *The National*, 24 October 2018.

⁴ "Menendez demands more answers from Trump admin before letting arms sales to United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia move forward", press statement, office of Senator Bob Menendez, 28 June 2018.

empt more robust congressional action.⁵ Senior officials, including Mattis, told Saudi and Emirati counterparts in Bahrain on 27-28 October that they would have to support peace negotiations and announce a ceasefire or at least a pause in fighting to enable a new round of talks. On 30 October, back in Washington, Mattis announced plans for the UN to convene talks in Sweden:

The longer-term solution, and by longer-term, I mean 30 days from now, we want to see everybody around the table, based on a ceasefire, based on a pullback from the border, and then based on ceasing dropping of bombs, that will permit the [UN] special envoy – Martin Griffiths, who's very good, he knows what he's doing – to get them together in Sweden and end this war.⁶

Pompeo followed up with his own, slightly different statement, on the same day. He used language unprecedented for the Trump administration, by calling on Washington's Gulf allies to cease hostilities under certain conditions and setting a deadline for the start of talks within a month:

The time is now for the cessation of hostilities, including missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strikes from Houthi-controlled areas into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Subsequently, Coalition air strikes must cease in all populated areas in Yemen. Substantive consultations under the UN Special Envoy must commence this November in a third country to implement confidence-building measures to address the underlying issues of the conflict, the demilitarization of borders, and the concentration of all large weapons under international observation. A cessation of hostilities and vigorous resumption of a political track will help ease the humanitarian crisis as well.⁷

It is not clear how well the administration had coordinated these messages internally or with its allies, who appeared to be caught by surprise. Earlier on 30 October, a senior UK minister had rejected the notion of a formal ceasefire, apparently contradicting Mattis, and Yemeni government officials claim they received no prior warn-

⁵ The House of Representatives and Senate are considering parallel draft legislation tied to the War Powers Resolution that would remove U.S. forces from hostilities in Yemen except to the extent required for certain counterterrorism operations. House Republicans have used procedural manoeuvres to stall further consideration of the House bill; the Senate is expected to vote on its version shortly. Separately, a bipartisan group of senators recently introduced the Saudi Arabia Accountability and Yemen Act of 2018, which would among other things restrict the sale of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia (with a carve-out for "ground-based missile defense systems"), limit refuelling support to the coalition, and require the imposition of sanctions on certain categories of actors. A vote on this legislation is unlikely before the new Congress is seated in January 2019. See the discussion in Section IV.

⁶ "A conversation with Secretary of Defense James N. Mattis", U.S. Institute of Peace, 30 October 2018, www.usip.org/publications/2018/10/james-mattis-yemen-needs-truce-within-30-days; and see official transcript of Mattis's statements: <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1678512/secretary-mattis-remarks-on-the-national-defense-strategy-in-conversation-with>.

⁷ "Ending the conflict in Yemen", press statement, U.S. Department of State, 30 October 2018, www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/10/287018.htm.

ing.⁸ For their part, the Huthis expressed surprise that talks would be held in Sweden within 30 days.⁹

The two statements created a good deal of confusion over what precisely Washington wanted. While Mattis touted the possibility of an undefined ceasefire, Pompeo used the term “cessation of hostilities”, focused on cross-border Huthi attacks and Saudi airstrikes and, by leaving the term “populated areas” undefined, appeared to give licence to continued coalition airstrikes elsewhere in Yemen. Nor did the statements clarify when the parties were to take the required steps – immediately, or any time prior to the resumption of talks – or whether the coalition’s steps were conditioned on the Huthis’ or not. Under Pompeo’s (but not Mattis’s) formulation, the U.S. expects the Huthis to take the first step, a demand the rebels could only view as evidence of U.S. bias. Indeed, Huthi officials simply described the U.S. calls as “lies”.¹⁰ All the same, the Huthis announced on 19 November that they would cease all drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the coalition’s Yemeni partners, and signalled readiness for a broader ceasefire should the coalition reciprocate.¹¹ This announcement put the ball in the coalition’s court.

Adding to the initial confusion, the U.S. subsequently began quietly discouraging the UK from drafting a Security Council resolution, arguing that its timing would undermine Griffiths’ efforts. (The UK distributed a draft resolution to Security Council members for review on 19 November.)¹² Then, on 10 November, the administration announced that the U.S. would no longer refuel coalition aircraft, a decision it said it had taken “at the Saudis’ request”, which could be read as an attempt to add pressure on the coalition or, conversely, as an effort to steal a march on members of Congress pondering larger-scale measures.¹³

In calling for a ceasefire, Mattis arguably was at odds with Griffiths, who had made clear in earlier statements that he saw conditioning the start of peace talks on a prior ceasefire as counterproductive, potentially setting up the process for failure. His plan was to use preliminary consultations to get the parties on board with his framework peace plan and start building trust.¹⁴ Consistent with this approach, the UK foreign minister, Jeremy Hunt, announced on 13 November that he was close to

⁸ Alistair Burt, the UK Middle East minister, told Parliament on 30 October, “Passing a ceasefire resolution risks undercutting the UN envoy’s efforts to reach a political deal and undermining the credibility of the [UN Security] Council”, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-10-30/debates/Bo8429CC-CA7B-4830-A964-C8F1866ABBB0/Yemen>. See also *The Guardian*, 1 November 2018. Crisis Group phone interview, Yemeni government official, 1 November 2018.

⁹ Crisis Group messaging app interview, Huthi official, 31 October 2018.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ “Yemeni Houthis halt missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, raising peace prospects”, Reuters, 19 November 2018.

¹² Julian Borger and Bethan McKernan, “UK tables UN security council resolution calling for Yemen truce”, *The Guardian*, 19 November 2018.

¹³ According to Reuters, “Saudi Arabia ... said it had decided to request an end to U.S. aerial refueling for its operations in Yemen because it could now handle it by itself. U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis backed the decision and said the U.S. government was consulted”. “U.S. halting refueling of Saudi-led coalition in Yemen war”, Reuters, 10 November 2018.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, UN officials, in person and via messaging app, November 2018.

brokering a deal for the airlift of injured Huthis from Sanaa to Muscat – the issue that had helped scupper the earlier attempt at talks.¹⁵

Both the Huthis and the Hadi government have said that they will attend the talks. This is welcome news. In the meantime, however, ambiguous and contradictory messaging risks being exploited by the parties in ways that could both further aggravate the humanitarian situation and compromise chances for successful peace talks. UN officials concede that the likelihood of the talks taking place and being moderately successful are “fifty-fifty”.¹⁶ The coalition thinks that a Huthi no-show or a collapse of talks are the most likely outcomes. UAE officials are clear in saying that, while it has paused its operations on the Red Sea coast for the time being, the Yemeni forces it commands are positioned to move into the Hodeida campaign’s final phase: an assault on the port. In interviews with Crisis Group, UAE-backed Yemeni forces were clear in their determination to move on Hodeida.

The UAE sees Hodeida as the only way to break Huthi resistance. It presents its decision to push its campaign to the city’s outer edges on 31 October, only a day after the twin announcements in Washington, as part of a necessary strategy of placing pressure on the rebels. The positions the Yemeni fighters assumed around the city allow them to strike the entrance to the port, and thus prime them for a final assault.

¹⁵ A UK press release stated: “Following the visit of Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Saudi-led Coalition have agreed to the evacuation of wounded Houthis from Yemen, one of the key stumbling blocks to the UN Geneva talks in September. Subject to final reassurances, Coalition forces will now permit the UN to oversee a Houthi medical evacuation, including up to 50 wounded fighters, to Oman, ahead of another proposed round of peace talks in Sweden later this month”. UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, “Foreign Secretary Says Building Blocks for Yemen Solution Are in View”, press release, 13 November 2018.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, 18 November 2018.

III. The Battle for Hodeida

A. *Hodeida in the Crosshairs*

The UAE has periodically taken strategic “pauses” in its Red Sea campaign, responding to pressure from the U.S. and others to spare the city and claiming it wants to give the UN envoy a new opportunity to bring the Huthis to the negotiating table. A first such pause occurred in June, when the Huthis expressed readiness to discuss a deal that would see them quit Hodeida port and perhaps the city as well. Negotiations collapsed, however, after the coalition apparently shifted the goalposts, making a new demand that the Huthis withdraw from the city and then the entire governorate on the grounds that defending the port would be unrealistic if rebels were in the immediate vicinity. UAE-backed forces then pressed forward, leaving the Huthis to accuse them of bad faith as they came under duress on the ground.¹⁷ The second pause came in the run-up to consultative talks planned in Geneva in September. This time, the Huthis appeared to be the spoilers, when they cancelled their participation after wrangling over the airlift out of Sanaa. But they may also have reacted to a sudden push from UAE-backed fighters in Hodeida.¹⁸

There are several contradictory versions of why the UAE has periodically ordered pauses. Publicly, Emirati officials have claimed they were aimed at giving Griffiths a chance to make progress on the diplomatic front.¹⁹ Privately, they also complain that U.S. officials – from the Obama and then the Trump administrations – urged them to stop for various reasons, thereby stalling their efforts.²⁰ Some senior Western and UN officials express a different view, suggesting the UAE-ordered pauses mainly were dictated by a desire to allow its allied Yemeni fighters to consolidate their positions and plan for the next phase.²¹

UAE officials involved in military planning suggested in November 2018, shortly after they had called for a third pause, that they still held the view that taking Hodeida was a crucial step in the war. They presented the current halt in fighting as the Huthis’ “last chance” before UAE-backed forces move on the port.²² But they firmly believed – along with civilian leaders – that the Huthis would ignore the pause, giv-

¹⁷ In public statements and private conversations, coalition officials said they would consider a deal for the port and city before increasing their demands. Crisis Group interviews, June 2018.

¹⁸ Subsequent Crisis Group interviews suggest that all sides bear blame for the Huthi withdrawal: the rebels for bringing new demands to the table at the last minute, the UN for not having locked down travel arrangements sooner, and the coalition for its refusal to demonstrate flexibility.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UAE foreign ministry officials, Abu Dhabi, July and September 2018.

²⁰ Emirati officials say they postponed their attack on Hodeida in late 2016 at the urging of the Obama administration. When the Trump administration assumed office, they say, they again were told to hold off, this time because the U.S. military was prepared to help but needed some time. They believe that circumstances have become more complicated since then and regret their decision to pause, believing that proceeding with an assault would have shortened the war. Crisis Group interviews, Emirati officials, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN, U.S. and other Western officials, September–November 2018.

²² Crisis Group interview, UAE official, November 2018.

ing UAE-backed forces a reason to resume operations.²³ In fact, local commanders have manoeuvred these forces into such a vulnerable position – occupying a low-lying and relatively flat corridor between the city to the west and Huthi positions in agricultural land to the east – that it is hard to see how a halt in fighting could be anything more than temporary.

UAE officials have repeatedly suggested that taking Hodeida – or at least convincing the Huthis to abandon it – would be the surest and fastest way to end the war overall, given Hodeida's importance as the main entry point for goods sold in Huthi-held territory, and therefore a primary source of Huthi revenues through customs duties and control of local markets. An Emirati official explained:

We think it's crucial that the Huthis see that there is no way out of this for them, so that they will moderate their demands. This was the initial impetus for Hodeida. It really is now their only main source of income funding the war. We have to get it out of their hands. We want this war to end as quickly as possible. If taking Hodeida is the way to do that, then we will go forward. People say that we want to stay forever in Yemen. It's the opposite. At the end of the day, this is very costly in many ways – in manpower and in resources.²⁴

There is reason to question whether taking Hodeida will have the desired effect. The Huthis tend to read the UAE-backed forces' stop-and-start push for the city and accompanying statements as signals that the coalition has no genuine interest in peace talks. The sudden toughening in coalition demands regarding the handover of the city to the UN in June after the Huthis had signalled willingness to make concessions only reinforced this perception.

More importantly, past Huthi behaviour and Crisis Group interviews with Huthi officials suggest that a drive for Hodeida will make them only more suspicious and induce them to dig in rather than sue for a way out. They have been preparing for a Hodeida battle since late 2016 and have spent much of this year constructing defences, including barricades, trenches and, reportedly, a network of tunnels under the city.²⁵ Some well-informed sources in Yemen say the rebels have fine-tuned their internal security in response to UAE claims that the city would "self-liberate" – that cells planted inside Hodeida would attack Huthi positions when given the go-ahead. In preparing for a battle with external and internal forces, the Huthis have moved some of their most battle-hardened front-line fighters, the Death Battalions (Kataeb al-Mawt), into the city, along with a large number of newly mobilised forces.²⁶ Huthi snipers have taken positions on rooftops while security forces on motorcycles patrol the streets.²⁷

²³ A senior official said: "We know from experience that the Huthis will attack our allied forces. I give it a week at most. It has happened every time. Then we will resume our operations". Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, September 2018.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials, local contacts, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

²⁶ Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sanaa-based sources with close ties to the Huthi movement, 5 November 2018.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, well-placed contacts, Hodeida environs, Abu Dhabi, New York, Washington, September-November 2018.

Calculating the exact number of Huthi fighters in Hodeida is near impossible; coalition officials say the Huthis have 2,000 hard-core fighters there, as well as a higher number of less well-trained auxiliary forces, while the Huthis say the real figure (perhaps including the auxiliary forces) is ten times that. Regardless, there is consensus among coalition military officials, Western officials and analysts that the Huthis are resourceful, committed, experienced and ruthless, and that the core fighters are likely to fight until the last man if called upon to do so.²⁸

UAE officials understand that a fight for Hodeida will be messy and painful but contend that it will prevent the overall war from dragging on for another three years.²⁹ Implicit in this analysis is the belief that, if they are made to feel enough pain, the Huthis will accept the coalition's conditions for an end to the war: a handover of the territory they control and of their heavy weapons to the Hadi government, and a clear split from Iran.³⁰

This thinking does not track with Huthi behaviour since the movement resorted to militancy fourteen years ago. Before 2011, the group endured six rounds of war with the Yemeni government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which at times had the assistance of Saudi air support. It has faced periods of privation much more challenging than its current situation. Today it is in control of much of the northern highlands, key state institutions in Sanaa and elsewhere, and a lucrative, if increasingly constrained, war economy. The loss of Hodeida would be a severe psychological and financial blow to the group, but one it would likely be able to absorb militarily and economically. The Huthis would still control the main arteries leading from Hodeida into the highlands, even if they lost the port itself, and thus could still raise revenue from trade should the port continue to function and the UAE-backed forces allow goods to travel into Huthi-held areas.

For the Huthis, in other words, losing the port would be a serious setback but one they could survive, for the time being at least. For a population already on the brink of starvation, it would mean something far worse, as further disruptions in the supply of basic commodities could prove calamitous.

B. UAE-backed Groups on the Red Sea Coast

Crisis Group fieldwork in Hodeida in September and October 2018, including trips to the three main front lines at the time, and interviews with senior UAE officials, have provided insight into the nature of the UAE-backed forces currently moving on Hodeida. The core force is largely composed of religiously motivated Salafi fighters whose military training comes predominantly from battles in southern Yemen and along the Red Sea coast since 2015. UAE officials concede that these forces have not had the time to become professionalised and that they quickly lose morale when unable to move forward.³¹

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S., UN, UAE and other Western officials, along with analysts, New York, Washington, Abu Dhabi, October-November 2018.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

³¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

Emirati officials say it is ultimately up to local commanders to decide whether to advance. But this claim seems to be an attempt to build plausible deniability should the offensive go forward too rapidly or farther than publicly announced.³²

Indeed, observations on the ground suggest that no military movement is likely to occur without a bright Emirati green light.³³ In the telling of several Yemeni fighters allied with the coalition, the UAE tightly controls the movement of forces in the Red Sea theatre, pays fighters' wages, arms them, feeds them and supplies them with *qat*, the leaf Yemenis chew as a stimulant, as well as vehicles and other materiel.³⁴ During major operations, armoured vehicles – given to select Yemeni units commanded by Tareq Saleh, the former president's nephew, but not to regular fighting forces – lead the first wave of attack, in coordination with air support from UAE fighter jets and helicopters.³⁵ A group of fighters from the Giants Brigade, a force of Salafi-leaning fighters hailing mainly from Lahj governorate in the south, then enters in pickup trucks and on foot to fully clear the areas of enemy fighters.³⁶ Other factions, like the Tihama Resistance and Presidential Forces, secure the newly won territory when front-line fighters move on to open new fronts.³⁷

In early October, many fighters professed readiness to advance on Hodeida and expressed confidence that they could take it, regardless of international pressure or the likely humanitarian impact, which, many fighters said, was a price worth paying for the Huthis' defeat.³⁸ They also made clear, however, that they could not move forward without the explicit say-so of their direct commanders, who in turn answered to the UAE and the Yemeni senior commander affiliated with the Giants Brigade, Abu Zaraq al-Mahrami.³⁹

³² Crisis Group telephone interviews, New York and Abu Dhabi, 2 and 5 November 2018.

³³ Crisis Group observations, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

³⁵ Until December 2017, the Republican Guard was – nominally at least – allied with the Huthis and fighting against coalition-backed forces. Following ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's death at Huthi hands in Sanaa that month, his nephew Tareq fled to the south and assumed control of what remained of the Republican Guard. The Guard has suffered severe losses of both men and materiel since joining the Red Sea coast campaign.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UAE-backed Yemeni fighters, Hodeida environs, October 2018. The brigade is divided into two factions. One is affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council in Aden, which supports southern secession from the republic. The other favours continued union; its members are mainly recruited from interwoven Salafi and tribal networks in the Yafa area of Lahj governorate. The latter group does most of the front-line fighting and is the first to occupy new territory during offensive manoeuvres. These fighters' rhetoric is often sharply sectarian: many describe a desire to eradicate the "Shiites and Iran" in Yemen. The secessionist faction of the Giants Brigade is clustered to the south of Mokha and guards the road linking that town with Aden; it has shown no desire to fight in the north. Crisis Group observations, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

³⁷ Drawn from the population of the plains along the Red Sea coast, the Tihama Resistance is commanded by Zanareq tribal leaders. These fighters usually act in a support role, securing territory taken by the Giants Brigade and allowing the frontline force to move forward. The Presidential Forces are loyal to Yemen's internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and are largely drawn from his native Abyan province.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UAE-backed Yemeni fighters, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UAE-backed Yemeni fighters, Hodeida environs, October 2018. One battlefield commander described participating in an attempt to take the junction linking Hodeida

Should these forces seize all of Hodeida, a different set of challenges will set in – above and beyond anticipated continued Huthi insurgency tactics. Because these forces come from different parts of the country – the south, particularly Lahj; the Red Sea plains of the Tihama; and, in the case of Tareq Saleh's forces, the northern highlands – they have widely varying goals and ideologies. The Tihama Resistance is motivated primarily by a desire to control the Red Sea coast, its home territory. Some of the southerners seek secession, while others are driven by religious fervour. Tareq Saleh's forces hope to build a new power base in Hodeida before pushing their way up to Sanaa. These forces constantly squabble and frequently engage in gun battles.⁴⁰ Thus the only way the UAE can coordinate their advance has been via a central command post at a military installation just outside of Mokha overseen by Emirati officers alongside al-Mahrami.⁴¹

These forces' ability to peacefully coexist in a post-Huthi Hodeida is far from guaranteed. The experience of Aden – the southern port city retaken from the Huthis in mid-2015 and currently under ostensible Yemeni government and coalition control – hardly inspires confidence. After three years of weak governance and intermittent violence, Aden is a blighted city.⁴²

C. *A Final Chance*

In the wake of U.S. calls for a resumption of peace talks in late October, UAE-backed forces launched a major new assault. On 31 October, they advanced from their positions to the south of Hodeida, crossing the main highway linking it with Sanaa and moving north, where they seized an industrial district in eastern Hodeida. They then tracked the city's eastern edge before occupying strategic positions only 2-4km from the coast and the entrance to the port, thus almost completely encircling the city. The main front line now cuts across the road connecting the port to Red Sea Mills, an important wheat storage and milling facility used by the World Food Programme. Fighting has arrived at, and at times penetrated, both the southern and eastern entrances to the city.

After a week of fierce battles, UAE senior commanders engineered another pause and fighting died down, though at the time of publication reports emerged that the battle had resumed. The main outcome of the most recent round of fighting is that there is now only one uncontested, operational land route in and out of Hodeida, the northbound Hodeida-Hajja road via Salif, which links the port with the rest of the country. UAE-backed forces are some 4km from the port entrance, and closer still to

and Sanaa in July, but his unit was forced to fall back when he failed to obtain reinforcements with UAE support. Crisis Group interview, Yemeni field commander, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

⁴⁰ In early October 2018, Crisis Group witnessed a running gun battle between nominally allied forces that shut down the town of Khawka for about an hour. There was little evidence of on-the-ground supervision or monitoring of the various forces' conduct. Crisis Group observations, Hodeida environs, October 2018. In late October, Salafi fighters of the Giants Brigade destroyed a Sufi mausoleum on the Red Sea coast road. "UNESCO condemns the intentional destruction of a historical mosque in the Hodeida Governorate of Yemen", press statement, UNESCO, 30 October 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Hodeida environs, October 2018.

⁴² Crisis Group observations, September-October 2018; April Alley, "Eight Days in Aden – a Forgotten City in Yemen's Forgotten War", Crisis Group Commentary, 23 May 2018.

the intersection connecting the northbound highway with the city. Some UN officials argue that military operations in Hodeida contravene verbal commitments reportedly made by UAE officials to the UN and U.S. between July and October that their forces would not cut off the Hodeida-Sanaa road or attack the city in the run-up to talks.⁴³

Emirati officials indicate that they ordered the pause to give talks a “last chance”, though they acknowledge they issued the command at Washington’s request.⁴⁴ If the Huthis attack UAE-backed forces, they say, or fail to come to the table, the UAE will launch a final offensive to take the port, if not the city. It is likely that Abu Dhabi fully expects the Huthis to play into the coalition’s hands by targeting its forces.⁴⁵

Assuming that UAE-backed forces resume their advance, indications are that they will seek to seize the port and strangle, rather than take, the city proper due to concerns about intense street-to-street combat, which would cause high casualties.⁴⁶ They expect allied groups inside the city to rise against the Huthis once the latter find themselves pressed on the defensive. Several Western military and political officials express scepticism that this train of events is the most probable. They warn that a fight for the port instead is likely to be prolonged and destructive, and that UAE-backed forces will not be able to guarantee the security of the port or maintain road access without fighting their way into the city. In the meantime, no goods would flow inland.

D. *Humanitarian Impact*

A decisive move on Hodeida port would have devastating consequences not just for the local population but for millions of Yemenis. Such an assault would likely block all roads leading from the port to the central highlands, leaving an estimated 18 million highland Yemenis without supplies of staples like wheat and rice, or fuel, all of which Yemen imports by sea, the bulk through Hodeida.⁴⁷

The UAE and other coalition members have suggested that humanitarian agencies are engaging in fear-mongering and that the battle for Hodeida has not appreciably affected the flow of food, fuel and humanitarian aid until now. They add that current inflows to Hodeida could be replaced by transit through other ports.⁴⁸ This

⁴³ Crisis Group messaging app interview, senior UN official, 31 October 2018; Western official, New York, November 2018.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, UAE official, November 2018. UAE officials said that they were responding to U.S. requests, most clearly expressed by Secretary Mattis in light of growing disquiet among members of Congress. Crisis Group interviews, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior UAE official, November 2018.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, well-placed contacts, Hodeida environs, November 2018.

⁴⁷ Before the war, Yemen imported some 90 per cent of its grain and 100 per cent of its rice; the figure for grain is likely to have risen. Hodeida has accounted for around 70 per cent of all food and fuel imports by sea since the beginning of the war. See Oxfam, “Missiles and Food”, December 2017, at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bn-missiles-food-security-yemen-201217-en.pdf>.

⁴⁸ At a briefing, Anwar Gargash, UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, said: “Despite the fight, the port is working. Six ships are loading and others coming. All humanitarian ships. We are preparing to send 100 trucks loaded with aid and we have plans for airdrops if necessary”. Crisis Group observations, Abu Dhabi, 18 June 2018.

assessment is highly questionable. Aid officials note that the severing of the Sanaa-Hodeida road in November has had a discernible humanitarian impact already. Trucks must now pass through a bottleneck to the north of Hodeida and follow an alternative route to Sanaa that adds some two hours of travel time, increasing fuel consumption and cargo costs.⁴⁹ If UAE-backed forces seize Salif port as well, the front line would move inland, but the humanitarian challenge will merely be displaced, not improved.

The UN believes that twelve of Yemen's most populous governorates rely almost entirely on Hodeida and Salif ports for food and fuel supplies, and that four governorates – Hajja, Hodeida, Saada and Taiz, with a combined estimated population of more than 10 million – are unlikely to be able to effectively shift to imports from Aden or other, smaller, ports.⁵⁰ Hodeida is also the site of the country's main wheat storage and milling facilities, and the main logistical hub for fuel distribution and transportation in the north. Put simply, an aid official said, "there is no alternative to Hodeida".⁵¹

The looming final battle for Hodeida comes at a critical time. On 23 October, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) readjusted its estimates of the number of severely food-insecure people – the last increment on the scale the UN uses to measure hunger before a determination of famine – from eight to fourteen million, or half the country's population.⁵² It made this readjustment based on an ongoing currency crisis amid a broader economic collapse caused by the war. Most of those going hungry are in this condition not because food is unavailable but because they cannot afford to buy it.⁵³ The UN believes that famine is already present in parts of Yemen. It is still deliberating as to whether the country has crossed the technical threshold for nationwide famine.⁵⁴

When, in November 2017, the Saudi-led coalition briefly halted all imports into Hodeida following a Huthi missile attack on Riyadh, the price of a 50kg bag of flour rose by 21 per cent.⁵⁵ A prolonged battle for Hodeida – the most likely scenario if the UAE-backed forces launch a final assault – would cause an even steeper rise in prices, exacerbating the hunger crisis. Indeed, according to Mark Lowcock, the UN humanitarian chief, even without a battle for Hodeida:

There is now a clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine engulfing Yemen: much bigger than anything any professional in this field has seen during their working lives.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, via email, messaging app, and in person.

⁵⁰ Famine Early Warning Systems, Yemen Central Statistical Organisation projections, 2018.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, senior UN humanitarian official, November 2018.

⁵² "A clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine is engulfing Yemen" – UN humanitarian chief, press statement, OCHA, 23 October 2018.

⁵³ OCHA, "Yemen: Exchange rates and inflation trends", 5 September 2018, at https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ocha_yemen_exchange_rate_dashboard_sep2018.pdf.

⁵⁴ Samuel Oakford, "Deaths before data", IRIN News, 12 November 2018.

⁵⁵ "Exclusive: Saudi-led blockade cuts fuel lifeline to Yemen", Reuters, 6 December 2017.

⁵⁶ OCHA, "A clear and present danger", op. cit.

Against this backdrop, it is far from clear whether the current humanitarian program can be scaled up any further. Aid agencies have been able only to slow down the collapse in living standards despite a huge relief program, including a nearly \$3 billion UN humanitarian plan for 2018, almost one third of it funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁵⁷ On 20 November, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced an additional pledge of \$500 million to humanitarian agencies, including the UN. They said the aid would help meet the needs of an additional 12 million Yemenis – welcome news, but still unlikely to prevent famine.⁵⁸

Even prior to and without an all-out assault on Hodeida, accounts from residents caught between the combatants paint a disturbing picture of how the war is being waged.⁵⁹ The UN says that more than 570,000 people have been displaced from their homes in Hodeida governorate since fighting began.⁶⁰ Civilians are frequently exposed to coalition airstrikes, the rebels' use of landmines and shelling by both the Huthis and anti-Huthi forces. Both sides are destroying, damaging or endangering civilian infrastructure. The Huthis have prevented people living in front-line areas from leaving their homes, and neither side has opened protected corridors to allow civilians to leave combat zones. Both sides have impeded the flow of humanitarian aid. The current pause in fighting is bringing little solace. "A freeze is very difficult to manage", said a senior UN official involved in the mediation process. Yet, he said: "[It is] imperative that the coalition leave an exit and access route open from city and port to the north. Absent that, the city will die, and the supplies will not reach the rest of Yemen".⁶¹

⁵⁷ See UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service, Yemen Appeal Summary, at <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/657/summary>.

⁵⁸ "UAE and Saudi pledge \$500m to stem famine in Yemen", *The National*, 20 November 2018.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Hodeida governorate, September–October 2018.

⁶⁰ Daily press briefing, Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, United Nations, 12 October 2018.

⁶¹ Crisis Group messaging app interview, senior UN official, November 2018.

IV. A Way Forward

The Yemen war is complex, and ending it sustainably will therefore be long, hard work. For now, there is an urgent priority. The international community, the coalition and the Huthis face a stark choice: allow the momentum to continue toward a final battle for Hodeida and become complicit in a man-made famine the UN says would be the worst in a generation, or act to prevent it.

While continuing to push for broader talks, Martin Griffiths should make stopping an assault on Hodeida a principal task. True, this effort failed in the past, and he may therefore be tempted to shift his attention entirely to reaching a broader deal. Yet despite the long odds of success, preventing worse in Hodeida is worth another try, given the risk that all-out attack would precipitate an even greater humanitarian catastrophe and undermine prospects for successful peace talks.

Griffiths came close to a deal in June, and arguably failed mainly because the Saudi-led coalition moved the goal posts. He should now revive his original proposal, which would see Yemeni staff continue to run Hodeida port independently of the Huthis under UN supervision, while negotiating wider security arrangements. The Huthis say that they are still open to a deal for the port.⁶² If the UAE is as confident in its ability to take Hodeida as it claims it is, then waiting a little while longer should not make a difference. The Saudi-led coalition partners should understand they have been warned, time and again, that the human cost of a push for Hodeida will be intolerably high to their Western allies. If they proceed regardless, they will signal a clear decision to ignore these warnings, and thus will bear primary responsibility for an offensive's humanitarian impact.

For their part, the coalition's allies – notably the U.S., UK and France – should mount more sustained pressure. Thus far, they have done little more than chide the Saudis and Emiratis in public while privately nudging them toward periodic pauses and talks. U.S. and U.K. officials have defended the coalition against a growing public outcry, laying the blame for the war's worst fallout chiefly on the Huthis and their Iranian backers, while conceding serious problems in the way the coalition wages war is not always ideal.⁶³

A sharper message is now needed. The Security Council is now considering a new resolution, drafted by the UK, prescribing “a cessation of hostilities in Hodeidah governorate” and a halt to “all attacks on densely populated civilian areas across Yemen”, as well as “missile and UAV attacks against regional countries and maritime areas”. The draft resolution also “calls on all parties to the conflict to facilitate the unhindered flow of commercial and humanitarian” goods into Yemen, including by “ensuring the full and sustained opening of all Yemen's supply routes and ports, including Hodeidah and Saleef ports, and by the reopening and safe and secure opera-

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Huthi officials, including via messaging app, November 2018.

⁶³ See Jonathan Swan and Haley Britzky, “Trump: The Saudis ‘don't know how to use’ U.S. bombs”, *Axios*, 4 November 2018; and Frank Gardner, “Yemen conflict: The view from the Saudi side”, *BBC*, 9 December 2016.

tion of Sana'a airport".⁶⁴ These clauses are commendable and similar in substance to what Griffiths and UN humanitarian chief Lowcock have requested. That said, the draft omits a call for a nationwide ceasefire – necessary to consolidate the gains of the above measures. It also lacks explicit provisions for accountability for parties that may flout the resolution's terms, saying only that the Council would "consider further measures, as necessary, to support a political solution to end the conflict".

Debate on the draft resolution commenced on 20 November. The Saudi-led coalition has indicated its displeasure at the text. The UN ambassador from Kuwait, a Council member in 2018-2019, told a reporter that "some Council members don't see this is the right time to table a draft resolution".⁶⁵ Kuwait may try to water down the resolution's terms further.

The Security Council should resist such entreaties and urgently pass the resolution. Optimally, it would even strengthen it by calling for a nationwide ceasefire and establishing a UN-led arrangement for Hodeida port, as Griffiths proposed in June 2018. Finally, it should specify what steps the Council would take to enforce the resolution's terms in the event of non-compliance.

Given the close ties between the U.S. and UK on the one hand, and the coalition on the other, as well as a history of failed attempts at ending the war or curbing its worst features through gentle prodding, they should move to stronger means of pressure. U.S. and UK officials know they are under mounting scrutiny. They have expended major political capital to defend arms sales and other support to the coalition. The UK government has gone to the High Court to argue that licensing arms exports to Saudi Arabia for use in the Yemen campaign did not violate international law.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Pompeo went against the advice of key bureaus in his own department to provide the certification needed to continue refuelling coalition aircraft.⁶⁷ Both UK and U.S. officials could incur growing political consequences from a famine declared on their watch and attributed in part to a Hodeida campaign in which they indirectly participated.

It was in this context that the U.S. announced on 10 November that it had decided to end in-air refuelling of coalition aircraft, purportedly "at the Saudis' request", ostensibly because the coalition said it had gained the capability to do so on its own. The timing may suggest that the Trump administration was prepared to start using more serious leverage with the coalition.⁶⁸ It might equally suggest that in the face of increasing Congressional impatience (especially in the wake of Jamal Khashoggi's brutal murder by Saudi Arabia and the administration's apparent manoeuvres to shelter senior Saudi leadership from blame) the administration was eager to demon-

⁶⁴ Draft UN Security Council resolution, undated, obtained by Crisis Group on 19 November 2018. See also "UN draft resolution calls for Yemen truce, two weeks to unblock aid", Agence France Presse, 19 November 2018.

⁶⁵ Tweet by Nabil Abi Saab, @NabilAbiSaab, Al Hurra UN correspondent, 12:40 pm, 19 November 2018.

⁶⁶ "British court allows appeal against UK arms sales to Saudis", Reuters, 4 May 2018.

⁶⁷ Dion Nissenbaum, "Top U.S. diplomat backed continuing support for Saudi war in Yemen over objections of staff", *Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2018.

⁶⁸ "U.S. halting refueling of Saudi-led coalition aircraft in Yemen's war", Reuters, 9 November 2018.

strate a measure of toughness that might pre-empt further-reaching and flexibility-inhibiting Congressional action.

On 20 November, President Trump issued a statement making clear that he planned on standing by Saudi Arabia, and that punitive action against the kingdom would be limited to the sanctions the White House has already imposed against seventeen low-ranking men said to have been involved in the Khashoggi murder.⁶⁹ That means it is up to Congress to act.

The prospects for such action continue to increase. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have considered draft legislation linked to the War Powers Resolution of 1973. This draft legislation would require the withdrawal of U.S. personnel from hostilities in Yemen (other than for specified counter-terrorism operations), effectively ending refuelling and in-theatre intelligence support to the coalition.⁷⁰

While such efforts have been floated (and shot down) previously in recent years, they continue to have some momentum, even if primarily as a vehicle for signalling frustration with U.S. Yemen policy. The House Republican leadership bottled up one iteration of pending war powers legislation shortly after the mid-term elections.⁷¹ Now the Senate has taken up the baton and is expected to vote on its version during the current “lame duck” session (ie, the work period between the election and the January date when the newly elected members of Congress take their seats). The Senate already sent a message of concern when it voted down the same resolution by a relatively narrow margin of 55-44 during Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to the U.S. in March 2018.⁷²

Though there are no expectations that the war powers legislation will become law, January will bring a new Congress, which will be poised to increase pressure yet further. A bipartisan group of senators recently proposed new draft legislation cutting off offensive arms sales to Saudi Arabia, barring refuelling support to coalition aircraft, and requiring sanctions on persons hindering humanitarian access to Yemen or threatening its peace and stability.⁷³ This legislation – which co-sponsor Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, describes as “an important way to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for various acts in Yemen as well as the death of

⁶⁹ “Statement from President Donald J. Trump on Standing with Saudi Arabia”, White House, 20 November 2018.

⁷⁰ See “Joint resolution to direct the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress,” at www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/54 and “Congressional resolution directing the President pursuant to section 5(c) of the War Powers Resolution to remove United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress”, at www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-concurrent-resolution/138/text.

⁷¹ Rebecca Brocato, Jeff Prescott and Ned Price, “House extends U.S. support for Saudis as concerns mount”, *Axios*, 15 November 2018.

⁷² Nicholas Fandos, “Senators reject limits on U.S. support for Saudi-led fight in Yemen”, *The New York Times*, 20 March 2018.

⁷³ See The Saudi Arabia Accountability and Yemen Act of 2018, at www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/11-15-18%20Saudi%20Arabia%20Bill.pdf. Under the draft legislation, the secretary of state can waive the arms sales restriction in coordination with the defense secretary upon a written certification that such waiver is in the national security interest subject to the satisfaction of detailed factual requirements (including that the coalition has continuously honoured a cessation of hostilities for 180 days) and an accuracy assessment by the U.S. comptroller general.

Jamal Khashoggi⁷⁴ – is a ready-made vehicle for the new Congress to take up. It will likely be reintroduced early in the new congressional term.⁷⁴ Moreover, the new Congress will bring a Democratic majority into the House that is almost certain both to use its oversight powers and to press for legislation that curtails U.S. support for the war.

Emirati and Saudi officials, as well as some from the U.S., say cutting off military assistance would be counterproductive. It would, they argue, embolden the Huthis and Iran who, sensing international impatience, might simply wait things out, hoping that pressure on the Saudi-led coalition will compel it to curb or even end its military activities.⁷⁵ It would also allow them to evade blame for the current situation, even though the Huthis bear responsibility for commencing the war and have repeatedly obstructed negotiations. Finally, U.S. officials argue that, with military support suspended, they would be sacrificing a source of critical leverage with Saudi Arabia or the UAE.⁷⁶

But the countervailing case is the more powerful: leverage supposedly produced by providing military support has not meaningfully altered the way in which coalition forces have prosecuted the war – including targeting civilian areas and using the economy as a weapon of war, nor has it delivered discernible progress on the diplomatic front. Moreover, it is coalition-backed forces that are advancing on Hodeida, and it is that advance that today presents the greatest danger; leverage needs to be applied where it can have an effect. Despite mounting public criticism, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi seem confident in continued U.S. support. At this stage, therefore, only dramatic U.S. action, replicated by other Security Council members, all of whom supply the Saudis and Emiratis with arms being used in Yemen, will be sufficient to give the coalition the short, sharp shock required.

True, UAE officials argue with some credibility that they can continue their part of the campaign without outside help.⁷⁷ A halt in military assistance therefore might not prevent the attack on Hodeida. Yet a cut-off in military support would send a powerful political message all the same, especially if combined with a new UN Security Council resolution.

There are alternative options. The U.S. could adopt a phased approach conditioned on coalition behaviour: first cutting off intelligence sharing that can be used in offensive operations, and any air-traffic control support for the coalition; then, should that not suffice to produce changes in coalition behaviour (eg, a nationwide cessation of hostilities; a halt to any advance on Hodeida; and agreement on the UN plan for the port), halting transfers of precision-guided munitions; and, again in the event this proved insufficient, halting the transfer of other weapons systems used in operations in Yemen. But such a conditions-based approach would be problematic, susceptible to wrangling over who was responsible for breaching the pause or cessation of hostilities, and perpetuating U.S. complicity in a brutal conflict that is decimating Yemen's civilian population.

⁷⁴ "U.S. senators seek clampdown on Saudis over Yemen, journalist's murder", Reuters, 15 November 2018.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, UAE officials, Abu Dhabi, November 2018.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Congressional and government officials, Washington, 7-8 November 2018.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, UAE official, Abu Dhabi, 11 November 2018.

Of course, the Huthis also need to be pressed to stop fighting and sit down in good faith at the negotiating table. Moreover, if there is a battle for Hodeida, they have a responsibility to refrain from deliberately destroying the port and other vital infrastructure, something their adversaries claim the Huthis intend to do.⁷⁸

The U.S. and its Western allies have little to no ability to produce these outcomes. Only Iran and Oman appear to have the necessary leverage. Iran (with Hizbollah) has been the Huthis' principal supplier of electronic missile parts, training and other forms of support. The Huthis derive escalation potential from firing missiles into Saudi Arabia and at ships in the Red Sea whenever they find themselves squeezed militarily. If, as it has long maintained, including most recently to European countries, it is ready and able to help de-escalate and end the Yemen war, Tehran should prove it now.⁷⁹ For its part, Oman has built a solid relationship with the Huthis, and has been able to convince them to do things they have found unpalatable in the past, including agreeing in principle to hand over Hodeida port.

Both countries should press the Huthis to agree to a cessation of hostilities; agree to hand over the port to the UN and allow for a humanitarian corridor out of the city; and engage in good-faith talks in Stockholm. Tehran should cease its transfer of missile parts. And, barring a good-faith response by the Huthis, Muscat in particular should warn them they risk losing a trustworthy ally that is in a position to help them negotiate an end to the war. The European Union (EU) should press the Iranians, while the U.S. and UK should coordinate with the Omanis.

The fighting parties and their respective backers face a clear choice. With pressure applied in the right way on both sides, it is possible to prevent a fight for Hodeida, achieve a cessation of hostilities and move to talks.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Washington, London, Abu Dhabi and via telephone, 2018.

⁷⁹ The E4 – France, Germany, Italy and the UK – most recently met with Iranian officials in Brussels in September 2018. See “EU/E4 political consultations on regional issues with Iran”, press statement, European External Action Service, 12 September 2018.

V. Conclusion

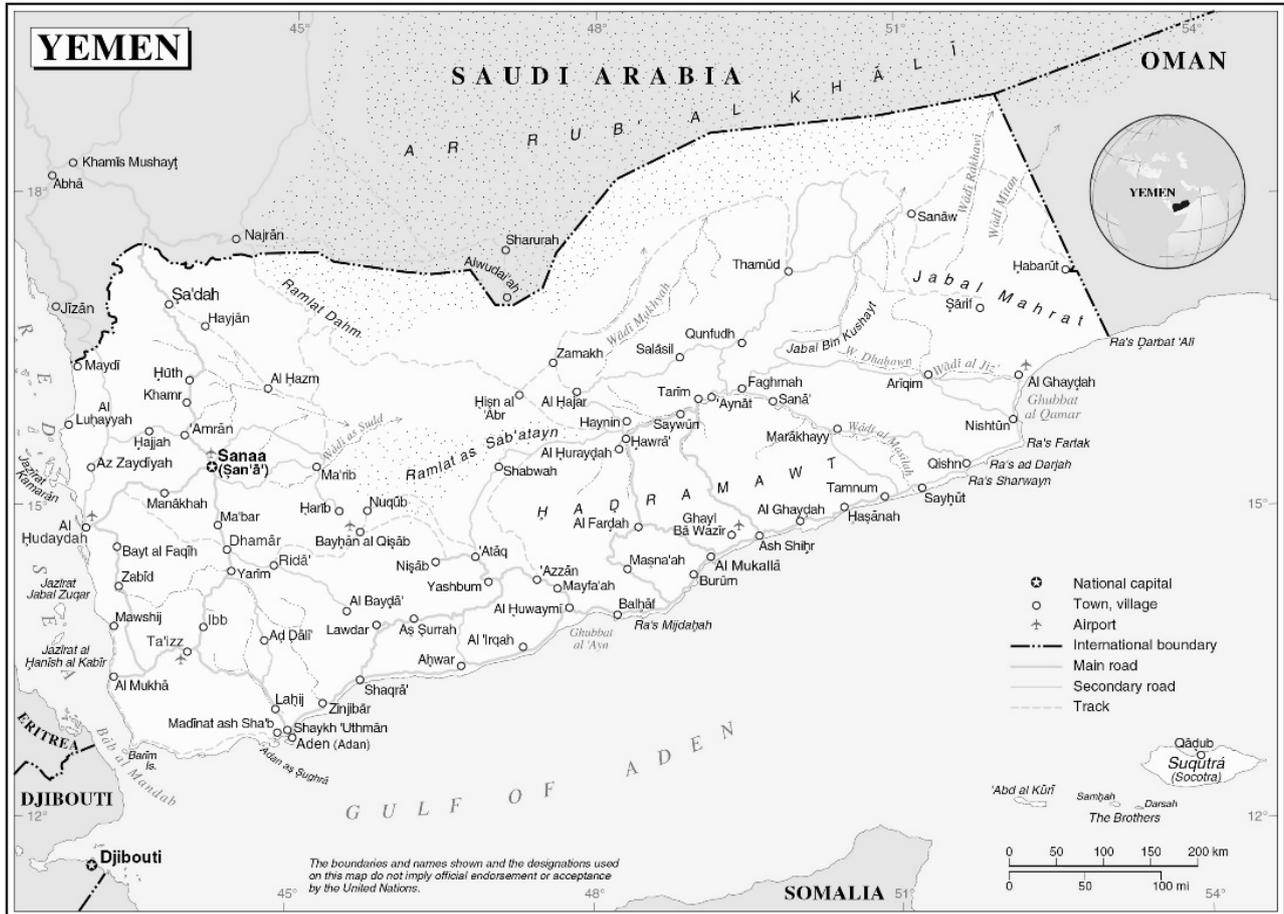
Yemen is now four years into a war that has brought none of the principal players involved any closer to achieving its core goals, while producing further misery for civilians. While there are countless indicators of such misery, one tells the story: today, half the population of 28 million stands on the verge of famine.

Even as the country appears headed for the very depth of its humanitarian crisis, an opportunity has arisen. International stakeholders are signalling that enough is enough. Initial action by the Trump administration, while insufficient, is welcome. The U.S. and other states, including and especially those who have been arming the Huthis and the coalition, should take the next critical steps by pressing the parties to agree to a cessation of hostilities, to a deal that would turn management of the port of Hodeida to the UN while securing a humanitarian corridor out of the city, and to attend peace talks in good faith. The Security Council should back this dispensation with a new resolution of the kind drafted by the UK. Optimally, this resolution would be strengthened with a call for a nationwide ceasefire. The U.S. and its allies should bolster these efforts by ending assistance to coalition offensive operations.

Even if implemented, these steps will not prevent a significant portion of the Yemeni population from dipping into famine; famines often are officially declared well after they have already started. But they would allow goods to flow to the major population centres and humanitarian agencies to do their life-saving work. Thus, they would allow Yemen's catastrophic slide to stop and create conditions conducive to UN-sponsored peace talks. Time is of the essence, however. And at this stage only concerted external pressure can be expected to produce the desired effect.

Abu Dhabi/Washington/New York/Brussels, 21 November 2018

Appendix A: Map of Yemen



Map No. 3847 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
Cartographic Section

Appendix B: Yemeni Forces Backed by the United Arab Emirates

The Giants Brigade

Made up of Salafi-leaning fighters, the majority of the Giants Brigade is from the southern Lahj governorate. The brigade is divided into two factions – one affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council in Aden, which supports southern secession from the republic, and one favouring continued union whose members are mainly from the tribal areas of Yafa area of Lahj. The latter group does most of the front line fighting and is the first to occupy new territory during offensive manoeuvres. The secessionist faction of the Giants Brigade is clustered to the south of Mokha and guards the road linking that town with Aden.

Republican Guard

Led by Tareq Saleh, nephew of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, until December 2017 the Republican Guard were – nominally at least – allied with the Huthis and fighting against coalition-backed forces. Following the ex-president's death at the hands of the Huthis, Tareq fled northern Yemen. The UAE heavily backs the reconstituted force, handing it control of a fleet of armoured vehicles. Yet it has suffered severe losses of both men and materiel since joining the Red Sea coast campaign around March. The Republican Guard are often deployed in conjunction with aerial attacks when coalition-backed forces make a push for new territory.

The Tihama Resistance

Drawn from the population of the plains along the Red Sea coast – also known as the Tihama – the Tihama Resistance is commanded by Zanareq tribal leaders. These fighters usually act in a support role, securing territory taken by the Giants Brigade and allowing the front line force to move forward. At the time of Crisis Group's visit, the majority were deployed around Hodeida airport.

Presidential Forces

Loyalists of Yemen's internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the Presidential Forces – a mix of the Presidential Protection Forces and others – are largely drawn from his native Abyan province in the south.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

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

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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

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

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

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

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The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Report N°159, 30 June 2015 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

No Exit? Gaza & Israel Between Wars, Middle East Report N°162, 26 August 2015 (also available in Arabic).

How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

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

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

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Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict, Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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New Approach in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°163, 2 September 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

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

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

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

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

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Reform and Security Strategy in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°161, 23 July 2015 (also available in French).

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The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth, Middle East and North Africa Report N°165, 3 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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Yemen at War, Middle East Briefing N°45, 27 March 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

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The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Briefing N°65, 6 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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