



Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen

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Principal Findings

What's new? A UN-brokered agreement to demilitarise the Yemeni port city of Hodeida is stuck. The Yemeni government insists on a complete handover of Hodeida by the Huthis, which the latter reject. Meanwhile, Huthi attacks on Saudi territory and Saudi airstrikes in Yemen have intensified over the past three months.

Why does it matter? The paralysis in Hodeida is preventing the UN from convening talks to end the war and undermining its credibility as mediator. Continued Huthi attacks on Saudi territory could trigger a broader regional confrontation at a time of deepening tensions between Iran and the U.S. and its regional partners.

What should be done? The UN, with P5 support, should clarify the minimum threshold needed for implementing the Hodeida agreement to allow for a pivot to broader peace talks. And the U.S., with the UN in support, should push Saudi Arabia toward direct talks with the Huthis over military de-escalation, particularly regarding cross-border strikes.

Executive Summary

Yemen witnessed a rare moment of international coherence and focus in December 2018 when a UN-brokered, U.S.-backed accord prevented a battle for the Red Sea port city of Hodeida and staved off a likely famine. Seven months on, UN-led attempts to demilitarise Hodeida and two nearby ports are at risk of running aground, in turn preventing long hoped-for political negotiations to end the war. Beyond Hodeida, fighting is intensifying on other front lines. Cross-border attacks by the Huthis (also known as Ansar Allah) into Saudi Arabia and Saudi airstrikes inside Yemen are enmeshing Yemen ever more deeply in regional tensions between the U.S. and Iran. If a collapse of the demilitarisation process is to be prevented and Yemen is to be firewalled from regional rivalries, international stakeholders in the crisis should urgently revive diplomatic efforts to achieve a realistic implementation plan for Hodeida so that broader peace talks can begin, and urge Saudi Arabia and the Huthis to negotiate an end to reciprocal cross-border attacks.

A weakened UN diplomatic effort in Yemen is in dire need of an international shot in the arm to remove obstacles to implementing the Stockholm Agreement, of which the subsidiary agreement to demilitarise Hodeida city and ports forms the core. In May, faced with the parties' inability to work out a mutually acceptable process, the UN endorsed unilateral Huthi redeployments from Hodeida, Ras Issa and Salif ports. Yemen's internationally recognised government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi reacted angrily, calling the Huthi redeployments a sham and accusing UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths of bias, even briefly cutting off contact with him. The Hadi government has yet to back down from its maximalist interpretation of the accord: that all Huthi personnel are to be replaced by government forces, a claim the Huthis reject and the UN says does not reflect what was agreed in Sweden.

Amid this worrisome picture is some good news. In June 2019, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) withdrew the bulk of its forces that led the assault on Hodeida and continue to support anti-Huthi Yemeni fighters along the Red Sea coast, easing the threat of a return to major fighting. But this development should not lull policymakers into a false sense of security. Front-line fighting has moved to other parts of the country. Anti-Huthi forces still see Hodeida as a target and may yet resume hostilities, with devastating consequences. Yemen's humanitarian crisis, which the UN describes as the world's biggest, has not deteriorated significantly since December 2018, but neither has it improved. A renewed battle for Hodeida would almost certainly tip the country into widespread famine. Plus, continued efforts to revive the faltering Hodeida agreement are consuming all available diplomatic bandwidth at great cost, preventing a turn to national-level peace talks.

At the same time, Yemen is at increasing risk of becoming the trigger for a wider regional confrontation. Escalating Huthi drone attacks and missile strikes into Saudi Arabia since May have injured dozens of civilians and killed one person. Saudi airstrikes in Yemen have also intensified, routinely causing civilian casualties. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia use increasingly black-and-white language in their portrayal of the Huthis as an Iranian remote-control proxy just as the crisis in U.S.-Iran relations has further intensified. Senior U.S. officials now say that they consider all Huthi attacks

as Iran-directed, while some Huthi officials say they see a “great war” across the region as all but inevitable. It is not hard to imagine a particularly lethal Huthi attack prompting military action by the U.S. and its allies against Iran, or drawing the U.S. deeper in to the Yemen war.

Reviving the Hodeida agreement and preventing an escalatory spiral of cross-border attacks from plunging Yemen further into a regional quagmire are urgent priorities. They will require successfully pushing on two mediation tracks: one between the Huthis and the Yemeni government over Hodeida and the other between the Huthis and Riyadh over escalating fighting between them.

As for the first track: optimally led by the UN and supported by the P5, talks should aim to clarify the minimum steps necessary to stabilise the situation in Hodeida and allow for the onset of broader Yemeni peace talks. Closing the remaining gaps on Hodeida will entail addressing the thorny issue of the composition of local security forces that are to provide security following Huthi redeployment from the city and ports; if a full resolution proves unachievable, then the UN should aim at a minimum for a satisfactory compromise that allows discussions over the city to take place in parallel to more comprehensive peace talks. This in turn will require pressure by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council on both sides and their respective regional backers.

As for the second track: Saudi Arabia and the Huthis should engage in discussions aimed at halting cross-border attacks. The U.S. is best-placed to encourage Saudi Arabia to reestablish meaningful communication with the Huthis in pursuit of such an agreement.

The more time passes without either a workable Hodeida arrangement or a freeze in cross-border attacks, the greater the threat of the Stockholm Agreement’s unravelling and of a wider regional war. The more remote, too, any prospect of a national political settlement and end to the Yemeni conflict. The international community mobilised once before to prevent an attack on Hodeida. With the stakes now even higher – for both Yemen and the region as a whole – such mobilisation is needed again, as urgently as ever.

Yemen/New York/Washington/Brussels, 18 July 2019

Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen

I. Introduction

More than a year has passed since UAE-backed Yemeni fighters rapidly advanced up Yemen's Red Sea coast, sparking fears of a lengthy and bloody battle for the vital port city of Hodeida, which could have precipitated a famine. The battle was averted in December 2018 by the Stockholm Agreement, a UN-brokered accord that saw the Yemeni government and its Huthi adversaries agree to a ceasefire and demilitarisation process in Hodeida, a prisoner exchange, as well as the formation of a committee to de-escalate tensions in Taiz governorate. The accord raised hopes that, once these initial hurdles were overcome, Yemenis could start broader peace talks to end the regionalised civil war, now in its fifth year.

Seven months after the deal was brokered, that optimism is gone. International attention has waned and attempts to implement the Stockholm Agreement have hit a series of roadblocks. At the same time, U.S.-Iran tensions are nearing a zenith while Huthi missile and drone attacks into Saudi Arabia threaten to both trigger a broader regional confrontation and, in turn, draw Yemen deeper into that morass.

This report outlines the conditions that made the Stockholm Agreement possible and the obstacles to its implementation, including escalating tensions between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and its Gulf allies on the other. It addresses the potential costs of the agreement's collapse and the related but separate risk of further cross-border military escalation between the Huthis and Saudi Arabia, while offering policy options to avoid these outcomes. The report is based on field research in Aden, Riyadh, Muscat, Amman and Washington, including interviews with Yemeni government, Huthi, UN, U.S., UK, Emirati and Saudi officials.

II. The Stockholm Agreement and Its Malcontents

The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement was the product of what may have been a fleeting moment of international consensus. With an assault on Hodeida imminent in late 2018, UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock warned of a “great big famine” in Yemen if fighting closed down the port.¹ This looming threat overlapped with growing impatience in Washington with Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who was a U.S. resident and *Washington Post* columnist, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018.

The Khashoggi murder was a tipping point, prompting harsh denunciations of Riyadh even from members of U.S. Congress who, in the past, had been supportive of the kingdom.² U.S. officials worried that a battle for Hodeida would prompt further scrutiny of the U.S.-Saudi relationship and the Yemen war, and boost Congressional efforts to suspend arms sales and military support to Riyadh.³ Possibly seeking to stave off this action, U.S. Defence Secretary James Mattis announced plans in October 2018 for the UN to convene peace talks in Sweden; both Mattis and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called for a partial ceasefire ahead of talks.⁴

By the time they arrived in Sweden in December 2018, the Huthis (whose forces faced a military assault) and the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi were under mounting international pressure to reach an agreement. The final push came with the arrival of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to the talks, last-minute phone calls from Mattis to senior Saudi and Emirati officials, and resulting pressure from Riyadh on the Hadi government to accept a compromise on Hodeida. In the end, the agreement was so rushed that the parties did not actually sign it.⁵ They also left the deal’s language vague, particularly in the section describing the local security forces that were to control Hodeida once front-line forces redeployed.⁶

After the Sweden talks, the battle for Hodeida quickly evolved into a competition to define the terms of the accord. Government officials argued the agreement should entail a complete Huthi withdrawal, with the government taking control of the ports

¹ “A clear and present danger of an imminent and great big famine is engulfing Yemen – UN Humanitarian Chief”, UN OCHA, 23 October 2018.

² “Senators, furious over Khashoggi killing, spurn president on war in Yemen”, *The New York Times*, 28 November 2018.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ “At turning point, US urges Yemen cease-fire, political talks”, Associated Press, 1 November 2018.

⁵ “Making Yemen’s Hodeida Deal Stick”, Crisis Group Q&A, 19 December 2018.

⁶ “Security of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa shall be the responsibility of local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law. Legal lines of authority shall be respected and any obstructions to proper functioning of local state institutions, including supervisors, shall be removed”. “Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa”, UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen. See Appendix A. The government points to the terms “in accordance with Yemeni law” to argue that its forces are needed to provide security. For their part, the Huthis say (and the UN agrees) that it was always understood that the agreement was about preventing a humanitarian disaster, not about resolving questions of sovereignty. Crisis Group interviews, New York, Abu Dhabi, April-June 2019.

and city.⁷ The Huthi interpretation was different: a redeployment of front-line forces, with the ports and city secured by police forces and Coast Guards currently in the city – many of whom are affiliated with the group – with minor changes to their leadership, including the removal of Huthi supervisors, and some UN oversight. UN officials involved in brokering the agreement say the Huthi version is closest to the compromise agreed in principle in Sweden, but concede that the deal’s opaque language created an opening for rival interpretations.⁸ At its core, they say, the agreement was a stop-gap measure meant to prevent a humanitarian disaster, not an accord to address the longer-term issue of sovereignty.⁹

By April, the UN-chaired Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) – comprising government and Huthi representatives and tasked with sorting out technical details and overseeing implementation – had broken the redeployment process down into a series of incremental steps. But it had not reached consensus on the local security forces issue or on how to monitor and verify redeployments to the satisfaction of both sides.¹⁰ The U.S., Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, increased pressure on the UN envoy to produce results. The Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had each lobbied UN Security Council member states to publicly censure the Huthis for blocking implementation.¹¹ The envoy worried that such a move – which fed into the narrative that the Stockholm Agreement called for an outright Huthi withdrawal and handover – could precipitate a backlash from the Huthis and a collapse of the process.¹²

In early May, with another Security Council meeting imminent, Griffiths and Lt. Gen. Michael Anker Lollegaard, the RCC’s UN chair and head of the UN monitoring mission in Hodeida, asked the Huthis to unilaterally redeploy their forces from Hodeida, Ras Issa and Salif ports in a sign of good faith.¹³ According to UN officials involved

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior Yemeni government official, Riyadh, March 2019. Shortly after the talks concluded, a government official described the Stockholm Agreement as a “mini 2216”, a reference to UN Security Council Resolution 2216 of 2015, which called for a Huthi withdrawal and handover of weapons. Crisis Group interview, December 2018.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, UN staff involved in negotiations, December 2018 and March and May 2019. At the time of the Stockholm negotiations, Crisis Group’s Middle East and North Africa deputy director was a member of the negotiating team while on secondment to the UN.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “UN envoy: Yemen parties agree on initial Hodeida withdrawals”, Associated Press, 15 April 2019.

¹¹ From January 2019 onwards, the Hadi government, UAE and Saudi Arabia sent at least three letters to the UN Secretary-General and circulated them to Security Council member states. Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and diplomats based in New York, January, March, April 2019. A 4 March 2019 letter provided to Crisis Group reads: “We urge members of the United Nations Security Council to call on the Houthis to implement the Stockholm Agreement in accordance with UNSC Resolution 2451, to condemn the Houthis’ ongoing violations of the ceasefire, and to demand the Houthis’ compliance with the measures agreed on in the negotiations of the RCC”. Letter on file with Crisis Group.

¹² Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, May 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, UN official, New York, May 2019. The Huthis had offered to redeploy unilaterally on a number of occasions in the past but the UN had not pursued the offer. This was in part because its officials worried the Yemeni government would not support it, in part because they preferred agreement on a package deal for redeployment as opposed to a partial solution. Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, April and May 2019.

in the process, the Hadi government gave its consent.¹⁴ Government officials dispute this, arguing that Griffiths tried to “force” them into accepting the redeployments as a *fait accompli*.¹⁵

The Huthi leadership acceded to the UN envoy’s request and proceeded with the redeployment. UN officials, including Lollesgaard, who subsequently inspected the ports, verified that the Huthis had fulfilled their obligations, describing the group’s cooperation as “very good”.¹⁶ Griffiths, in his subsequent Security Council briefing, claimed the Huthis were “fully compliant” with agreed procedures in their redeployments.¹⁷ But the UN released few details of what had actually happened on the ground. Anti-Huthi news outlets and social media accounts soon claimed the Huthis had simply rebadged their fighters as Coast Guard, and that the UN was rubberstamping continued Huthi control of the ports.¹⁸

The backlash against unilateral Huthi redeployments, and their validation by the UN, was swift and vociferous.¹⁹ A social media campaign attacking the UN envoy for pro-Huthi bias gathered momentum and public attacks on the envoy became widespread. President Hadi sent a written complaint to the UN Secretary-General and temporarily refused to speak to the envoy.²⁰ After he received a visit from UN Under-Secretary General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo on 10 June, Yemeni government officials claimed she reassured Hadi that Griffiths “would abide by implementing the Hodeida deal in accordance with international resolutions and Yemeni law”, a clear reference to the government’s belief that the Huthis should withdraw entirely and hand over the ports and city to the government.²¹

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, May 2019.

¹⁵ The Yemeni government drafted a statement welcoming the redeployments and calling for proper verification but never released it. Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, 10 May 2019.

¹⁶ “UN monitoring team in Yemen verifies pull-out of armed forces from crucial port zones”, UN News, 14 May 2019.

¹⁷ “Briefing of Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen, to the Security Council, 15 May 2019”, Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen website.

¹⁸ In a representative series of tweets, the Yemeni government’s information minister described the redeployments as a “sham” and Griffiths’s endorsement of them a “violation of the rules and norms of diplomacy and international laws” and an “unprecedented deception and disinformation to the international community, UN and the SC”. Moamer al-Iryani, 26 May 2019, <https://twitter.com/eryanim>.

¹⁹ A common argument among anti-Huthi social media was that Griffiths’ actions led to the “legitimation of the coup militias” – a reference to the Huthis overthrowing the Hadi government in 2015. “The UN ignored the imbalance of power between the warring parties. The government was cornered and subjected to the pressure of regional and international powers, while the Houthis were positioned on equal footing with the legitimate government, giving them a victory simply for showing up”, Khattab al-Rawhani, a Yemeni journalist, wrote in a 13 June Twitter post. <https://twitter.com/alkhatabyemen/status/1139191997951107074>.

²⁰ Letter on file with Crisis Group and verified by Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, May 2019. See also, “Yemen government to meet UN chief over envoy’s ‘biased’ behaviour”, *The National*, 27 May 2019.

²¹ “UN guarantees Griffiths’ respect of Stockholm deal”, Asharq al-Awsat, 12 June 2019.

III. An Anti-Huthi Backlash over Hodeida

Several Yemeni factions denounced the Huthi redeployments and the UN's handling of the post-Stockholm process, each for its own reasons. Some, including the Hadi government, fear that the UN approach – leaving the Huthis as the most influential political and security brokers in the city and port – will set the dangerous precedent of legitimising Huthi territorial control.²² The Hodeida agreement clearly states that this is not the case, and that the arrangement is not meant as a model for future negotiations, but this has not reassured the government or its political base.²³ Government supporters also point to the uptick in violence on other front lines in the war as evidence that the Huthis are not interested in ending the war, and as evidence of UN naivety.²⁴

The government's interpretation of the agreement plays well with supporters who view the rebels as deceptive, capable operators who use negotiations and agreements to reposition themselves before pursuing further military gains.²⁵ But it puts Hadi in the position of advocating for an outcome far from what the two sides agreed to in Sweden.²⁶ The backlash from the government's side, and Hadi's own position, reflects the depth of their opposition to an agreement it was strong-armed by its regional allies into accepting. The government's stance also suggests a continued desire to resume the battle for Hodeida as the better way to achieve its goals. Indeed, many on the government's side still believe that a military victory is realistic; that it would significantly weaken the Huthis by depriving them of valuable customs reve-

²² Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, May 2019.

²³ The agreement reads: "This Agreement shall not be considered a precedent to be referred to in any subsequent consultations or negotiations". "Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa", Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen, 13 December 2018.

²⁴ During recent fighting in northern and southern Yemen, the Huthis scored a series of battlefield successes. In March 2019, they quashed a brief rebellion by Hajour tribesmen in Hajja governorate. In May, they launched an assault to recapture territory in the southern governorate of al-Dhale they had lost at the beginning of the war. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing Note, *Crisis Group Update 4*, 14 February 2019; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing Note, *Crisis Group Update 10*, 6 May 2019.

²⁵ This group cites as a primary example the 2014 Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA), which called for a phased withdrawal of Huthi forces from Sanaa in exchange for a series of political concessions, including the formation of a new government. After signing the deal, the Huthis ignored the pullout requirement, arguing that the men at checkpoints on the streets were not their fighters but supportive citizens from autonomous "popular committees". The Huthis offer another version, pointing to the slow pace of government formation, Hadi's unfulfilled promise to reform the Shura (consultative) council and his attempt to bring a draft constitution to a vote based on a six-part federal division, which the Huthis had rejected. By January 2015, the rebels had placed Hadi under house arrest as their slow-motion coup tipped an already divided country into civil war. Crisis Group Middle East Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

²⁶ While some government officials worry that the hawks are going too far, they also see the Stockholm Agreement as a political liability for Hadi, whose legitimacy in Yemen is shaky at best. Hadi regained some support through his pushback against Griffiths. A government official said: "We were forced into a deal we didn't want and we can't let ourselves be forced into accepting the worst possible version of the deal. Who would accept that?" Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, New York, May 2019.

nues and an arms smuggling hub; and that it would break the image of the Huthis' military superiority in the north, thereby harming the group's ability to recruit among the tribes.²⁷

They argue, further, that if they lost Hodeida the Huthis would be forced to accept a power-sharing arrangement more in line with their actual demographic size as opposed to their current military weight. A government official said: "Peace is not possible right now. If the Huthis had lost Hodeida, we would be much closer to peace; they would be weakened and would be more likely to compromise".²⁸ Behind this stance lies the concern that any national political settlement negotiated under current military circumstances automatically would favour the Huthis – and that under any such settlement displaced Yemenis who publicly opposed the rebel group would find it difficult to return to their homes in Huthi-controlled territories for fear of retaliation.

Some in the General People's Congress (GPC), Yemen's former ruling party, have a different reason for advocating a battle for Hodeida. The GPC has witnessed a steep decline since 2015 from a party who dominated politics, the military and the economy to a fragmented collection of weakened rival factions, many based outside of Yemen and dependent on cooperation with other political groups or external backers.²⁹ Some leaders in the anti-Huthi camp are convinced they need a base inside Yemen for any serious chance at returning to power. They see Hodeida as an ideal "GPC city" in much the same way they see Sanaa as Huthi-dominated, Aden as the hub of the separatist-leaning Southern Transition Council, and Mareb as under the control of Islah, Yemen's largest Sunni Islamist political party.³⁰ Tareq Saleh, the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew and military commander, could be pivotal in this effort: if the fight were led by the Republican Guards, an armed group under his control that participated in the Hodeida campaign and still holds positions around the city, he could try to make Hodeida a GPC stronghold.³¹

Other forces that, to date, have played a more significant role in the campaign have their own incentives for resuming the fight for Hodeida. The Giants Brigade, an

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior Yemeni government officials, southern separatist supporters, Aden, March 2019; Crisis Group email correspondence, anti-Huthi activists, individual with close ties to the GPC leadership, April and May 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, New York, May 2019. The size of the Huthi movement has long been a talking point for the Yemeni government and Saudi officials. "Keep in mind that the Houthis, in a country of 26 million people, are less than 50,000", Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said during a joint press briefing with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in August 2016. "That's their number, ten percent of the population of Sanaa". "Press Availability with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir (August 26, 2016)", U.S. Embassy in Riyadh, <https://sa.usembassy.gov/joint-press-availability-saudi-arabian-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir>.

²⁹ GPC members outside of Yemen generally oppose the Huthis. However, its Sanaa-based grouping has found an accommodation with the group. The major GPC factions abroad are based in Abu Dhabi, Cairo and Riyadh.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, political activist with close ties to the GPC's Cairo branch, May 2019; senior GPC official, New York, February 2019; GPC-linked official, Aden, March 2019.

³¹ A Republican Guard officer denied that Tareq Saleh seeks to resume the battle for Hodeida and insisted that he (like the government) preferred to see the Huthis implement the Stockholm Agreement, ie fully withdraw from the city and allow the return of security personnel who were there prior to the war. Crisis Group interview, May 2019.

assortment of southern fighters, constitutes the majority of front-line forces around Hodeida. Many of its Salafi fighters frame the battle as a religious struggle between Sunnis and Shiites, but are internally split over whether an assault on Hodeida can be justified on religious grounds.³² Those among them who are separatists seem motivated by a desire to demonstrate their battlefield prowess and value to the Saudi-led coalition in hopes they will be rewarded with political support for a secession bid.³³ A group known as the Tihama Resistance, consisting of Hodeida tribesmen, wishes to retake their home from the Huthis but do not want it to fall into the Salafis' or Saleh's hands.³⁴

That said, none of these groups, whether separately or collectively, could prevail over the Huthis without active UAE military support. This is all the more true now that the rebel group has used the pause to fortify its defences in Hodeida with landmines, trenches and barricades. With Abu Dhabi having initiated a drawdown of its military capabilities in Yemen's Red Sea theatre (for reasons explained below), prospects of renewed fighting for Hodeida appear to be off the agenda, at least for the moment.

³² Some southern Salafi factions argue that war is justifiable only as a form of defence and see the Hodeida campaign as offensive. That said, there are those who view Hadi as the "*wali al-amr*" (the "head of the community", or rightful leader), and would feel obligated to attack the city if he gave such an order. Crisis Group interviews, Salafi leaders, Aden, March 2019; Salafi fighters, Hodeida, October 2018.

³³ Crisis Group interview, STC-linked security official, Aden, March 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Tihama Resistance commander, Hodeida, October 2018.

IV. A Shifting Regional Environment

Even as the likelihood of a new round of violence in Hodeida has declined, the possibility of an escalation in the Yemen war, linked to a combustible regional environment, has increased. In response to Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, Tehran has shown increased willingness to retaliate, gradually breaching the nuclear deal, purportedly threatening U.S. personnel in the region, and either directly or indirectly targeting Washington's regional allies.³⁵ Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration increasingly frames the Yemen conflict as part of a regional tug-of-war with Iran.³⁶ In this vein, they tend to depict Huthi attacks on Saudi Arabia as part of a broader Iranian proxy battle against the U.S. and its allies rather than the manifestation of a local Saudi-Huthi fight.³⁷

In this environment, the timing of the 14 May drone attacks on Aramco pipelines in Saudi Arabia and a subsequent wave of attacks on Saudi targets, almost all of which the Huthis claimed, could not have been more unwelcome and alarming.³⁸ They coincided with the Huthi redeployment from the Hodeida ports, undermining any positive impact that move might have generated.³⁹ Worse, it came amid deteriorating U.S./Iranian relations and on the heels of attacks on ships off the coast of Fujairah in the UAE, which Washington and Riyadh blamed on Iran. The Aramco and Fujairah attacks appeared calculated to telegraph the attackers' capabilities to disrupt Saudi oil export channels, which are crucial to the health of the global economy.⁴⁰

³⁵ See also Crisis Group, "The U.S.-Iran Trigger List"; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing Note, *Iran Briefing Note #4*, 11 July 2019.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, June 2019. For further discussion of regional dynamics and the risk of an escalation between Iran and the U.S., see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Alert, "Taking the U.S. and Iran Off Collision Course", 15 May 2019.

³⁷ The Huthi relationship with Iran and Hizbollah unquestionably has deepened over the course of the war. While the Huthis received some material support and advice in the past, members of the group acknowledge it has grown more dependent on Tehran. As one official put it: "If we are under attack by Saudi Arabia, and the only country willing to help us is Iran, then, yes, we will grow closer to them". Crisis Group correspondence, Huthi official, March 2019. That said, they deny accusations that they are an Iranian proxy or have a deep ideological alignment with Iran. Instead, they present the relationship as one of pragmatic shared interests in light of Saudi attacks and of political resistance to U.S.-Saudi-Israeli efforts to impose their imprimatur on the region. *Ibid.*

³⁸ "U.S.: Saudi pipeline attacks originated from Iraq", *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2019. Riyadh accused the Huthis of launching missile strikes on Mecca and Medina in May 2019, a claim they reject. "Saudi Arabia intercepts 2 Houthi missiles heading to Mecca, Jeddah", *Middle East Monitor*, 21 May 2019. The 14 May drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities were claimed by the Huthis, according to U.S. officials, launched instead from Iraq by Iran-backed Shiite militias. This only underscored the Huthis' willingness to do Iran's bidding in Washington's eyes. "U.S.: Saudi pipeline attacks originated from Iraq", *Wall Street Journal*, 28 June 2019.

³⁹ "Yemen's Houthi rebels attack Saudi oil facilities, escalating tensions in Gulf", *The New York Times*, 14 May 2019.

⁴⁰ In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have moved a great deal more oil out of the country via pipeline, including the Saudi east-west pipeline from the Eastern Province to the Red Sea port of Yanbu. This allows ships to avoid passing through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has threatened to shut down in the past. In addition, they move oil out of Fujairah, the UAE's only port on the Indian Ocean and today a major oil storage and trans-shipment site for both Gulf states' crude oil.

Along with a wave of subsequent Huthi cross-border attacks on Saudi infrastructure,⁴¹ they deepened perceptions in Washington that the Huthis were acting on behalf of Iran at a time when Tehran had decided to hit back at the U.S. tightening the economic noose.

The Huthis also used drones to attack Saudi airports and Khamis Mushayt, a Saudi military facility where U.S. military personnel are present.⁴² U.S. Vice Admiral Michael Gilday, the director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the 14 May Huthi drone attacks as part of a “campaign designed by the Iranians against U.S. interests, U.S. forces and our partners in the region”.⁴³ The U.S. has said that any Iranian attack leading to the death of a member of the American armed forces would precipitate a counter-attack, potentially against Iran, and that it considers all Huthi activities to be Iran-backed.⁴⁴

What this means in terms of U.S. policy toward Yemen is uncertain. Officially, Washington still backs UN efforts in general and Griffiths’ efforts in particular. According to some reports, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has shared his belief that the Huthis will only accept a compromise after being subjected to greater military pressure, possibly achieved through an assault on Hodeida;⁴⁵ others say he continues to believe in the Stockholm Agreement, backs Griffiths, is eager for a quick diplomatic resolution that might weaken Iran’s ability to target U.S. allies, and is open to the U.S. playing a more active role.⁴⁶ Still, the administration’s Iran-centric view, coupled with the resignation of Secretary Mattis – who had played a central role in midwifing the Stockholm Agreement – raises questions about how much the administration currently prioritises a diplomatic resolution to the conflict.⁴⁷ More significantly, it raises questions about how the U.S. might react to a future Huthi attack on Saudi or Emirati targets that proved particularly bloody – and whether the administration might decide to retaliate against Iran.

Whoever chose the targets for these attacks may have wanted to signal that the world economy’s Gulf vulnerability is not limited to the Strait of Hormuz.

⁴¹ In a 2 July statement, a military spokesman for the de facto Huthi authorities in Sanaa claimed 23 missile and drone attacks inside Saudi Arabia over the course of the previous month. “Huthi spokesman announces surprise attacks on Saudi Arabia”, accessed via YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=S_kXQtG2kUc&feature=youtu.be, and confirmed by Huthi officials. Crisis Group correspondence, June 2019.

⁴² “Yemen’s Houthis target two Saudi airports with multiple drone attacks”, Reuters, 15 June 2019.

⁴³ U.S. Department of Defense, “Department of Defense Briefing on Iran”, 24 May 2019. Gilday’s statements are but one example among many. The head of Central Command, the military umbrella that leads all U.S. forces in the Middle East, described the threat of an attack by Iran or its proxies “imminent”. “U.S. commander says American forces face ‘imminent’ threat from Iran”, NBC News (Online), 6 June 2019.

⁴⁴ “Pompeo warns Iran about trigger for U.S. military action as some in administration question aggressive policy”, *Washington Post*, 28 June 2019.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, March 2019, New York, May 2019; Western diplomats, New York, April-May 2019.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, Abu Dhabi, July 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Abu Dhabi, June 2019.

Of equal importance is the mood in Riyadh. The Saudi leadership reacted angrily to the Huthi strikes, viewing them as directly ordered by Iran.⁴⁸ As a senior Saudi official told Crisis Group, “the Huthis have a choice. They can act as a Yemeni group that serves Yemeni interests. Or they can act, as they have, as an Iranian militia group that serves Iranian interests”.⁴⁹ In response, Riyadh hardened its stance and seemed to reject any notion of a mutual de-escalation – the Huthis ceasing their cross-border attacks, and Saudi Arabia halting or limiting its own strikes on Huthi-controlled areas. A senior official said: “Instead of asking the side that has never attacked Iran to de-escalate, why not ask the side that has been at war with us and targeted our capital and people to stop. If they don’t, we will not remain idle”.⁵⁰

When pressed by Western diplomats and others to open a serious communications channel with the Huthis, Saudi officials say they would first need proof of the rebels’ readiness to cut ties with Iran.⁵¹ More recently, Riyadh reportedly has somewhat moderated its views and signaled openness to reaching an understanding with the Huthis, although this remains unconfirmed.⁵²

In this environment, the UAE has begun to look a bit like the odd man out. Even as the U.S. appeared to harden its views and as Riyadh’s commitment to the Stockholm Agreement seemed to waver, Abu Dhabi became increasingly vocal about its determination to preserve it, begin to draw down its forces from the western coast and, in the words of its senior officials, “end the war in 2019”.⁵³ This was a significant shift, and one that appeared to catch their closest allies, Saudi Arabia, by surprise. Abu Dhabi had spearheaded initial efforts to capture Hodeida in 2018, largely because it believed it was the only lever that could move the conflict toward political talks and facilitate their exit from the conflict with the Huthis.

As they moved closer to launching a battle for Hodeida, Emirati officials dismissed the argument that the Huthis would engage seriously in diplomacy absent a military defeat in the port city. They blamed the U.S. (under Presidents Barack Obama and then Donald Trump) for having thwarted previous plans to take Hodeida. After the Sweden talks, however, the UAE viewed the Stockholm Agreement as a less costly route to extricate their forces from the Huthi fight. In a public signal of the UAE’s shifting stance, Anwar Gargash, the UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, an-

⁴⁸ A Saudi communiqué issued on behalf of the Gulf Cooperation Council described the Aramco attacks as “acts of terrorism” that pose “a serious threat to the security of the region and the global economy”. *Al-Arabiya*’s translation of the GCC Summit’s final communiqué, *Al-Arabiya*, 31 May 2019. Khaled bin Salman, the Saudi deputy defence minister and brother of the crown prince, said: “The terrorist acts, ordered by the regime in Tehran, and carried out by the Huthis, are tightening the noose around the ongoing political efforts”. “Saudi prince says Iran ordered pipeline attack”, Bloomberg, 16 May 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, May 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019. Saudi-backed media widely covered Hadi’s campaign against the UN envoy and the Huthis’ unilateral redeployments; this suggests that Riyadh, at a minimum, had no objection.

⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Washington, July 2019.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Washington, April 2019.

nounced on 10 May the UAE's support for Griffiths and described the redeployments as an "imperfect breakthrough".⁵⁴

Like Saudi Arabia, the UAE saw the Huthis' unilateral redeployments from Hodeida somewhat sceptically; unlike their neighbour, however, they also saw them as an opportunity. The absence of a trilateral verification mechanism to ensure those redeployments were complete sowed suspicion, but they nonetheless partially addressed a key Emirati concern: to remove port revenue and authority from the Huthis and place UN personnel on the ground. More importantly, the redeployments allowed the UAE to accelerate its own drawdown along the Red Sea coast, which it had quietly begun some weeks earlier.⁵⁵ In turn, they allowed the Emirates to focus on their priority objective: consolidating their influence in the south, where they built strong ties to separatist and other groups, and diminish the role of Islamists and those they consider extremists. Not only al-Qaeda, but also Islah – a Yemeni group with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood actively participating in the Saudi-led fight against the Huthis – are perceived by Abu Dhabi as the real threat. The battle against the Huthis, by contrast, had become a costly distraction.

Regional tensions with Iran were not the impetus for the draw down, but they have solidified and accelerated the UAE's decision. As the prospect of a military confrontation with the U.S. have grown, the UAE has assumed a low profile, seeking to de-escalate the situation given the devastating impact such a conflict would have on the Emirates' trade and tourism. Notably, it declined to join Washington and Riyadh in casting blame on Tehran for the Fujaira attacks.⁵⁶ The UAE's lighter footprint arguably also reinforces the message that the UAE is not seeking to pick a fight with Iran and its allies. Moreover, as it redeploys assets and personnel from Yemen, Abu Dhabi can use these capabilities to secure critical infrastructure from asymmetric and missile attacks.⁵⁷

The UAE is also aware of the mood in Washington. The administration may be strongly supportive of the campaign against the Huthis, but Congress – Democrats in particular – is not. Members keep looking for new ways to pressure the Trump administration to curtail its support for the Saudi-led military campaign, following the president's April veto of a resolution that sought to achieve that goal.⁵⁸ Those

⁵⁴ "Gargash: Yemen envoy deserves support after 'imperfect breakthrough' in Hodeidah", *The National*, 8 June 2019.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior UAE official, Abu Dhabi, June 2019.

⁵⁶ "We have not seen a smoking gun" to assign blame, Crisis Group interview, UAE foreign ministry official, Abu Dhabi, June 2019. Crisis Group interview, UAE official, June 2019.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, and Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Abu Dhabi, July 2019.

⁵⁸ Trump said: "This resolution is an unnecessary, dangerous attempt to weaken my constitutional authorities, endangering the lives of American citizens and brave service members, both today and in the future". "Presidential Veto Message to the Senate to Accompany S.J. Res. 7", White House statement, 16 April 2019. See also "Trump vetoes resolution to end U.S. participation in Yemen's civil war", *Washington Post*, 16 April 2019. Members of Congress have different motivations, including continued anger over the Khashoggi murder, broader concern over the perceived recklessness of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and umbrage at the Trump administration's attempts to avoid Congressional oversight of arms sales. Deirdre Shesgreen, "Not the time to do business as usual' with Saudis: Senators to rebuke Trump over arms sales", *USA Today*, 5 June 2019; Karoun Demirjian, "Democrats Accuse Trump of Creating 'phony' emergency to secure arms deal with Saudis, UAE", *Washington Post*, 12 June 2019.

attempts may well fail but they are a stark reminder that the Saudi-led Yemen campaign is coming at a real and long-term political cost.⁵⁹ While much of congressional ire is directed at Saudi Arabia, the more the UAE is associated with the campaign, the more likely it too will be in the cross-hairs.

This does not mean that the UAE is ending its involvement in Yemen or even that the threat of an attack on Hodeida has receded entirely. The Emirates, as noted, remain heavily committed in the south. While it has significantly reduced its heavy equipment and direct ground participation, the UAE can still rely on its Yemeni allies to conduct the battle against the Huthis, and could potentially scale up its presence on the Red Sea coast again in the future.⁶⁰ It is not fully withdrawing, and it says it will retain its chain of command among Yemeni allies on the Red Sea coast.

⁵⁹ In June 2019, the administration invoked an emergency authority – citing the potential for conflict with Iran – to proceed with \$8.1 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan without review and over Congressional objections; while a bipartisan group of senators is attempting to push back, the president will almost certainly veto any legislation to block the sales. The Congressional Record identifies sales notified under the emergency provision as being for Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan (via a sale to the UAE). “Arms Sales Notification”, Congressional Record (online), 4 June 2019. PDF copy on file at Crisis Group. See also Catie Edmonson, “Senators look to force 22 votes blocking arms sales to Saudi Arabia”, *The New York Times*, 4 June 2019; Diana Ohlbaum and Rachel Stohl, “An ‘Emergency’ Arms Deal: Will Congress Acquiesce in Another Blow to its Authority?”, *Just Security*, 6 June 2019; and Scott Anderson, “Untangling the Yemen arms sales debate”, Lawfare blog, 14 June 2019.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, UAE officials, April-June 2019.

V. Scenarios to Avoid

Of all the scenarios for Yemen, the most likely entails a deteriorating status quo: continued stagnation in implementing the Stockholm Agreement, extension of the war inside and outside of Yemen, damaged UN credibility and effectiveness, and deepening Huthi dependence on Iran. Already, fighting has intensified in various areas of the country, such as al-Dhale in the south, and Hajja on the northern border, drawing some front-line forces away from Hodeida.⁶¹ This trend could well persist, worsening the situation for Yemen's civilian population.

Even in Hodeida itself there is reason for worry. Should the fragile ceasefire around Hodeida continue to erode, it could precipitate a low-intensity struggle for the city.⁶² Since the UAE's plans to draw down its own presence on the Red Sea coast, reports have emerged that Saudi Arabia plans to fill the vacuum while the Yemeni forces on the ground have moved to form their own command structures.⁶³ These forces could still attempt to seize Hodeida, perhaps encouraged by Saudi Arabia in the wake of a major Huthi attack on Saudi or UAE territory. If such an assault were to be initiated, the UAE could be drawn back into supporting it, at least with airpower.⁶⁴

Risks inherent in such an attack on Hodeida remain high. Even if the coalition and its Yemeni allies were to secure a victory without triggering a famine – an improbable outcome – there is no basis for believing that the loss of Hodeida would lead the Huthis to return to the negotiating table in a more pliable mood or abandon their relationship with Iran. More likely, the Huthis would dig in and continue the fight, with the more pragmatic wing of its leadership – those who backed the UN process – sidelined in favour of those who were sceptical of the talks from the start. If anything, the cost of a battle for Hodeida today would be even higher than it would have been pre-Stockholm. After months of Huthi preparations to defend the city, any fight now would last longer. This means that an ensuing famine would be more serious, given many months of lost imports through Hodeida and Salif, which cumulatively account for more than 50 per cent of all food entering the country.

But the gravest risk to the Stockholm Agreement, and indeed to the prospect of a comprehensive political settlement and to regional stability, may well be cross-border attacks between the Huthi and Saudi Arabia. In May, the Huthis publicly committed to an intensified military campaign, asserting they plan to attack 300 military installations in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen in response to the Saudi-imposed closure of Sanaa airport and a Saudi-led economic war that has seen them increasingly cut

⁶¹ The Giants Brigade deployed its 4th brigade, one of its most important fighting forces, to al-Dhale in May. Crisis Group interview, person with close ties to Giants Brigade leadership, June 2019.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, Abu Dhabi, June 2019. All of the forces around Hodeida have expressed a desire to push into the city and frustration with UN efforts to prevent this outcome. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°193, *How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine*, 21 November 2018.

⁶³ "Saudi Arabia moves to secure Yemen Red Sea ports after UAE drawdown", Reuters, 11 July; verified statement on file with Crisis Group, 9 July 2019.

⁶⁴ In Libya, the UAE appears to have been drawn into supporting its ally, Khalifa Haftar after he initiated an assault on Tripoli in April 2019, apparently against Emirati advice.

off from international trade and banking.⁶⁵ Stated motives aside, these attacks risk both dragging Yemen deeper into regional politics and triggering a broader regional conflagration.

The tempo of cross-border attacks has risen significantly. Since the May Aramco attack, the Huthis have claimed a series of drone strikes against what the group claims to be military sites in Saudi Arabia's southern province of Najran, repeatedly hitting Najran and Abha airports. Dozens of civilians have been injured so far, and one killed.⁶⁶ In June, the Huthis alleged they had seized twenty positions inside Saudi Arabia after a surprise offensive.⁶⁷ Saudi Arabia too has stepped up its air war, including with strikes on Sanaa that have had a devastating effect on the civilian population.⁶⁸ The danger inherent in such an escalatory cycle is clear: another successful Huthi attack on a Saudi target such as Khamis Mushayt could prompt direct retaliation by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia against Iran.⁶⁹ Such a counterstrike could also take place in Yemen, drawing the U.S. more deeply and overtly into the conflict.

At the heart of the matter is the issue of the Huthis' relations with Tehran. There is little doubt that Iran has armed and trained the rebel group, and that their ties have only grown as the war progressed. It likewise is entirely plausible that, as U.S. sanctions have tightened and Iran has found itself under growing pressure, Tehran encouraged the Huthis to step up their offensive against Saudi Arabia. Still, the Huthis have an agenda of their own. They have long believed the conflict will end only through direct talks with Riyadh, see military pressure on Saudi Arabia as an important point of leverage in bringing about these discussions, and feel they must respond to Riyadh's economic and military pressure.⁷⁰ An Iranian greenlight or encouragement might have helped, just as a strong signal by the Islamic Republic warning against such attacks might have deterred the Huthis. But they had plenty of reasons of their own for stepping up their offensive against their northern neighbour.

This is a highly risky gambit. Just as Saudi Arabia's overreliance on military pressure has had the opposite of its intended effect – the Huthis have developed a vice-like grip on the territory they control and have become increasingly dependent on Iranian support – the Huthis' cross-border escalation risks undermining their chances of reaching a political settlement with Saudi Arabia.

If the war in Yemen has the potential to provoke a wider regional confrontation, so too might regional developments have a perilous knock-on effect on the Yemen war. Iranian officials say that they expect their regional allies, including the Huthis, to come to their support if tensions boil over and there is a U.S.-led attack on Iranian

⁶⁵ For the 300 attacks claim, see "Yemen's Houthis strike Saudi utility station, coalition responds", Reuters, 19 June 2019. The Huthis justified their attacks in interviews with Crisis Group, May-June 2019. Although the Huthis have not given a timeline for the attacks, given their claim of 23 attacks over the course of June, such a campaign would take around a year at its current pace.

⁶⁶ "Yemen war: Civilian killed in Houthi attack on Saudi airport", BBC News, 24 June 2019.

⁶⁷ "Yemen's Houthis claim seizing 20 positions in Saudi Arabia", Al-Jazeera, 5 June 2019.

⁶⁸ After declining each month from December 2018 onwards, the total number of Saudi airstrikes increased again in May 2019. See "Yemen Data Project Air Raids Summary for May 2019", 6 June 2019.

⁶⁹ A senior Saudi official said: "If a country ordered its proxy to fire a missile at Washington, what would the U.S. do? Why should we act any differently?" Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, May 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, November 2015; New York, May 2019.

territory.⁷¹ Huthi officials themselves have warned of a “great war” in the region in which they say they would join the side of the Iran-led “Axis of Resistance”, if the Yemen war is not over by then.⁷² It is hard to see how the Huthis, not to mention the Yemeni people as a whole, would benefit.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Iranian official, Beirut, May 2019.

⁷² In an 18 May Facebook post Mohammed al-Bukaiti, a member of the Huthi politburo, wrote: “The great war between the coalition states, represented by America, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and the axis of resistance, represented by Yemen, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, has begun to loom on the horizon and the people of the region are ready to begin”. Other Huthi officials have made similar statements and Yemenis with close ties to the organisation say that this is representative of internal thinking. Others say that a regional war could help break the stalemate in Yemen. Crisis Group interviews, two individuals close to the Huthi movement, May-June 2019.

VI. A Better Approach

As regional tensions rise and with Yemen a possible trigger for a broader conflagration, there is an urgent need for international involvement. Two parallel efforts are required, the first focused on saving the Stockholm Agreement, the second on halting cross-border attacks between the Huthi and Saudi Arabia. International actors, notably the UN Security Council's permanent members, ought to seize the initiative, revive their active support for UN-led mediation, and pressure the parties to de-escalate.

On the first track, negotiators should pursue a compromise that allows the parties to move beyond the Stockholm Agreement and beyond Hodeida to focus on a broader political settlement. This would entail establishing minimum, mutually agreed requirements for the agreement's implementation. Given disagreements between the sides, this likely would mean a more limited short-term understanding of what needs to happen in Hodeida, leaving negotiations over implementing the rest of the agreement to proceed as a subset of, or parallel to, broader peace talks.

After seven months, it has become clear that demilitarising the city and ports is not solely a technical but also a political issue. In mid-July, members of the RCC met on a UN-operated ship off the coast of Hodeida and finalised a technical plan for re-deployments.⁷³ But the most contentious issue, which the Stockholm Agreement left relatively vague, concerns the identity of local security forces, which is tied to the question of sovereignty. The RCC members did not and cannot resolve this issue. As noted, the UN mediators sought to sidestep that question, explicitly stating that identity of local security forces was without prejudice to the matter of ultimate sovereignty. But the government now rejects that outcome, and after months of wrangling, they are unlikely to agree on a comprehensive solution on local security forces in the short term.

That said, with international backing, a partial stop-gap solution for all or part of Hodeida city might still be achievable. For example, the parties could agree that, as a means of pivoting to broader peace talks, the two sides would implement the first phase of redeployments already under discussion – the three ports and the part of the city critical to humanitarian access – leaving the second phase (which focuses on the rest of the city) for later. Implementing phase one does not require a comprehensive agreement on local security forces. But it does entail agreement on a tripartite monitoring mechanism involving the Huthis, Yemeni government and UN, as well as agreement on the identity of local security forces in the phase one areas, and a plan for how to deal with revenues from the ports.

As part of such a compromise, those areas would be secured neither by pre-2014 forces (the government's stated position) nor by the forces that are there today (the Huthis' implicit view). Instead, the UN could vet current local security forces to ensure they are professionally trained personnel and that their senior commanders held rank within the military and security services before 2014. A limited agreement like this may be easier for both parties to accept as it deals with a small subset of the city's security forces and a limited part of the city, making UN vetting more feasible

⁷³ "Hodeidah meetings end without breakthrough", *Asharq al-Awsat*, 16 July 2019.

and avoiding perceptions that it is a comprehensive, final plan. The Huthis, who are concerned that a gap between implementing phases one and two will leave the ports vulnerable to attack from forces that would still be positioned north of the city after phase one redeployments, need assurances from the P5 that implementing phase one would not lead the government to pursue a military advantage. It may be easier to convince the Huthis of this now that the UAE has partially withdrawn from the Red Sea coast front.

To convince the parties, the UN will need robust diplomatic assistance. The P5 have in the past demonstrated they could be effective when working together on Yemen;⁷⁴ more recently, they seemed to find agreement on 10 June when the Security Council issued a statement backing Griffiths, calling for the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement and a political solution to the war.⁷⁵ Such expressions of international consensus now ought to be backed up with concrete action.⁷⁶ Specifically, the P5 could set up a contact group at both the ambassadorial and the ministry level to work alongside the special envoy, comprising, in addition to them, the EU and possibly Oman in supporting roles, along with other states acceptable to both. Enlisting the P5 would be important given the mistrust the Huthis feel toward the Quad – the group composed of the U.S., UK, Saudi Arabia and UAE that presently purports to take a leading role in multilateral efforts to end the war. By contrast, they likely would feel more comfortable with Russia and China in the mix.

The second track, aimed at military de-escalation between Saudi Arabia and the Huthis, should pursue a mutual freeze: a halt in Huthi cross-border attacks in exchange for a pause or significant reduction in Saudi airstrikes against Huthi targets. This would require direct engagement between the two parties, including in all likelihood face-to-face meetings between senior Huthi and Saudi officials.

The Huthis previously signalled interest in such a deal; Saudi officials have resisted it, on two grounds. First, at a practical level, they argue that this would give the Huthis too great an advantage in their battle against less capable government forces.⁷⁷ Second, they reject any equivalency between the actions of a non-state actor threatening a sovereign state and those of a state responding to the legitimate invitation of the Yemeni government. Many other obstacles stand in the way: the Huthis might not agree to anything less than a full halt in Saudi airstrikes, which Riyadh might reject and more hard-line Huthi elements might act as spoilers and resist such a de-escalation.

⁷⁴ P5 ambassadors in Yemen worked together in support of UN mediation in 2011. See Rebecca Brubaker, *Things Fall Apart: Holding the Centre Together During Yemen's 2011 Popular Uprising*, UN University Centre for Policy Research, 2018. During Yemen's 2012-2014 transitional period, the P5 formed the core of a contact group of embassies that worked together to support the UN-led process that later expanded to include 18 foreign missions. During a period of diplomatic tensions over Syria and other crises in 2018, senior P5 officials identified Yemen as a potential area for cooperation and, barring a spat between the U.S. and the UK in December 2018 over the wording of a Security Council resolution, they have generally worked closely together on this issue. Crisis Group interviews, western and other diplomats, December 2018-June 2019.

⁷⁵ "Security Council Press Statement on Yemen", UN website, 10 June 2019.

⁷⁶ Crisis group interviews, New York, May 2019.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi negotiator, May 2019; Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019.

But potential benefits to the kingdom are significant. At a time of rising tensions with Iran, Riyadh might see an advantage in neutralising a front that has offered Tehran a low-cost, high-yield opportunity to bleed its regional rival. An understanding between the kingdom and the Huthis would lessen the rebel group's dependence on Iran and could trigger tensions between those who are more and those who are less beholden to the Islamic Republic.

While not a substitute for Yemen-Yemeni talks, mutual de-escalation could pave the way for broader discussions of issues at the core of the Saudi-Huthi relationship: border security, the Huthis' access to heavy weapons and the nature of their relationship with Iran. Huthi officials assert they are open to discussing these matters and claim they are ready to address legitimate Saudi concerns; indeed, they say that, for reasons of geographic proximity, their most important long-term relationship must be with Riyadh, not Tehran and that their current posture is a function of the ongoing war, not an inherent affinity to the Islamic Republic.⁷⁸

Saudi-Huthi channels are nothing new; they have existed for some time and, according to Saudi officials, exist in some form to this day. But Riyadh till now has taken the position that, in order for it to take these contacts seriously, the rebel movement must demonstrate its goodwill upfront – whether in the form of a unilateral cessation of cross-border strikes or a gesture signalling willingness to distance itself from Iran.⁷⁹ Those are unlikely to happen as a precondition for meaningful talks; if they are to occur at all, however, it could be as one of their early outcomes.⁸⁰

To overcome Saudi hesitation, the U.S. could play a leading role by both encouraging and reassuring Riyadh as well as by resuming their own contacts with the Huthis to help choreograph the two sides' mutual steps. In the Huthis' mind, the U.S. is the party most capable of influencing Saudi Arabia; they therefore likely would be willing to accept a U.S. role in the discussions.⁸¹ Of course, Washington cannot do this alone insofar as it is viewed by the Huthis as a biased interlocutor; it must team up with the UN and possibly Oman in shepherding the talks and helping both sides follow through on any commitments they make.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporters, May 2019.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Saudi officials, Riyadh, March 2019.

⁸⁰ Although the Huthi leadership might be willing to be first in initiating a halt to cross-border attacks, such a position would be unsustainable if Saudi Arabia strikes against Huthi targets in the capital or in their stronghold of Saada continued unabated.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representatives, March and July 2019.

VII. Conclusion

The sense of urgency that seized the U.S. and others between October and December 2018 has faded, but the importance of ending the Yemen war has not. Yemen increasingly has become hostage to regional tensions while regional stability is increasingly a function of what happens in Yemen. For those reasons alone, international actors should make it a priority to safeguard the Stockholm Agreement; use it to pivot to more comprehensive political talks; and firewall, as much as possible, what happens in Yemen from what is happening between Iran on the one hand and the U.S. and its Gulf allies on the other.

Time is of the essence. The threat of an attack on Hodeida has receded for now, but every day that passes without progress in implementing the Stockholm Agreement gives that threat new life. And each time a Huthi drone or missile reaches Saudi soil, the risk of a broader regional confrontation grows commensurately. Both outcomes would be tragic, but both can still be averted.

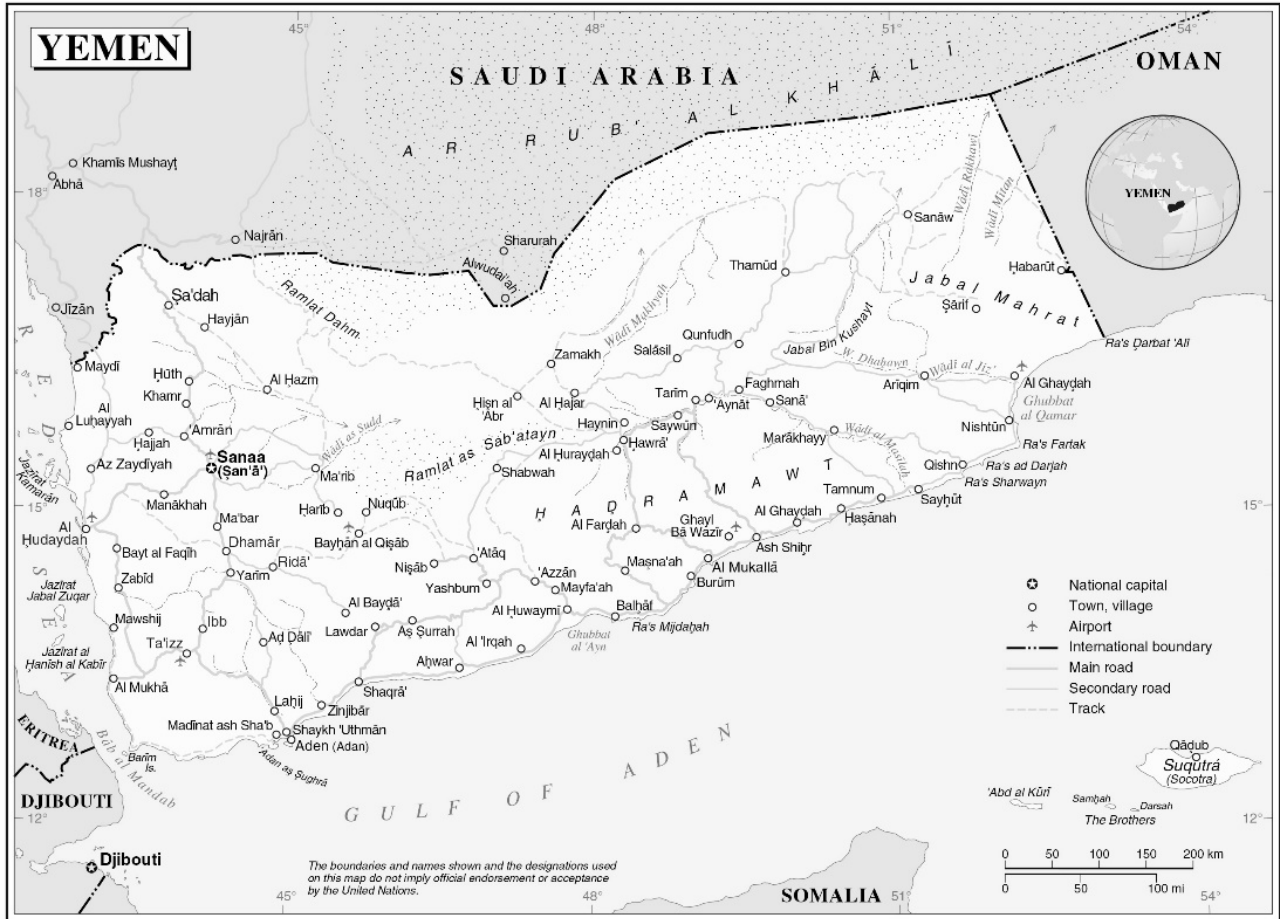
Yemen/New York/Washington/Brussels, 18 July 2019

Appendix A: Agreement on the City of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa

The parties reached an agreement on the following:

- An immediate cease-fire shall enter into force in the city of Hodeidah, the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa and the governorate upon signature of this agreement.
- A mutual redeployment of forces shall be carried out from the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa to agreed upon locations outside the city and the ports.
- The parties shall be committed not to bring any military reinforcements to the city, the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa, and the governorate.
- The parties shall be committed to remove any military manifestations from the city.
- A joint and agreed upon Redeployment Coordination Committee chaired by the United Nations and comprised of, but not limited to, members of the parties shall be established to oversee the cease-fire and the re-deployment.
- The Redeployment Coordination Committee shall supervise the re-deployment and monitoring operations and it shall also oversee the de-mining operations in the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa.
- The Chairman of the Redeployment Coordination Committee will report on a weekly basis to the Security Council through the Secretary General on the compliance of the parties to the terms of the agreement.
- A UN leading role in supporting Yemen Red Sea Ports Corporation in management and inspections at the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras al-Isa, to include enhanced UNVIM monitoring in the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa .
- A strengthened UN presence in the city of Hodeidah and Ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Isa.
- The parties shall be committed to facilitate and support the work of the United Nations in Hodeidah.
- Parties shall facilitate the freedom of movement of civilians and goods from and to the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa and the delivery of humanitarian aid through the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa.
- Revenues of the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa shall be channeled to the Central Bank of Yemen through its branch in Hodeidah as a contribution to the payment of salaries in the governorate of Hodeidah and throughout Yemen.
- Security of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa shall be the responsibility of local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law. Legal lines of authority shall be respected and any obstructions to proper functioning of local state institutions, including supervisors, shall be removed.
- This Agreement shall not be considered a precedent to be referred to in any subsequent consultations or negotiations. This agreement shall be implemented in phases, the details of which will be determined by the Redeployment Coordination Committee. The redeployment from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa and critical parts of the city associated with the humanitarian facilities shall be the first phase and it shall be completed within two weeks after the cease-fire enters into force. The full mutual redeployment of all forces from the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa shall be completed within a maximum period of 21 days after the cease-fire enters into force.

Appendix B: Map of Yemen



Map No. 3847 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
 January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
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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.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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Appendix D: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2016

Special Reports and Briefings

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.

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

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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).

Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

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

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

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

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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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Post-Bouteflika Algeria: Growing Protests, Signs of Repression, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°68, 26 April 2019 (also available in French and Arabic).

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On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

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