

## **YEMEN: DEFUSING THE SAADA TIME BOMB**

Middle East Report N°86 – 27 May 2009

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>II. ROOTS OF WAR.....</b>	<b>5</b>
A. WHO ARE THE HUTHIS?.....	5
B. A BROKEN EQUILIBRIUM .....	6
C. A CRISIS WITHIN ZAYDISM.....	7
<b>III. COMPETING NARRATIVES.....</b>	<b>10</b>
A. THE STATE’S NARRATIVE .....	10
B. THE HUTHI AND ZAYDI REVIVALIST NARRATIVE.....	12
<b>IV. A METASTASISING CONFLICT.....</b>	<b>13</b>
A. ACCUMULATING GRIEVANCES AND GROWING TRIBAL INVOLVEMENT.....	13
B. A WAR OF SUCCESSION? .....	15
C. RISE OF A WAR ECONOMY .....	15
D. PERCEIVED FOREIGN MEDDLING .....	17
E. WESTERN SILENCE .....	18
<b>V. MEDIATION ATTEMPTS .....</b>	<b>19</b>
A. TRIBAL AND POLITICAL MEDIATION COMMITTEES.....	19
B. QATAR’S MEDIATION .....	21
C. RECONSTRUCTION COMMITTEES.....	22
<b>VI. BUILDING A LASTING PEACE .....</b>	<b>25</b>
A. BRIDGING THE SECTARIAN GAP .....	25
B. REINTEGRATING THE HUTHIS INTO POLITICS.....	25
C. ENCOURAGING CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES .....	26
D. A NEW INTERNATIONAL ROLE.....	27
<b>VII. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A. MAP OF YEMEN .....	29
B. YEMEN WITH GOVERNORATES AND CITIES .....	30
C. SAADA GOVERNORATE DISTRICTS MAP .....	31

## YEMEN: DEFUSING THE SAADA TIME BOMB

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Away from media headlines, a war has been raging on and off in Yemen's northern governorate of Saada since 2004, flaring up in adjacent regions and, in 2008, reaching the outskirts of the capital, Sanaa. The conflict, which has brought about extensive destruction, pits a rebel group, known generically as the Huthis, against government forces. Today's truce is fragile and risks being short-lived. A breakdown would threaten Yemen's stability, already under severe duress due to the global economic meltdown, depleting national resources, renewed tensions between the country's northern elites and populations in the south and the threat from violent groups with varied links to al-Qaeda. Nor would the impact necessarily be contained within national borders. The country should use its traditional instruments – social and religious tolerance, cooptation of adversaries – to forge a more inclusive compact that reduces sectarian stigmatisation and absorbs the Huthis. International actors – principally Gulf states and the West – should use their leverage and the promise of reconstruction assistance to press both government and rebels to compromise.

After two decades of relative stability that confounded foreign diplomats and analysts alike, the convergence of economic, political and secessionist challenges are testing the regime's coping capacity. The Saada conflict might not be the most covered internationally, but it carries grave risks for Yemen's political, sectarian and social equilibrium.

The war began as a quasi-police operation to arrest a former parliament member, Husein al-Huthi. Over five rounds, it has grown several-fold and become increasingly complex and multilayered. As mutual grievances accumulated and casualties mounted, the conflict metastasised, bringing in ever-growing numbers of actors, including local tribes and other members of the Saada population, covering a widening area and involving foreign actors under the backdrop of a regional cold war. It has violated two fundamental pillars of Yemen's stability: a political formula premised on power-sharing and the gradual convergence of the two principal sectarian identities, Zaydism – a form of Shiism that in rites and practices is closer to Sunnism

than to the Twelver Shiism predominant in Iran and Iraq – and Shafei Sunnism.

The war expanded because it became a microcosm of a series of latent religious, social, political and economic tensions. It can be traced to the decline of the social stratum led by Hashemites, who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, and legitimised by Zaydism; lack of investment in Zaydi strongholds like Saada; failed management of religious pluralism; permeability to external influences and the emergence of new political and religious actors, particularly Salafis. It has variously and at times simultaneously taken the shape of a sectarian, political or tribal conflict, rooted in historical grievances and endemic underdevelopment. It also has been shaped by the regional confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The 1962 revolution ended the imamate that Zaydi Hashemites ruled for over 1,000 years and overturned a social order with which they had been intimately associated. During the civil war that followed, Saada was the main opposition stronghold. Since then, the region has been largely ignored and marginalised. The religious dimension, long successfully managed, has resurfaced. Although differing on a number of theological and political issues, Zaydism and Shafeism are relatively close within the doctrinal spectrum. Over the last several decades, the gulf further narrowed, thanks partly to state educational efforts, and Yemen enjoyed cross-sectarian harmony. But a core of Zaydi revivalists remained, including the Huthis, who fought to retain Zaydism's theology and symbolic rituals. Their cause was energised by the spread of Salafi influence, mainly from Saudi Arabia, and their sense that Zaydism was besieged. Some former rulers and Zaydi revivalists view the republic as fundamentally anti-Hashemite and anti-Zaydi.

There is a foreign dimension too, though it is hard to evaluate. As the government accuses the rebels of alignment with Iran and of loyalty to the Lebanese Hizbollah, Huthi leaders denounce its alignment with the U.S. They also claim Saudi interference, in particular funding of government and local tribes.

If history has left scars, the war aggravated them. The destruction of entire villages and infrastructure by army shelling, air bombardment and indiscriminate military and police violence exacerbated grievances among not only Hashemites generally and Zaydi revivalists in particular but, more broadly, civilians in all northern governorates. The rebels fuel anger by brutal acts, looting and kidnapping. Growing involvement of tribal militias beside government or rebel forces further inflames the conflict and contributes to its endurance. Competing tribes and their leaders vie for positions and resources; as some groups are marginalised, others receive government help in exchange for fighting the insurgents.

The conflict has become self-perpetuating, giving rise to a war economy as tribes, army officers and state officials have seized the opportunity to control the porous border with Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea coastline. Tribal leaders and senior officials have amassed military hardware and profit from illegal sales of army stockpiles. Continued operations have justified increased military budgets without government or independent oversight. As competition over resources intensified, the benefits of war exceeded its drawbacks – at least for the elites involved.

With only some exceptions, the international community has not recognised the Saada conflict's destabilising potential or pressured the government to shift course. That is partly related to the West's single-minded focus on Yemen's struggle with al-Qaeda and the regime's adroit portrayal of the Huthis as a subset of the so-called war on terror. It also is related to the regime's denial of access to Saada to many if not most governments and humanitarian agencies.

Fighting ebbed as the government announced a unilateral ceasefire in July 2008. But it is far more likely a pause than an end. Observers and actors alike expect new violence; early months of this year already have witnessed recurrent localised fighting. There is no clear agreement between parties, accumulated grievances remain largely unaddressed, tensions run high, skirmishes persist and few principal belligerents appear willing to compromise. Internal mediation has repeatedly failed, as did Qatar's well-intentioned endeavour.

But renewed war is not preordained. Local, national and international actors can do much to set the stage for durable peace. There is every reason to proactively intervene before more damage is done and to build on core Yemeni assets: a tradition of compromise between political, social and religious groups and the state's tendency to coopt ex-foes. International help should be multilateral, involving Western and regional countries ready to exert diplomatic pressure, mediate

and, most importantly, pledge reconstruction assistance as an incentive for peace. In duration and intensity, destruction, casualties, sectarian stigmatisation and regional dimension, the Saada conflict stands apart from other violent episodes in Yemen. It will need more than run-of-the-mill domestic and international efforts to end it.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the Government of Yemen and rebel leaders:

1. Take immediate steps to prevent renewed warfare by:
  - a) engaging in direct talks;
  - b) agreeing to a mediation and reconstruction committee comprising government officials, rebel representatives and international actors (such as donor governments and international organisations);
  - c) assisting in the safe return of those displaced during the war; and
  - d) granting access to war-affected regions to diplomats, journalists, and humanitarian and human rights organisations.

### To the Government of Yemen:

2. Address population and rebel grievances by:
  - a) conducting a damage survey in war-affected areas with the assistance of independent national and international experts to facilitate compensation and reconstruction;
  - b) jump-starting development in Saada governorate and other war-affected zones;
  - c) halting recruitment and deployment of tribal or other militias; and
  - d) releasing persons detained in the context of the war, declaring an amnesty for insurgents and halting summary detentions of journalists, human rights activists and independent researchers.
3. Reduce sectarian and other social tensions by:
  - a) promoting and facilitating inter-sectarian dialogue and exchange, including by fostering Zaydi participation in public debate; and
  - b) condemning the stigmatisation of the Hashemite identity and facilitating the entry of qualified Hashemites into state institutions.

**To rebel leaders:**

4. Release government soldiers and other persons detained in the context of the war.
5. Articulate political demands and publish a political program as a step toward becoming a political movement or party.
6. Endorse clearly government sovereignty in Saada governorate and other districts with a rebel presence.

**To civil society organisations:**

7. Support and participate in mediation, damage-assessment and reconstruction efforts in war-affected regions.
8. Promote dialogue between the government and insurgent leaders.

**To Western donor governments:**

9. Pressure both sides to end the conflict and participate in mediation efforts.
10. Insist on full access to war-affected regions for diplomats, journalists, and humanitarian and human rights organisations.
11. Pledge reconstruction assistance for the development of Saada governorate as an incentive to reach a durable peace agreement.

**To regional countries:**

12. Pledge diplomatic support as well as development and reconstruction assistance to war-affected areas.
13. Condemn and refrain from any military or financial assistance to parties in conflict, including tribes or armed militias.

**Sanaa/Brussels, 27 May 2009**

## YEMEN: DEFUSING THE SAADA TIME BOMB

### I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, diplomats and analysts regularly have described Yemen as on the verge of explosion. To their surprise, the country for the most part has remained stable, avoiding large-scale violence and managing multiple crises at once, including unification of North and South in 1990, reabsorption of around one quarter of the workforce when Yemeni migrant workers faced eviction from Gulf states in 1991, the former South Yemen's secession attempt in 1994 and, since 2000, the battle against al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

That era appears to be drawing to a close. Yemen currently confronts simultaneous political and social crises made all the more serious by the global financial meltdown. Increasing domestic repression under cover of an anti-terrorism campaign reflects growing state insecurity; meanwhile, massive protests are occurring in what once was South Yemen, where secessionist sentiment is on the rise.<sup>1</sup> Finally, there is the Saada conflict, which the government has been singularly unable to end. Each of these developments is a reason for worry in a country that, a mere decade ago, was engaged in a promising and remarkable democratisation process. Of all, the Saada war between the army and a rebel group calling itself the Believing Youth (al-Shabab al-Mumin) is the most dangerous and deadly.

A mountainous governorate in north-western Yemen that borders Saudi Arabia, Saada has been the scene of a brutal armed conflict since June 2004 that has resulted in thousands of casualties and enormous destruction. The war has the potential to spread to surrounding regions, particularly Amran, al-Jawf, Marib and Hajja.

---

<sup>1</sup>As protests grew more intense, security forces responded with greater repression. In April 2009, protests in Radfan led to the deaths of eight people. Rising tensions led the government to temporarily close seven newspapers, including the popular *al-Ayyam* daily. See *The New York Times*, 4 May 2009, and Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni national unity: Could lingering regional divisions bring down the regime?", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2008).

The rebel movement, first headed by Husein al-Huthi, a former parliament member, and, after his death, by his kin, is part of a larger, highly diverse Zaydi revivalist group.<sup>2</sup> Members of the Huthi family claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad and thus consider themselves *sayyids* or Hashemites.<sup>3</sup> Until the 1962 revolution in North Yemen that ended the Zaydi imamate and led to the establishment of a republic, Hashemites had dominated both political and religious spheres; during that period, North Yemen's rulers (imams) were exclusively Hashemite.<sup>4</sup> Today, the demoted Huthi family purports to defend Zaydi identity from dilution in a wider Sunni Islamic identity; it also mobilises support through an anti-U.S, anti-Israel and, at times, anti-Jewish platform. The government

---

<sup>2</sup>Zaydism is a branch of Shiism distinct from Jaafarism (Twelver Shiism, which dominates in contemporary Iran, Iraq and Bahrain and is present in, inter alia, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia). Zaydism first took root in Mesopotamia and Central Asia in 740 but gradually moved south, where it reached Yemen. The sect's religious elites claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad and ruled North Yemeni territory under the imamate until the 1962 revolution. Since then, Zaydism has been in crisis. Zaydis reportedly represent approximately one third of Yemen's estimated 25 million citizens, the majority of whom are Shafeis, ie, members of one of the four traditional schools of Sunni jurisprudence (*madhhab*), which is also dominant in, for example, Egypt. Zaydis are based in the north-western highlands, with their main strongholds in Saada, Hajja and Dhamar, as well as Yemen's capital, Sanaa.

<sup>3</sup>Hashemites are descendants of the Prophet's clan; members of the Huthi family hail from a different branch than the contemporary Jordanian royal family. Not all Yemeni Hashemites are Zaydis; indeed, some are Sunni. That said, throughout this report and unless otherwise specified, the term Hashemite will refer only to its Zaydi members.

<sup>4</sup>North and South Yemen united on 22 May 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen. Until then, the two entities' trajectories had remained separate. The North, which comprises roughly three quarters of the population, achieved formal independence in 1918 following the Ottoman Empire's demise. It was ruled by Zaydi imams until the 1962 revolution, which gave rise to the Yemen Arab Republic. The South, colonised by Great Britain since 1838, gained independence in 1967. In 1970 it became the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a socialist state and Soviet ally. See Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge, 2000).

accuses it of receiving Iranian support and seeking to restore the imamate, though there is no hard evidence.

The conflict reportedly was triggered when, in January 2003, Believing Youth militants shouted “God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!”<sup>5</sup> in a Saada mosque in President Ali Abdallah Salih’s presence.<sup>6</sup> After failed reconciliation attempts between Salih and Husein al-Huthi as well as continued demonstrations – including in the capital city’s Grand Mosque – the government in June 2004 sought to arrest al-Huthi in his stronghold in Saada’s Haydan district. Fighting ensued, persisting until security forces killed al-Huthi on 10 September 2004.<sup>7</sup>

That death did not end the conflict. Instead, the war experienced four additional rounds, each centred in Saada governorate, more intense than its predecessor and with low-level fighting continuing in between. Most affected was Haydan district, southwest of Saada city. Some zones remained under rebel control even after the fifth round.

During the first round, which lasted from 18 June to 10 September 2004, fighting took place chiefly in the Marran Mountains, around 30km south west of Saada city, where Husein al-Huthi had taken refuge. From the outset, the government and its media accused the Believing Youth of allegiance to the Lebanon-based movement Hizbollah and Iran and of aiming to restore the Zaydi imamate.<sup>8</sup> Al-Huthi denied the allegations

in a 26 June 2004 open letter in which he asserted loyalty to the president and the republic. He claimed his differences stemmed solely from the government’s pro-U.S. stance and Saudi policy in Yemen.<sup>9</sup> Following al-Huthi’s death, the government declared a unilateral end to the fighting. However, most issues were left unresolved, including both longstanding grievances and newly created ones, such as prisoners held by both sides.

The second round, which took place between March and May 2005, began with a series of accusations and counter-accusations. The government charged Husein’s father, Badr al-Din al-Huthi, and Abdallah al-Ruzami, a former parliament member, of seeking to resume the insurgency. Badr al-Din criticised Salih’s unwillingness to end the conflict and argued that Husein’s objective merely had been to defend Islam.<sup>10</sup> Salih accused the opposition and particularly its two Zaydi-based parties, al-Haqq (of which Husein al-Huthi and Abdallah al-Ruzami were former members) and the Union of Popular Forces (Ittihad al-Qiwa al-Shaabiyah), of supporting the rebels.<sup>11</sup> The government began portraying the Huthis as terrorists responsible for small-scale attacks against officials and soldiers in Sanaa and claimed they had planned to kidnap foreign ambassadors.<sup>12</sup> The ensuing clashes were heaviest north and west of Saada, in Majz, Sahar and Baqim districts, where the rebels found support, and mountainous terrain slowed the army’s advance.

Although the government claimed victory and announced an end to operations in May 2005, low-intensity fighting continued. This eventually prompted a third round, which raged from late 2005 until early 2006. It started as a confrontation between pro-government tribesmen (some belonging to Sheikh Abdallah al-Awjari’s Hamdan tribe) and tribal fighters supporting the rebels, suggesting that tribal feuds gradually were growing in importance. The fighting also saw the emergence of Husein al-Huthi’s brothers, Abd-al-Malik and Yahya, as new rebel leaders.<sup>13</sup> The government faced strong pressure to settle the conflict before the September 2006 presidential and local elections, even if only tempo-

---

<sup>5</sup>“Allahu akbar! Al-mawt li-Amrika! Al-mawt li-Israil! Al-laana ala al-yahud! Al-nasr lil-Islam!” On the slogans and their origin, see *Al-Balagh* (Sanaa weekly of Zaydi orientation), 10 March 2009.

<sup>6</sup>Crisis Group interview, official of the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC) and member of the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shura*, second legislative chamber, whose members are appointed by the president), Sanaa, 12 January 2009. In a July 2004 speech, President Salih explained that while the slogans themselves were not a problem, insofar as he also frequently criticised U.S. and Israeli foreign policies, they harmed national interests. *26 September* (Sanaa weekly published by the armed forces), 15 July 2004.

<sup>7</sup>Iris Glosemeyer, “Local Conflict, Global Spin: An Uprising in the Yemeni Highlands”, *Middle East Report*, no. 232 (September 2004).

<sup>8</sup>Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence and former interior minister (until 2008), Sanaa, 11 January 2009. President Salih accused the rebels of raising Hizbollah’s yellow flag rather than Yemen’s republican one. Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago, 2008), pp. 153-157. Official media levied similar accusations. See Shaun Overton, “Understanding the Second Houthi Rebellion in Yemen”, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 12 (June 2005).

<sup>9</sup>In July, Huthi leaders accused the Saudi air force of bombing villages to support the Yemeni army, a charge Riyadh denied. Andrew McGregor, “Shi’ite Insurgency in Yemen: Iranian Intervention or Mountain Revolt?”, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 16 (August 2004).

<sup>10</sup>*Al-Wasat* (Sanaa weekly), 9 March 2005.

<sup>11</sup>*Al-Ahram Weekly* (Egyptian weekly), 19 May 2005.

<sup>12</sup>Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>13</sup>Yahya al-Huthi is also a parliament member from the ruling General People’s Congress (GPC). He was a mediator during the war’s first round.

rarily. It released prisoners (including one of Husein al-Huthi's other brothers), and the president named a new Saada governor, Yahya al-Shami, considered more accommodating than his predecessor. These steps, which indicated government willingness to find a peaceful solution, led to the conflict's temporary suspension.

According to the government and its tribal allies, the fourth round (February-June 2007) was sparked by Huthi threats against the al-Salem Jewish community in Saada, an allegation the Huthis deny.<sup>14</sup> Fighting picked up and spread to different districts, including outside Saada governorate, as the government sought new recruits and encouraged involvement by tribesmen and militants from other regions.

The round ended with the help of Qatari mediation. During a May 2007 visit to Yemen, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Emir of Qatar, pledged his country's financial support for the reconstruction of much of Saada governorate if the parties ended the war. On 16 June, government and rebels reached a ceasefire. Despite sporadic clashes, they signed a formal agreement in Doha on 2 February 2008.

It was not to last. The government accused Huthi militants of violating the agreement by two violent attacks, though Huthis rejected the claim.<sup>15</sup> Fighting spread to the Bani Hushaysh area, north of Sanaa, where it drew in the Republican Guards headed by the president's son, Ahmad Ali Salih. Heavy fighting also occurred in Saada city and in the northern part of Amran governorate. Militias affiliated with the Hashid tribal confederation fought alongside the national army, both allegedly financed by Saudi Arabia. On 17 July 2008, the 30th anniversary of his rule, the president announced a unilateral ceasefire which is variously attributed to his fear that the situation could spin out of control, domestic mediation or heightened U.S. and EU criticism of the humanitarian situation in Saada governorate.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> *Al-Quds al-Arabi* (pan-Arab daily published in London), 22 January 2007, and Marib Press (independent information website), 25 January 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Al-Thawri* (Yemeni Socialist Party weekly), 31 July 2008. The first was the April 2008 assassination of Salih al-Hindi, a GPC parliament member from Saada governorate. Al-Jazeera International website, 19 April 2008. The second was the 2 May attack against Saada's Bin Salman Mosque, which killed eighteen people, including six military officers. *Al-Wasat*, 7 May 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009; Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 17 January 2009; and Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009.

Fighting may have stopped, but it is far more likely a pause than an end. Actors on all sides expect violence to resume and a sixth round to begin in coming weeks or months. Since March 2009, tensions have been mounting and clashes repeatedly have occurred between army and rebels. There is no clear agreement between the parties, accumulated grievances remain largely unaddressed, skirmishes persist,<sup>17</sup> and few of the principal belligerents appear willing to compromise.<sup>18</sup>

While the war by and large is localised and at comparatively low levels, important spikes of violence have occurred, including air bombardments. Videos released on the internet by the rebels and human rights organisations suggest widespread destruction of homes, schools and mosques. International human rights organisations have noted with alarm the existence of a dire humanitarian situation that includes high numbers of internally displaced – some 130,000 by mid-2008, although most are likely to have returned to their villages after the July ceasefire – as well as indiscriminate, extrajudicial detentions, especially of Hashemites and people from Saada.<sup>19</sup> Government officials deny their forces target civilians or forcibly displace them based on ethnic, tribal or religious background.<sup>20</sup> Others say the rebels, too, are guilty of human rights violations, including use of child soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Unless corrective action is taken rapidly, a sixth and more deadly round is likely.

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, six soldiers were killed in clashes with Huthi militants in Ghamir district (45km west of Saada city) in early March 2009. Sahwa.net (information website of the Al-Islah party), 8 March 2009. Information on such clashes, which have been frequent even in times of "peace", is scarce and often confusing due to a dearth of independent reporting. The identity of those involved and their links to either government or rebels is uncertain. Both sides at times have claimed that tribal feuds in fact were related to the Saada conflict.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa, January-March 2009. A Zaydi scholar said, "the state wants war and so do the Huthis". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 17 January 2009.

<sup>19</sup> "Invisible Civilians: The Challenge of Humanitarian Access in Yemen's Forgotten War", Human Rights Watch, November 2008, [www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/11/18/invisible-civilians-0](http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/11/18/invisible-civilians-0).

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, director of the Bureau of National Security and presidential office, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Uthman al-Majali, GPC parliament member from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 12 January 2009; representative of international humanitarian NGO, Paris, 28 January 2009. Underage recruitment by the government is standard practice, and the military allegedly has used child soldiers during the Saada war. It is unclear whether the rebels have also done so. See "Child Soldiers Global Report 2008", Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Sol-

## II. ROOTS OF WAR

The Saada war is a multilayered confrontation that has evolved significantly since 2004. It can be traced back to the decline of the social stratum led by Hashemites and legitimised by Zaydism (a branch of Shiism), failed management of religious pluralism, lack of investment in Zaydi strongholds like Saada after 1962, permeability to external influences and the emergence of new political and religious actors, in particular Salafis. As a result, it has variously and at times simultaneously taken the shape of a sectarian, political or tribal conflict, rooted in historical grievances and endemic under-development. It also has been shaped by a regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

From a distance, the war looks like an internal armed conflict between a national army and an insurgent group, but battle lines are far more fluid. The army reportedly has been supported by tribal or Islamist militias, particularly during the fourth and fifth rounds. Moreover, some suggest that the war also reflects a power struggle within the ruling elite, with different components vying for Salih's succession and using one side or the other to bolster their position.<sup>22</sup>

By the same token, the Huthi-led group's goals are not easily grasped. When the war began, Husein al-Huthi repeatedly expressed allegiance to the state, denying

---

diers. While the government has tried to maintain an information blackout throughout the war, its efforts began to falter during the fourth and fifth rounds. News started to filter out owing to visits by local and international human rights and humanitarian organisations and the rebels' improved communications (via an internet website in Cairo, Al-Minbar al-Akhbari al-Yamani, often inaccessible in Yemen due to censorship but which militants occasionally can overcome, and direct contacts with independent journalists in Sanaa). For example, Human Rights Watch published two reports in late 2008, "Disappearances and Arbitrary Arrests in the Armed Conflict with Huthi Rebels in Yemen" and "Invisible Civilians: The Challenge of Humanitarian Access in Yemen's Forgotten War". The full scale of the violence and its impact remain unclear, however. Total casualties (civilian, rebel and military) are subject to much conjecture by local journalists and civil society. The government has responded to charges of human rights violations by expressing willingness to cooperate with local and foreign organisations, releasing prisoners and claiming progress in addressing the issues – but not by providing access to areas of fighting.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, 5 January 2009. President Salih has been in power since 1978.

he was in rebellion.<sup>23</sup> Over time, however, the Huthi leadership's position evolved toward unambiguous opposition.<sup>24</sup> After the 2008 ceasefire, it openly sought the "demise of Ali Abdallah Salih's regime".<sup>25</sup> More importantly, there is no evidence that the so-called rebels possess a centralised command-and-control structure, coherent ideology or political program. Some groups fighting the government, though referred to as Huthis, appear motivated by multiple, mostly non-ideological factors having little in common with the leadership's proclaimed grievances. The May 2008 fighting in Bani Hushaysh, a mere twenty kilometres north of Sanaa, is an apt illustration. Depicted by both government and Huthi leadership as a rebel offensive, the events arguably were more akin to a local land ownership conflict between tribesmen and a prominent military figure.<sup>26</sup>

According to an independent observer, insurgents can be divided into four groups: a minority embracing a clear, well-articulated ideology, maintaining symbolic or political ties with Iran and rallying around anti-Western slogans; a small but distinct set seeking to defend Zaydi and Hashemite identity; groups of armed men with purely financial motivations; and a majority, tribesmen defending their families and villages against state violence.<sup>27</sup>

### A. WHO ARE THE HUTHIS?

Like the vast majority of the northern highlands population, including the president, Huthis are Zaydis. Unlike most, they are revivalists, who believe that Zaydi identity is threatened by a dominant Sunni or even Wah-

---

<sup>23</sup> See François Burgat, "Le Yémen après le 11 septembre 2001: entre construction de l'Etat et rétrécissement du champ politique", *Critique internationale*, no. 32 (2006). In an interview, Husein al-Huthi said, "I do not work against you [ie, the president]; I appreciate you and what you do tremendously, but what I do is my solemn national duty against the enemy of Islam and the community ... America and Israel. I am by your side, so do not listen to hypocrites and provocateurs and trust that I am more sincere and honest to you than they are". *Yemen Times* (Sanaa bi-weekly), 28 June 2004.

<sup>24</sup> After Husein's death, his father refused to say whether President Salih's rule was legitimate. *Al-Wasat*, 9 March 2005; and Sarah Philips, "Cracks in the Yemeni System", *Middle East Report Online* (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, exiled parliament member and co-leader of the rebellion, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Sharea* (Sanaa independent weekly), 7 June 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Samy Ghalib, editor in chief of *al-Nida* independent weekly, Sanaa, 8 January 2009.

habi identity.<sup>28</sup> Badr al-Din al-Huthi, Husein's father and a famous Saada cleric, advocated revivalism since the 1970s and published numerous treatises denouncing Wahhabism. Other family members followed suit by opening religious teaching institutes, writing books and proselytising.

The Huthi family also are Hashemites, which means they do not derive their legitimacy from affiliation with any particular tribe. Hashemites are said to have arrived in Yemen only after Islam's advent, mediating between local tribes; as relative latecomers, their claim to an authentic Yemeni identity sometimes is contested, though Zaydi Hashemites ruled parts or all of Yemen for over 1,000 years, until the September 1962 demise of the North Yemen imamate.<sup>29</sup> The country then began to be dominated by individuals and groups of tribal origin, many of whom hailed from Zaydi regions. Most Hashemites adapted to the new regime, many directly supporting it and accepting their own political decline. A minority sought exile, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the UK.

With unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 and the subsequent emergence of a multiparty system, Zaydi revivalists found new means of political expression. The creation of the al-Haqq party and of the Believing Youth, an al-Haqq offshoot set up in the mid-1990s, reflected new Zaydi dynamism. During Yemen's first multiparty elections in 1993, Husein al-Huthi and Abdallah al-Ruzami, a tribesman who also came from

Saada governorate, were elected to parliament as al-Haqq members and served single four-year terms. From 1997 onwards, Husein al-Huthi focused his activities on the Believing Youth in Saada. At the time, he enjoyed the government's acquiescence and arguably even support,<sup>30</sup> as it sought to counter the proliferation in the Saada region of Salafi groups tied to Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup>

## B. A BROKEN EQUILIBRIUM

One of the most remarkable features of Yemen's post-unification political system<sup>32</sup> has been its capacity to integrate a broad spectrum of various and often competing actors. The feature is a legacy of the 1960s civil war and the realisation that the republic's survival depends on power-sharing and compromise. Accordingly, successive governments used co-optation as a primary guarantor of regime stability. While neither dissidence nor repression has ever been wholly absent, Yemen on the whole has been spared massive bloodshed or open warfare. Skirmishes between the national army and tribal groups might be frequent, often deadly and sometimes prolonged. Yet, such conflicts typically

---

<sup>28</sup> Wahhabism – itself a controversial term – emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in what became Saudi Arabia. It is based on a strict interpretation of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence that emphasises the unity of God (*tawhid*) and rejects the Hashemites' claim to power. Salafism is a Sunni movement that seeks to revive "original" Islam, drawing on the so-called pious ancestors (*salaf al-salih*). It emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and is characterised in religious matters by a desire to transcend the four traditional Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Shafeism, Hanafism, Hanbalism and Malikism) and politically by a distrust of party politics and stigmatisation of Shiite Islam. While not automatically violent, certain fringes of the wider Salafi movement, labelled jihadi, have influenced al-Qaeda-type groups. See Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 13-14; Laurent Bonnefoy, "Deconstructing Salafism in Yemen", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 2, no. 2, February 2009; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°31, *Saudi Arabia Background: Who are the Islamists?*, 21 September 2004, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> In 1926, Imam Yahya (the religious and political ruler since 1904) established the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen and proclaimed himself king (*malik*). Subsequently, particularly during the civil war that followed the 1962 republican revolution, the imam's supporters were labelled royalists.

---

<sup>30</sup> Zaydi revivalist groups, including al-Huthi's organization, the Believing Youth, reportedly received state funding. Crisis Group interview, Islamist opposition figure, Sanaa, 10 January 2009; see also Abdallah al-Sanaani, *Al-harb fi Saada min awal siha ila akhir talqa* (Cairo, 2005), pp. 34-35. According to a senior ruling party official, funding was designed to thwart the influence of other Islamist groups in the Saada region, notably the Salafis/Wahhabis, who had connections with Saudi Arabia and called for a strict reform of Islam that many felt was alien to Yemeni history and culture: "The government felt the danger of Wahhabism spreading, so in the 1980s and 90s it supported Zaydi groups, including the Huthis. However, it failed to control these groups' platform". Crisis Group interview, GPC official and Consultative Council member, Sanaa, 12 January 2009. If true, the claim would be consistent with the government's strategy and record of coopting religious and tribal groups. The Huthi leadership responded: "They are lies, accusations uttered by Wahhabis. We have never received any weapons or money from the government". Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the Yemeni Salafis' links to Saudi Arabia, see Laurent Bonnefoy "Salafism in Yemen; A Saudisation?", in Madawi al-Rasheed (ed.), *Kingdom Without Borders: Saudi Expansion in the World* (London, 2008), pp. 245-262.

<sup>32</sup> During the socialist era in South Yemen (1970-1990), state-society relations differed markedly from those in the North, as they were shaped by an ideology that sought to transform society and break traditional influences, whether tribal or religious.

tend to be resolved through co-optation, including in the army, in which many once rebellious tribal sheikhs become officers.

Peripheral governorates such as Marib, al-Jawf, Shabwa and Saada, where tribes continue to play a central role and the state is virtually absent, unable to provide security, infrastructure or public services, have long been loci of grievance and dissent. Local tribes routinely kidnap citizens and foreigners to press the government to release detained family members or build roads and hospitals. Protection granted by unruly tribes to persons accused of crimes or links to terrorist organisations often trigger police or military operations, as do conflicts connected to compensation over land or blood feuds.<sup>33</sup> However, all these appear to be integral and accepted parts of Yemen's political equation rather than threats to it.

Even during the 1994 war between the Northern army and Southern secessionists, civilian casualties were kept low, and many secessionist leaders were later integrated into the state apparatus. Some even became close presidential advisors. Likewise, in combating al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, the government has often privileged dialogue over suppression and co-opted many, offering money and jobs in exchange for their promise to abandon violence against the state.<sup>34</sup>

### C. A CRISIS WITHIN ZAYDISM

The 1962 revolution that brought republicans to power also triggered a profound religious, social and political restructuring, upending an order with which Zaydism long had been associated.

Although the vast majority of its citizens are Arab Muslims, Yemeni society is pluralistic. The two principal religious sects are Zaydi Shiism and Shafei Sunnism. Although differing on a number of theological and political issues,<sup>35</sup> both are deemed relatively close

within the wider Sunni and Shiite doctrinal spectrums. Over the last several decades, the gulf between Zaydis and Shafeis has narrowed further, partly due to state actions, notably in education. The government raised the profile of prominent Zaydi historical figures who favoured "Sunnification".<sup>36</sup> Today only a minority of Zaydis define themselves specifically as Shiites; individuals (including President Salih and most elite members, whether from the ruling GPC or the al-Islah party, the Muslim Brotherhood's Yemeni branch) may be labelled Zaydis due to geographic and sectarian origin, but this is a secondary aspect of their identity. In effect, they have been assimilated in a broader non-sectarian Islamic arena as the identities gradually converged.

Most Zaydis have abandoned Shiite trappings, and most Shafeis refrain from stigmatising Zaydism; many pray in each other's mosques.<sup>37</sup> Ali al-Anissi, head of the Bureau of National Security, an institution created in the framework of the post-9/11 anti-terror campaign, summed this up: "Zaydism is a Shiite strain within Sunni Islam, and Shafeism is a Sunni strain within Shiite Islam".<sup>38</sup>

Although such a consensual identity is increasingly prevalent, it is not all-encompassing. Salafis, who emerged in the early 1980s and maintain ties to Saudi Arabia, continue to stigmatise Zaydis, highlighting their alleged links to Jaafarism (the dominant Shiite sect in Iran and Iraq).<sup>39</sup> In turn, Zaydi revivalists, including the Huthis, cling to Zaydism's theological and symbolic characteristics and expressly reject what they consider Wahhabi or Salafi predominance.<sup>40</sup>

---

Zaydis argue that *hadith* that appear inconsistent with the Quran and are not supported by revealed verses should be discarded, even though they might be considered authentic (*sahih*) by Sunni jurisprudence. Furthermore, Zaydism puts particular emphasis on Hashemites' political, social and religious roles and on the importance of the Imam as ruler of the polity – interpretations most Shafeis contest.

<sup>36</sup> A notable example is Muhammad al-Shawkani. See Bernard Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam: The Legacy of Muhammad al-Shawkânî* (Cambridge, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Laurent Bonnefoy, "Les identités religieuses contemporaines au Yémen: convergence, résistances et instrumentalisation", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, no. 121-122 (2008).

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Zaydism differs from Jaafarism in terms of jurisprudence and institutional organisation. For example, Zaydism does not have a clergy or give the same political and symbolic importance to Ali, Husein and Hasan as Jaafaris. Zaydis only recognise the first five Imams; Jaafaris recognise twelve (hence "Twelver Shiites") and await the reappearance of the twelfth "hidden" Imam.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>33</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°8, *Yemen: Coping with Terrorism and Violence in a Fragile State*, 8 January 2003, pp. 19-20; *The New York Times*, 20 December 2001; and *Yemen Times*, 24 December 2001.

<sup>34</sup> This equilibrium was under intense pressure and criticised by some of Yemen's allies after the 11 September 2001 attacks. In February 2006, U.S. President George W. Bush reportedly wrote to President Salih to express disappointment over the government's lack of investment in the global "war on terror" and questioned its sincerity. Andrew McGregor, "Stand-off in Yemen: the al-Zindani Case", *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 3, no. 9 (March 2006).

<sup>35</sup> For example, interpretations on the importance of the *hadith* (collection of the Prophet's words and deeds) diverge. Most

The crisis in Zaydism is not religious alone; it also has a socio-political dimension. Until the 1962 advent of the republic, a Zaydi-based social stratification prevailed in the northern highlands, premised on division between Zaydi Hashemites, *qadis* (administrative judges), tribesmen and *ahl al-thulth* (third people), such as butchers or barbers, who perform jobs considered vile inasmuch as they involve contact with organic substances.

The republic denounced such classification and promised equality to all. Coming up through military ranks, tribesmen and *qadis* from the Zaydi highlands allied themselves with elites and intellectuals from the Shafei lowlands to become the new ruling group. Resistance by Saudi-financed royalists who backed the imamate from their strongholds near Marib, Hajja and Saada lasted for more than seven years before the state prevailed. Saudi support was motivated less by religion (Zaydism stands in direct contradiction to Salafi/Wahhabism) than by politics: the Saudi monarchy preferred the Zaydi monarchy over the emergence of an Egyptian-backed North Yemeni republic.

This history left scars. Among former rulers and Zaydi revivalists, the republic is widely viewed as fundamentally anti-Hashemite and anti-Zaydi. Even though many of their successors are of Zaydi origin, they are suspected of ignoring their origins and paradoxically of succumbing to a Saudi-backed Salafi/Wahhabi influence that developed since the 1970s. To that extent, the Saada war can be seen as an extension of a process that began with the 1962 revolution<sup>41</sup> and saw the decline of a social group of which the Huthi family were members.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> A Zaydi (albeit non-Hashemite) scholar who was detained during the Saada war said of the conflict's origins: "The people now ruling Yemen continue to have a problem with the former Hashemite rulers. There is a kind of racism at play. They seem to consider that the preceding 1,200 years were all wrong and negative. Today it seems as though it would be impossible for a Hashemite to become president or even prime minister. Even to become a low-level minister, he would have to demonstrate again and again his loyalty to the president and ruling party". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 11 January 2009. President Salih expressly denied an anti-Hashemite or anti-Zaydi bias. In a May 2007 address to religious scholars of various backgrounds, he said the state was neutral and respected all identities and sects. *Al-Thawra* (official Sanaa daily), 15 May 2007.

<sup>42</sup> See Gabriele Vom Bruck, *Islam, Memory, and Morality in Yemen: Ruling Families in Transition* (New York, 2005). This is not to suggest that Huthis represent either Zaydism or Hashemites, or that the latter unanimously support or sympathise with the rebels. See, eg, Samy Dorlian, "Les reformulations identitaires du zaydisme dans leur contexte

Zaydis also complained of state neglect of their strongholds, peripheral regions where, as an observer put it, "people know the republic solely through missiles and tanks".<sup>43</sup> Saada remained on the margins, largely ignored by the government and developing solely thanks to commerce with neighbouring Saudi Arabia on the one hand and the fertility of its land on the other. In the early 1990s, a Zaydi intellectual recalled that the only hospital in Saada at the time had been built with Saudi money and that the city had waited more than twenty years after the revolution to be visited by a North Yemeni president.<sup>44</sup> Alienated from a state that deprived them of their former status and failed to attend to their region's security or economic development, some Zaydi revivalists – notably the Huthis – emerged as key regime opponents.

Zaydi revivalist opposition to the regime was emboldened by several other factors. The imamate's fall had left the religious group in deep crisis, as its scholars faced the difficult task of reviving their legitimacy in the absence of an imam.<sup>45</sup> Doctrinal adaptation was facilitated by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran that provided Shiites throughout the Muslim world with a positive model; at the same time, Yemeni Zaydis saw the rise of a new generation of scholars and militants who were not as marked by the civil war's legacy. Scholars established Zaydi teaching institutes, mainly in Sanaa and Saada, and publishers released new editions of Zaydi treatises.

The founding of al-Haqq and the reactivation of the Union of Popular Forces provided revivalists with means of political expression. In the 1990s, prominent al-Haqq-affiliated Zaydi scholars signed a manifesto arguing that the ruler or imam no longer needed to be a Hashemite. Badr al-Din al-Huthi and other leading Saada-based scholars dissented and split. Husein al-Huthi and others<sup>46</sup> created the Believing Youth, seeking to revive Zaydi activism through education and proselytising.

Zaydi revival around Saada also came as a reaction to the spread of Salafism, spearheaded by Muqbil al-Wadii, a Saudi-educated Saada cleric. In the late 1970s, after his expulsion from Saudi Arabia as a result of

---

socio-politique contemporain", *Chroniques yéménites*, no.15 (2008).

<sup>43</sup> *Al-Nida* (Sanaa independent weekly), 30 March 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Muhammad al-Saidi, *Saada limadha?* (Beirut, undated).

<sup>45</sup> Gabriele Vom Bruck, "Being a Zaydi in the absence of an Imam", in Rémy Leveau, Franck Mermier and Udo Steinbach, eds., *Le Yémen contemporain* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> These included Abd-al-Karim Jadban, Muhammad Azzan and Salih Habra. Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, al-Haqq secretary general, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

political activities, al-Wadii established his own institute, Dar al-Hadith, in Dammaj, on Saada's outskirts. It grew rapidly, educating thousands of Yemeni and foreign students and spawned other such institutes throughout the country. Fierce competition with Zaydis ensued, provoking what a Western scholar described as a "clash of fundamentalisms".<sup>47</sup> In the early 1990s, Zaydi scholars issued pamphlets denouncing Salafi "intrusion" in Zaydism's cradle and blaming Saudi Arabia for aggressively exporting Wahhabism.<sup>48</sup> Explaining why the Huthis set up the Believing Youth, Yahya al-Huthi said:

Our main reason for action is to fight Wahhabism. There has been a cultural and intellectual war between Zaydism and Wahhabism since the revolution in the 1960s. The Yemeni government is looking for financial help from Saudi Arabia and so in exchange it has favoured the spread of Wahhabism.<sup>49</sup>

Anti-Zaydi and anti-Hashemite prejudice, especially among certain Sunni Islamist intellectuals (Salafis and Muslim Brothers), is particularly worrying. It both threatens the growing convergence between sectarian identities<sup>50</sup> and undermines post-civil war reconciliation efforts. The January 2003 death in a car accident – viewed by some as suspect – of Yahya al-Mutawakkil, a former interior minister and prominent politician, left the Hashemites without representation among the

ruling elite. Moreover, as the war progressed, stigmatisation of Hashemites and Zaydis worsened; during the fifth round, Hashemite family members were arbitrarily detained.<sup>51</sup> The wife of a young Hashemite who was arrested in Sanaa in 2008 and remained in detention without trial in April 2009, said, "only non-Hashemites are allowed to criticise the war in Saada. If you are a Hashemite and a Zaydi and you are against it, you face immediate arrest".<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Shelagh Weir, "Clash of Fundamentalisms", *Middle East Report*, no. 204 (1997).

<sup>48</sup> Amin Abu Zayd, *Al-wahhabiyya wa khataruha ala mustaqbal al-Yaman al-siyasi* (Beirut, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>50</sup> The Salafist monthly magazine *al-Muntada* published several articles targeting Zaydism. One, which focused on the "second Huthi rebellion", was entitled "So that we do not forget: the secret plans to spread the Iranian revolution". In the same issue, Abd-al-Aziz al-Dubaii wrote: "If the armed forces have a great role to play in eradicating the Huthi sedition (*fitna*), the intellectual forces must eradicate its roots". *Al-Muntada*, April 2005. In 2008 the Salafist al-Kalima al-Tayyiba Centre issued a pamphlet entitled "Zaydism in Yemen: An Open Discussion", which focused on Zaydism's theological errors and proximity to Twelver Shiites. See Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Mahdi, "Al-Zaydiyya fi al-Yaman: Hiwar Maftuh", Sanaa, 2008. In 2007, Islamist intellectuals, including Abd-al-Fattah al-Batul, adviser to the governor of Ibb, established the Nashwan bin Said al-Himyari Centre, which has highlighted the Zaydi Imamate's "treachery". Ahmad Muhammad al-Hadiri, *Tarikh al-aimma al-hadawiya fi al-Yaman: al-fikr wa al-tatbiq* (Sanaa, 2007). Nashwan bin Said al-Himyari was a twelfth century Yemeni poet known for his anti-Hashemite positions. Samy Dorlian, "Les reformulations identitaires", op. cit., pp. 167-168.

---

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Sanaa, 5 January 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, wife of detained person, Sanaa, 20 January 2009.

### III. COMPETING NARRATIVES

Government and rebels have starkly different narratives about the war, the former highlighting the rebellion's ideological dimensions and alleged ties to Iran, the latter stressing the state's purported anti-Zaydi bias, the threat of Saudi-backed Wahhabism and the dangers of U.S. involvement in the Middle East.<sup>53</sup> By contrast, more nuanced accounts that could improve understanding of why the conflict broke out and persists have not garnered much attention.

#### A. THE STATE'S NARRATIVE

From the conflict's inception, the government has sought to discredit the rebels domestically and rally Western support. It has depicted the Believing Youth as a fundamentalist religious group and as having provoked the war to undermine the state and restore the Zaydi imamate;<sup>54</sup> portrayed the Saada conflict as a subset of the Bush administration's global war on terror; and accused the rebels of loyalty to Iran.

A government official charted the rebels' transformation from defenders of Zaydi identity to anti-state insurgents as follows:

The Believing Youth came into the picture as an anti-Salafi group. Gradually, it deepened its political involvement and took advantage of the international situation to mobilise support. The government intervened to stop some demonstrations because they were illegal. The conflict escalated when the Believing Youth asked people in Saada to stop paying taxes and started interfering in government affairs.<sup>55</sup>

Under this view, the Huthis triggered the conflict. In the words of a former minister and ruling party Consultative Council member, "at one point, the Huthis

felt they had enough power to rise up (*khuruj*)<sup>56</sup> against the central state and declare the president unfit for power".<sup>57</sup> In turn, the army purportedly was compelled to wage a defensive war on the state's behalf. Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister in charge of security and defence, explained: "No government wants war and ours, like any other, wants its citizens to live in peace. Since 2004, there have been various efforts and as many as seven or eight mediation committees, but these all failed. Military action was a last resort".<sup>58</sup>

As described by the government, the Huthis have been spreading a fundamentalist religious creed, reflecting a shift from moderate Zaydism to Jaafarism (Twelver Shiism). Ali al-Anissi, head of the Bureau of National Security, said, "Husein al-Huthi and Abdallah al-Ruzami imported a lot of festivals and practices coming from Twelver Shias, and this has provoked tension".<sup>59</sup> Most recently, in March 2009, Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi used the occasion of the Prophet's birthday

---

<sup>56</sup> Use of the term *khuruj* (literally: "coming out") is not innocent. Zaydism explicitly endorses revolt against oppressive rulers (*khuruj ala al-hakim al-dhalim*). During the imamate's millennium-long history, revolt was a legitimate means for Hashemites to gain power. By invoking this concept, the government sought to underscore the rebel's purported goal of restoring the imamate.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, GPC official and member of the Consultative Council, Sanaa, 12 January 2009. According to a senior government official, "it is evident that the rebels are well organised and well trained and have the capacity to confront the military". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 7 January 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009. Among these rituals, the annual Ghadir Khumm festival has particular symbolic significance. Held each year on the eighteenth day of the Islamic calendar's month of Dhu al-Hija, it is the subject of considerable controversy between Sunnis and Shiites. It celebrates Ali's supposed designation as the Prophet's authentic successor and thus rejects the legitimacy of Abu Bakr, the first caliph Sunnis recognise. It thus could be seen as reaffirming the Hashemites' claim to power, as Ali was the Prophet's son-in-law, from whom they claim descent, while Abu Bakr was only a companion of the Prophet. The celebration was abandoned after the revolution but reemerged in the 1990s amid Zaydi revivalism. Since 2004, the authorities have repeatedly sought to ban what some described as a "festival of Huthi sympathisers" (see Laurent Bonnefoy, "Les relations religieuses transnationales entre le Yémen et l'Arabie Saoudite: Un salafisme importé?", PhD dissertation, Paris, 2007, p. 356, quoting a district security head in Lahj governorate) or a celebration of Hashemite rule tantamount to "an assertion of the Huthis' rejection of democracy". Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

---

<sup>53</sup> While there are inconsistencies in both narratives, they do not reflect conflicting political agendas such as between "hawks" and "doves". They appear to be a function of information scarcity and opacity as well as a plurality of voices. On the government's side, the absence of accurate data could be explained by the fact the war was long managed exclusively by the military, with many senior officials excluded from decision making. Crisis Group interview, Nabil al-Sufi, journalist and editor-in-chief of the independent *Abwab* (monthly magazine), Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>54</sup> See, eg, *Yemen Times*, 28 June 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Sanaa, 7 January 2009.

(*mawlid al-nabawi*, a controversial celebration criticised by many Sunni scholars) to mobilise his supporters.<sup>60</sup> Pointing at such events, critics accuse the Huthis of sectarianism and undermining national unity.<sup>61</sup> In the words of a ruling party member who emphasised his own Zaydi Hashemite identity, “Husein al-Huthi hijacked Zaydism just like Osama bin Laden hijacked Islam”.<sup>62</sup> The Huthis also have been criticised for seeking to enforce new, more rigid social rules in areas under their control, such as Saada.<sup>63</sup>

To bolster its international case, the government labelled the rebels as terrorists, accusing them of preparing attacks against Western interests, planning to kidnap foreign diplomats, spraying acid on unveiled women, poisoning water reserves, murdering officials and bombing public places; several, including a journalist and editor, have been put on trial on charges of plotting such acts. Some were sent to the special criminal court set up to deal with terrorists in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks.<sup>64</sup> The government reportedly claimed to have asked the UN to place the Believing Youth on its list of terrorist organisations<sup>65</sup> but apparently never formally conveyed the demand. Accusations aside, there is no evidence linking the Huthis to terrorist groups operating in Yemen, such as al-Qaeda,

or to attacks carried out against targets outside the immediate Saada war theatre.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, the government has accused the rebels of receiving foreign backing. While top officials, such as the president, have been reluctant to formally finger the Islamic Republic, and although it maintains diplomatic relations, regularly hosts Iranian officials and even asserts full support for its nuclear program,<sup>67</sup> Yemen has strongly insinuated Iranian complicity with the rebels. In the words of one official:

The Believing Youth started their activities under different names in the 1980s in the context of the Iranian revolution. They were trained in Iran during the Ayatollah Khomeini’s era with the objective of spreading the revolution. Between that time and 2004, the Huthis prepared themselves to launch operations against the state.<sup>68</sup>

In 2005, a special criminal court sentenced two Zaydi clerics, Yahya al-Daylami and Muhammad Muftah, to death and eight years in prison, respectively, for maintaining contacts with Iran, supporting the rebels and aiming to topple the regime.<sup>69</sup>

The government has yet to support these allegations with hard evidence,<sup>70</sup> and in 2009 President Salih played down the role of external actors.<sup>71</sup> Tempering its accusation, the government now claims that funding could

---

<sup>60</sup> *Al-Diyar* (Sanaa independent weekly), 15 March 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, intellectual and member of the General People’s Congress, Sanaa, 13 January 2009.

<sup>63</sup> An international NGO country director said, “the Huthis have imposed very strict rules in the regions they control. For example, they ban male teachers in girls’ schools. As a result, girls can no longer study”, since there are few female teachers. However, “at the same time, they appear to play a positive role in resolving longstanding local conflicts. Through such actions, they gain the community’s trust”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 13 January 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, 5 January 2009. See also Almotamar.net (General People’s Congress information website), 14 June 2007; “Yemen”, Amnesty International annual report 2007. In June 2008, a special court sentenced Abd-al-Karim al-Khaywani, former editor-in-chief of *al-Shura* weekly (mouthpiece of the Union of Popular Forces, a Zaydi party) and a journalist well-known for criticising the government, to six years in prison for rebel ties. Al-Khaywani, who earlier had been imprisoned for writing about the Saada war, was released by presidential order in September 2008. In January 2009, a court confirmed his sentence but he remained free. News Yemen (independent information website), 31 January 2009. President Salih cancelled the sentence two months later.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

---

<sup>66</sup> Western diplomats in particular express scepticism. As one put it, “there is no evidence of attempts by the Huthis to carry out terrorist operations against Western interests”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Saba News (official Yemeni news agency), 14 May 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Both were freed by President Salih in a May 2006 amnesty but remained under judicial and police pressure, facing possible rearrest. Muhammad Muftah was detained again in May 2008 after criticising military operations in Saada in the Yemeni press and was released a few months later. Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>70</sup> In January 2009, the interior ministry gave Crisis Group reports purporting to document Iranian financial, ideological and logistical support. However, the reports (labelled “top secret”, *sirri lil-ghaya*) raised more questions than they answered. Accusations were not adequately sourced and often came from unidentified institutions. Overall, the evidence appeared incomplete and biased.

<sup>71</sup> When asked about Iran, Salih downplayed the role of external actors and acknowledged that Libya and Iran, like Qatar, had sought to mediate. He denied involvement by Lebanon’s Hizbollah, while intimating that connections might exist between the Huthis and the Lebanese movement and that certain military skills might have been transferred from Lebanon to Yemen. *Al-Hayat*, 28 March 2009.

be channelled through religious or economic actors rather than transferred directly from Iranian diplomats to rebel leaders. Ali al-Anissi argued:

Despite their denial and the fact they say that they are against foreign intervention, the Iranians fund the Huthis, for example through *hawzas*<sup>72</sup> and charities. Furthermore, presenters of Iranian radio and television programs call for support for the Huthis and refer to them as Twelver Shiites.

Yet, he added, “Iranians are not arming the Huthis. The weapons they use are Yemeni. Most actually come from fighters [government soldiers and allied militia members] who fought against the socialists during the 1994 war and then sold them”.<sup>73</sup>

Opposition politicians question claims that Iran is providing the rebels with either financial or weapons support,<sup>74</sup> while Huthis themselves have rejected outright any suggestion of collusion with Tehran.<sup>75</sup> Western and other diplomats based in Sanaa on the whole agree, while conceding some non-governmental Iranian actors could be involved. Summing up a more general view, one Western diplomat said, “there is no clear evidence of Iranian involvement but small signs of a role by Iranian charitable organisations. Overall, however, the conflict appears chiefly fuelled by internal grievances”.<sup>76</sup>

## B. THE HUTHI AND ZAYDI REVIVALIST NARRATIVE

The Huthi and Zaydi revivalist narrative directly contradicts the government’s. Although voiced by people with different agendas and positions, some highly

critical of the rebels’ resort to violence,<sup>77</sup> it is united in its view that the government is wrongly targeting the Zaydis as a whole. An al-Haqq party leader said, “the Huthis are just a label. The government’s true targets are Zaydis”.<sup>78</sup> Like the government, Zaydis claim self-defence. A Zaydi scholar said:

As people, as a community, as a tradition, we [Zaydi Hashemites] have been targeted in a very violent way. We have been prevented from exercising our rights. We have been deprived of jobs and education. Our schools and institutes were shut down. Such oppression has convinced many to defend themselves.<sup>79</sup>

Denying any political agenda, Zaydis accuse the government of being motivated by ideology and historical resentment. As explained by a Zaydi intellectual and founder of a Sanaa research institute, “the Huthis have no agenda whatsoever. They never articulated any conditions for peace other than to be left in peace – not to be attacked and not to have their villages bombed”.<sup>80</sup> A journalist affiliated with the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party pointed to the fact that

Whenever the state declared an end to the fighting, the Huthis immediately stopped. They respected the decision and only responded when the army attacked them. Husein al-Huthi had no plans of any kind. It is the government and the army which, through their mistakes, wrongdoing and violence, gave rise to the rebellion.<sup>81</sup>

In a mirror image of the government’s assertion of Iranian links, the rebels and their allies contend the authorities are acting on behalf of foreign powers, notably Saudi Arabia and the U.S.,<sup>82</sup> and accuse Riyadh

<sup>72</sup> *Hawzas* are prestigious Shiite religious seminaries.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, secretary general of al-Haqq party, Sanaa, 2 January 2009.

<sup>75</sup> In Yahya al-Huthi’s words, “Iran plays no role whatsoever. It is only Westerners, Saudis and the Yemeni government that accuse it of involvement. In fact, we do not need the Iranians in any way, as Zaydis have their own symbols, references and reasons to fight, and these are sufficient to wage the rebellion”. Crisis Group telephone interview, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009. An Arab ambassador added: “Although there might not be any financial support coming directly from the Iranian state, foreign money is reaching the rebels. Iranian companies invest in local Yemeni companies, and the money is then channelled to the Huthis, via local families”. Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 17 January 2009.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, al-Haqq general secretary, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 14 January 2009. A Sanaa-based human rights activist who has defended persons imprisoned in the context of the Saada war complained: “I am secular but the political situation has led me to take a closer look at my origins, which are Zaydi and Hashemite. Once, when I handed my passport to an immigration officer at the airport, he asked me whether I was a Hashemite, as if it was legal to question my origins, as if the law demanded it and favoured such discrimination”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi intellectual, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 17 January 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, Berlin, 3 February 2009. While the government has come under pressure from the U.S. and European governments for in-

of targeting them as Hashemites. Many claim that Riyadh provides the government with weapons and encourages it to pursue the fight. In the words of a Zaydi scholar, “Saudi Arabia is scared of the Hashemites. They are the only group that could directly compete with the Saudi royal family”.<sup>83</sup>

---

consistent anti-terror policies – releasing prisoners suspected of involvement in attacks, lenient sentences, concealing intelligence from foreign investigators (for example, FBI agents looking into the 2000 attack against the USS Cole) – it has faced no direct or public criticism for conduct in Saada, despite the deadly nature of the conflict and its threat to Yemen’s stability. The rebels see Western governments as complicit in government behaviour. Ibid. Another Zaydi religious figure contended: “If there is a will to stop the war, there will be a solution. But the government wants the war to continue in order to continue receiving financial support from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”. Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 11 January 2009. Rebel claims of Western support have bolstered the Believing Youth’s popularity and enabled Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi to pose as a true defender of Yemen’s Islamic identity. See, eg, *Al-Diyar*, 4 January 2009. In mid-January 2009, during the Gaza war, Huthi leaders organised large demonstrations in support of Gazans, denouncing Israel and the U.S. They analogised the Gaza siege to the blockade they claim is imposed on Saada governorate residents. *Al-Diyar*, 18 January 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 11 January 2009. By portraying the fight as against Saudi and Wahhabi encroachment, the Huthis have also sought to buttress their Yemeni credentials, which some contest due to their Hashemite lineage. The claim is at least somewhat undermined by the fact that Zaydi royalists received massive Saudi support during the 1960s post-revolutionary civil war.

## IV. A METASTASISING CONFLICT

Neither narrative addresses the conflict in all its complexity; in particular, both ignore non-ideological factors that explain its onset and persistence: the accumulation of mutual grievances, including among civilians; growing tribalisation, shifting internal power balances and the emergence of a war economy.

### A. ACCUMULATING GRIEVANCES AND GROWING TRIBAL INVOLVEMENT

The destruction of villages and infrastructure by army shelling, air bombardment and indiscriminate military and police violence<sup>84</sup> has amplified grievances among not only Hashemites generally and Zaydi revivalists in particular but, more broadly, civilians in all northern governorates (Saada, al-Jawf, Amran and Hajja). Even many who originally did not sympathise with Husein al-Huthi sided with the rebels, in some instances taking up arms in solidarity with fellow villagers, relatives or tribesmen harmed in the fighting. A parliamentarian said, “the Huthis are getting stronger and stronger with each round. Renewed fighting will only increase the rebels’ influence and broaden the combat zone”.<sup>85</sup> A General People’s Congress member of the Consultative Council echoed this: “The Huthis seem to have a lot of followers, not for religious reasons but because the population feels discriminated against and excluded from development policies. Unfortunately, the destruction of villages has not helped fight that impression”.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, the rebels have helped fuel anger, engaging in brutal acts, looting and kidnapping, including of soldiers and allied tribesmen,<sup>87</sup> even as they adamantly

---

<sup>84</sup> The scale of the destruction is gradually being documented by the state-controlled Saada reconstruction fund, but the data remains subject to manipulation.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 5 January 2009.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>87</sup> Husein al-Huthi’s death in September 2004 reportedly led to the ascent of a less compromising generation of rebel leaders and militants. Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009. Rebel violence was highlighted by foreigners living in Saada: “We trusted Husein al-Huthi and knew that he would not attack foreigners, but we now feel less confident with the new, more ideological, militants”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 18 January 2009. A humanitarian worker said, “Lack of access to the field is not solely due to government policies. We have been experiencing problems in some of the areas controlled by the rebels as well. The Huthis are seen by the population as very brutal. They intimidate people they consider neutral, including through kidnapping”. Crisis Group interview,

deny resorting to arbitrary violence.<sup>88</sup> The presence of thousands of displaced persons long after the conclusion of the fifth round<sup>89</sup> suggests persisting problems, including damage to homes and fear of retaliation by either rebels, groups sympathising with them or pro-government tribes.<sup>90</sup>

Driven by group solidarity, growing involvement of tribal militias alongside government or rebel forces has further inflamed the conflict and contributed to its endurance. By some accounts, the war has turned into a tribal conflict between the pro-government Hashid and pro-rebel Bakil confederations, the north Yemeni highlands' two largest.<sup>91</sup> In December 2008, skirmishes between tribes belonging to the two confederations threatened a new round of fighting,<sup>92</sup> as did January 2009 tribal clashes in Amran governorate, south of Saada, and al-Jawf governorate, east of Saada. Rebels and others claim the Hashid set up checkpoints targeting Huthis and their supporters and aimed, apparently, at pressuring the government to adopt a harder stance.<sup>93</sup>

---

country representative of international humanitarian NGO, Sanaa, 5 January 2009.

<sup>88</sup> "The Huthis have never exercised violence against neutral people; they have only attacked people who were supporting the government and collaborating with the army". Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>89</sup> In January 2009, the World Food Programme claimed to have provided aid to 7,500 people in camps in al-Dhahir and Sahar districts. *Saada Update* bi-weekly newsletter, January 2009. This is only a partial view of the affected area. The total number of displaced people at the time almost certainly was higher.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian NGO official, Paris, 28 January 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009. The notion that the Saada conflict has become a war between the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations was rejected by a Bakil leader, who indicated his tribe sided with the government. Crisis Group interview, parliament member from Saada, Sanaa, 14 January 2009. While the Hashid confederation appears centralised, particularly under the authority of Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar (until his death in December 2007), the Bakil confederation is larger and more loosely structured. As a result, Bakil-associated tribes have tended to take different positions in the conflict.

<sup>92</sup> *Al-Usubua* (independent Sanaa weekly), 4 December 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi accused the al-Usaymat (an important tribe in the Hashid confederation) of imposing an embargo on Saada via checkpoints that barred supplies and prevented free movement. *Al-Ilaf* (independent Sanaa weekly), 6 January 2009; Crisis Group interview, resident of Razih district in Saada governorate, Sanaa, 5 January 2009. A Saada tribal sheikh involved in successive mediations claimed the Hashid had taken more than 50 hostages in January 2009 alone. Crisis Group interview, tribal sheikh from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 9 January 2009. While these checkpoints tar-

These along with other incidents reflect how tribal vendettas (*thar*) have become a new, critical variable in the conflict. Government officials express alarm that tribal warfare may be taking on a life of its own.<sup>94</sup>

The conflict's tribalisation has mixed implications. On the one hand, it could signal a lessening of ideological or religious motivations. Muhammad Thabit, executive director of the Saada reconstruction fund, noted:

Skirmishes might continue despite the ceasefire, but they are between tribes. The situation in Saada is now similar to that in other parts of Yemen. The problem is that whenever fighting occurs between two tribes around Saada, the media tend to describe it as between Huthis and government, based on politics or religion and amounting to a ceasefire breach. It is none of the above.<sup>95</sup>

On the other hand, in Yemen's predominantly tribal society, the war's "tribalisation" means it is spreading far beyond its original reach. Competing tribes and tribal leaders vie for new positions to expand their power; as some groups are marginalised, others receive government help in exchange for fighting the insurgents.<sup>96</sup>

---

geted pro-Huthi tribes, they likely also were intended to encourage the government to harden its policy. A foreign development expert in Saada governorate explained the complexity of the Hashid's role: "Members of the Hashid confederation own a lot of land in the Saada region but do not originate from there; their base is around Hajja, a less fertile region. During the war, the Huthis destroyed some farms owned by Hashid members, including the farm of Sheikh Abdallah al-Ahmar [the Hashid's former paramount chief and speaker of parliament]. The Hashid were fighting on the government's side. However, since the end of the war they have felt abandoned, as they got nothing in return. So they started setting up checkpoints, seizing cars on the road and kidnapping people from Saada to pressure the government". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 4 January 2009. Uthman al-Majali, a ruling party parliamentarian from Saada said, "by cutting the road to Saada the Hashid are pushing the government to take a tougher stance toward the Huthis, who have taken hostages from Hashid tribes. The government currently does not want to put too much pressure on the Huthis in order to preserve the fragile peace". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Thabit, executive director, Saada reconstruction fund, Sanaa, 21 March 2009.

<sup>96</sup> This strategy generated considerable instability within tribes, with junior members seizing the opportunity to replace more senior and traditional sheikhs. Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, 14 March 2009. During the successive rounds, fears that the government would expropriate land in Saada to establish a military base further heightened tensions. The government used the expropriation threat

Nor is the original conflict being replaced by a tribal war; rather, the latter is supplementing the former and complicating resolution of both. Indeed, the size of the affected area, number of participating tribes and involvement of the army and other state agents distinguish this from the myriad of tribal conflicts that regularly occur and ordinarily would be solved through traditional, tribal law.<sup>97</sup>

## B. A WAR OF SUCCESSION?

With President Salih in his late sixties and in power since 1978, the succession question increasingly has become a matter of public debate. Although the president widely is believed to be grooming his son, Ahmad Ali Salih, head of both the Special Forces and the Republican Guards, the emergence of a hereditary republic is not unanimously endorsed by the ruling elite. According to some Yemeni analysts, the issue could be one of the drivers of the Saada war, described by an Islamist intellectual as “a game inside the house” – ie, a war driven in part by competition between ruling factions.<sup>98</sup>

Among those considered critical of dynastic succession is Major-General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the first armoured battalion in charge of the north west region and, as such, responsible for military operations in Saada since 2004. Although not appearing to have a direct claim to presidential power, Ali Muhsin (sometimes wrongly labelled the president’s half-brother – the two men come from the same village) is said to have been at odds with the president’s son<sup>99</sup> and to have mobilised certain tribes and Islamist militias, jihadis included, to support the military in the war. According to a Zaydi scholar, the “war strengthened him and the role of Wahhabis inside the state”.<sup>100</sup>

Others maintain that the war is being used by the president to undermine Ali Muhsin. Units under his command have engaged in disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force, earning him the nickname “Ali Katyusha”.<sup>101</sup> Accurate or not, the depiction helps cast

President Salih and his son as more pragmatic leaders, able to bring the war to a peaceful end, while Ali Muhsin is portrayed as mismanaging the counter-insurgency. Failed operations, rebel ambushes and internal miscommunications that led the army to strike its own positions prompted rumours of dissent within the military command.<sup>102</sup> In the words of a Western diplomat, the war is a “poisoned chalice given to Ali Muhsin”.<sup>103</sup>

The existence of internal leadership rivalry is widely accepted as fact by Yemenis, though it remains very poorly documented. Many believe it helped fuel the war, as various groups within the regime sought to use the Saada conflict to their advantage. In particular, observers and activists who participated in mediation efforts claim that such competition obstructed their work, as one faction undermined another, the result being incoherence on the government’s part.<sup>104</sup>

## C. RISE OF A WAR ECONOMY

The conflict has given rise to a war economy that, in turn, helps ensure its perpetuation. For various tribes, army officers and state officials, the war has translated into the ability to control the porous border with Saudi Arabia and the Red Sea coastline; tribal leaders as well as high-ranking officials have amassed military hardware; and the same groups profit from illegal sales from army stockpiles. At the same time, continued operations have justified increased military budgets without government or independent oversight. Competition over such resources has been intense.<sup>105</sup>

---

Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis group interview, country director, international humanitarian NGO, Sanaa, 13 January 2009.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009. According to some, army incompetence has jeopardised Ali Muhsin’s position. *Al-Masdar* (independent Sanaa weekly), 15 August 2008. Munir al-Mawri, a well-known Washington-based Yemeni journalist, reported that Ali Muhsin received threats and that plans existed to eliminate him physically or at least weaken him politically. Yemen Press (information website), 28 July 2008. The May 2008 attack on the Bin Salman Mosque in Saada governorate, which reportedly targeted Askar Zuail, one of Ali Muhsin’s close aides, although blamed on the rebels, is viewed by some as another indicator of internal leadership tensions.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009. See also below, section V.A.

<sup>105</sup> A tribal sheikh said, “The war has become a war over resources”. Crisis Group interview, tribal sheikh from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

---

to induce tribes to support the army. Crisis Group interview, international development expert, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Dresch, *Rules of Barat: Texts and Translations of Tribal Documents from Yemen* (Sanaa, 2006).

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, Islamist intellectual and journalist, Sanaa, 19 December 2008.

<sup>99</sup> Gregory Johnsen, “The Resiliency of Yemen’s Aden-Abyan Army”, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no.14 (July 2006).

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>101</sup> This nickname clearly refers to the notorious former Iraqi minister of defence, “Ali Kimiyawi” (Chemical Ali). Crisis

Saada governorate's location on the Saudi border and Red Sea coast makes it potentially of great economic interest. Due both to the paucity of state investment in this mountainous and relatively remote region and to its independent tribal culture, smuggling is a major economic activity and source of income. For decades, trafficking of qat,<sup>106</sup> drugs, weapons and people into Saudi Arabia has yielded substantial profit.<sup>107</sup> The Saudi border is largely unguarded, making cross-border trade a critical revenue generator and one of the war's unspoken stakes.<sup>108</sup> Several prominent Saada tribal sheikhs are considered to be the country's most important weapons dealers, enjoying regional as well as international connections; this, in the words of a Western diplomat, "means they have an interest in the war's continuation".<sup>109</sup>

In addition, lack of oversight in the context of an expanding military budget has encouraged corruption and fostered trafficking inside the military. Throughout the war, army leaders routinely demanded additional weapons; although some were used against insurgents, a significant proportion was diverted to regional (particularly Somali)<sup>110</sup> and local markets. Many weapons ultimately found their way to the rebels they were intended to combat. An opposition parliament member said, "the Huthis collect money from sympathisers as well as local merchants and then buy their weapons directly from the army. This is one of the war's true paradoxes".<sup>111</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> Qat is a mildly narcotic leaf chewed daily, often in lengthy sessions, by a large segment of the population. Sessions have become major social events and a strong symbol of national identity. Daniel Martin Varisco, "On the Meaning of Chewing: The Significance of Qat (*Catha edulis*) in the Yemen Arab Republic", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 21 (1986).

<sup>107</sup> The town of al-Talh, some 20km west of Saada city, reportedly hosted Yemen's single largest open arms market until the authorities shut it down in 2007. Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009. Business is likely to continue, although less conspicuously.

<sup>108</sup> In 1934, a brief war opposed the North Yemeni imamate to the young Saudi kingdom. The latter prevailed, gaining control of three southern provinces. The disputed border finally was demarcated in June 2000, but the agreement delineated only part of the border which has remained highly porous. Saudi Arabia frequently ignores Yemeni sovereignty, funding Yemeni tribes and granting special Saudi passports to Yemeni citizens living close to the border in a bid to ensure their loyalty.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni journalist, Paris, 5 March 2009.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aydarus al-Naqib, Yemeni Socialist Party parliament member, Sanaa, 21 January 2009.

Armed militias more akin to mercenaries have been another of the war's by-products, with recurring allegations that the government has paid tribes or even jihadi groups to assist in the fighting.<sup>112</sup> Recruitment of militiamen expanded the pool of potential war beneficiaries, increasing the incentive to prolong the fight as well as its geographic scope. Moreover, money allocated to fund militias allegedly often ends up in the pockets of the sheikhs who lead them. Such practices, although widely acknowledged to remain unproven, are said to be widespread. An independent journalist claimed:

Government officials and army officers contact certain tribal sheikhs from the Hashid confederation and ask them to set up militias with, say, 1,000 fighters and pay them accordingly. The sheikhs would then mobilise a much lower number and keep the rest of the money.<sup>113</sup>

---

The supply line to the rebels was confirmed by different actors, including some affiliated with the ruling party. Crisis Group interview, General People's Congress member of Consultative Council, Sanaa, 12 January 2009. Yahya al-Huthi acknowledged that the insurgents had bought some weapons from army officers but claimed they had mostly stolen them from army warehouses or captured them in battle. Crisis Group telephone interview, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>112</sup> The issue is highly sensitive. When, in June 2007, the independent weekly *Al-Sharea* published a special report on militias, the government prosecuted three editors and journalists for "disseminating information liable to undermine army morale". Reporters Sans Frontières, November 2007. In May 2009, the court had yet to pass sentence. One article highlighted the process and networks through which tribal groups from the Hashid confederation were induced to fight for the government. *Al-Sharea*, 2 June 2007. Another claimed that the army was mobilising al-Qaeda-linked jihadi militants. *Al-Sharea*, 9 June 2007. Journalists have long maintained that jihadis had joined regular army troops. The media accusations remain unproven.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009. Others have reported that some tribes command stipends from both government and rebels. Crisis Group interview, civil engineer based in Saada until 2007, Sanaa, 4 January 2009. The militia issue gained particular prominence during the war's fifth round in 2008, when Hashid tribal leaders – notably Husein al-Ahmar (a parliament member, seen as a key Saudi ally) promised to raise a 20,000-strong "popular army" to fight the rebels. *Yemen Times*, 10 July 2008. According to several analysts, the government had asked Riyadh to fund the militia, which also benefited from help from Islamists such as Abd-al-Majid al-Zindani. (He established the al-Iman religious university in 1993 after years in Saudi Arabia, is an important member of the al-Islah party, apparent leader of its radical Muslim Brother wing and rumoured to maintain links to international jihadi networks.) See Gregory Johnsen,

Ultimately, in the words of a Zaydi intellectual who belongs to the ruling party, “the war has created numerous interests that have extended a culture of war. We must find ways of spreading a culture of peace”.<sup>114</sup>

#### D. PERCEIVED FOREIGN MEDDLING

Both difficult to prove and hard to dispel, the perception of direct third party involvement is commonplace. Much speculation has revolved around a purported Saudi-Iranian proxy war waged on Yemeni soil. Since 1979, competition between Riyadh and Tehran has become a defining regional dynamic.<sup>115</sup> Most manifest during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war (when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states bankrolled Iraq), it has been aggravated of late by real or perceived Iranian ascendancy in Lebanon and the Palestinian arena as well as by alleged Shiite irredentism in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province and throughout the Gulf.<sup>116</sup> The Saada war, with its underlying albeit largely misleading Sunni/Shiite dimension, has become part of this narrative of geopolitical and sectarian rivalry. Other parties also have sought a role. In 2007, Qatar carried out mediation efforts that, according to many analysts,

Saudi Arabia ultimately helped scuttle.<sup>117</sup> Libya is alleged to have supported the rebels.<sup>118</sup>

As seen, officials point to purported Iranian financial, military and political aid to the rebels,<sup>119</sup> while others suggest possible rebel training in Iran.<sup>120</sup> Support from Jaafari and Zaydi communities outside Yemen, notably in Iran, also has been suggested, including by independent observers.<sup>121</sup> Although an Iranian role cannot be excluded, it is not self-evident. With the 1979 Islamic revolution, a number of Zaydi intellectuals have been drawn to Iran’s revolutionary ideology; likewise, Lebanon’s Hizbollah and its leaders enjoy widespread support, even beyond Zaydi revivalist circles. From Tehran’s perspective, moreover, a Shiite rebellion along Saudi Arabia’s borders is strategically beneficial. Still, serious theological differences between Zaydism and Jaafarism and the persistent Arab-Persian divide have limited Iran’s influence.

Huthi leaders and others claim Saudi interference, underscoring in particular supposed funding of government and local tribes during the fourth round in an effort to undermine Qatari mediation.<sup>122</sup> Many further assert that, during the fifth round, Riyadh bankrolled tribal groups, mainly those connected with the Hashid confederation.<sup>123</sup> The Kingdom denies any participation in the conflict,<sup>124</sup> and its critics have not offered con-

---

“Profile of Sheikh Abd al-Majid al-Zindani”, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 7 (2006). According to some reports, President Salih was fearful the government could lose control and changed his mind, deciding to end the war. This is said to have angered tribal elements and potential militiamen, who had been promised salaries. Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, secretary general of al-Haqq party, Sanaa, 9 January 2009. Feelings of neglect were not limited to mercenaries ready to join the “popular army”. Aydarus al-Naqib, an opposition parliament member from the southern region of Yafea, claimed: “More than twenty soldiers from my own district have died since the beginning of the war. Neither army soldiers nor volunteers fighting alongside the army have received proper treatment. The families of those who were injured or killed did not receive any compensation and often were informed very late of what had happened. This inevitably created new tensions”. Crisis Group interview, Aydarus al-Naqib, Yemeni Socialist Party parliament member, Sanaa, 21 January 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, intellectual and member of the General People’s Congress, Sanaa, 13 January 2009.

<sup>115</sup> See, eg, Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition (1968-1971)* (London, 2004).

<sup>116</sup> Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London, 2008).

---

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009; Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009; tribal sheikh from Saada governorate and member of mediation committees in 2004, 2005 and 2006, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>118</sup> The government claimed Libya helped the rebels during the fourth round but subsequently dropped the accusation. Yemeni officials did not mention Libya during a series of interviews conducted for this report in early 2009.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009.

<sup>120</sup> *Al-Hayat* (pan-Arab daily), 26 March 2009.

<sup>121</sup> During the second round, supreme Shiite religious leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a declaration from Najaf accusing the Yemeni government of racial discrimination. News Yemen, 7 May 2005; and Crisis Group interview, tribal sheikh from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>122</sup> According to a Consultative Council member from the ruling party, “while the Saudis had been very cautious until then, not wanting to get involved in the Saada issue, Qatar’s intervention infuriated them. This is when they became more massively involved and started satisfying our financial needs”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>123</sup> An opposition leader accused Saudi Arabia of seeking to “destabilise the country”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>124</sup> Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to Yemen explicitly denied his country’s involvement: “The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia views the Saada conflict as an internal one and therefore

vincing proof.<sup>125</sup> That said, a Saudi role would hardly be surprising, given shared borders and Riyadh's long tradition of intervention in Yemeni politics through tribal, religious and economic channels as well as through direct and official funding of the state budget. Referring to this age-old pattern, a foreign analyst coined the phrase "riyalpolitik".<sup>126</sup>

In reality, this role is more complex and nuanced than the rebels typically assert. For instance, it has not been driven by anti-Zaydi or Hashemite animus. Indeed, there is reason to believe that early on certain elements in Riyadh indirectly supported the Huthis, as the Kingdom hosted members of the Zaydi elite who fled after the 1962 republican revolution.<sup>127</sup> Instead, as historically has been the case, a variety of Saudi actors (the government, religious institutions, security apparatus, tribes, opposition groups and businessmen) pursue divergent, at times competing agendas in neighbouring Yemen, funding tribal, religious or military segments of society. Some see an interest in undermining government control, preventing Yemen from becoming a regional rival or following the lead of tribal allies who resent domination from the centre. Others believe in the need to bolster the government, fearful that Yemen's instability ultimately will spill over into the Kingdom.

---

does not intervene". Crisis Group interview, Ambassador Ali Hamdan, Sanaa, 13 January 2009.

<sup>125</sup> At best, accusations are backed by hearsay. Referring to an alleged Saudi role during the fifth round, for example, a Zaydi scholar asserted: "Some people inside the ministry of defence told me that Saudi Arabia was paying as much as \$10 million each week. The money went to tribal leaders, the army and people inside the ministry". Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>126</sup> The riyal is the Saudi currency. Gregory Gause, *Saudi-Yemeni Relations. Domestic Structures and Foreign Influence* (New York, 1990), p. 112.

<sup>127</sup> Hasan Zayd of the al-Haqq party said, "there has been no external support for the Huthis. The movement has been locally financed, except during the second and third rounds, when Zaydis in Saudi Arabia sent money with the Saudi government's agreement. The latter's position is ambiguous. It has successively supported both sides, not for strictly ideological reasons but because it wants war and instability in Yemen". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 9 January 2009. A Saada sheikh claimed that Saudi Arabia had supported the rebels during the first round with food: "This was linked to the fact that the tribe of Abdallah al-Ruzami, one of the main Huthi leaders, straddles the border and therefore is half Yemeni and half Saudi". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

## E. WESTERN SILENCE

If regional meddling is a possibility, Western silence has been a certainty, with much the same result: allowing the war to fester, intensify and spread. An internal conflict that, with adequate outside pressure, could have been resolved is now threatening to destabilise an already fragile and vulnerable state that the U.S. and others have identified as an important battleground in their fight against jihadi Islamism.

Such passivity has several explanations. First is the paucity of information and inadequate, at times contradictory, communications from the rebels that have obscured the war's scale and impact. Diplomats, journalists, researchers and NGOs, whether Yemeni or foreign, have had little to no access to Saada and surrounding areas as a result of official restrictions; they have thus been unable to assess the level of destruction or interview victims.<sup>128</sup> By the same token, the rebels' poor communications and lack of an articulated agenda have hampered information-gathering.

Western attitudes have also been shaped by the rebels' anti-U.S. and anti-Israel rhetoric which, coupled with vague and ill-defined demands, has alienated governments that might otherwise empathise with their suffering.<sup>129</sup> Yemeni authorities have skilfully portrayed the conflict as part of the broader war on terrorism, thereby tapping into U.S. and European post-11 September anxiety to combat potential Islamist foes. Criticised in the West for its tendency to co-opt rather than confront jihadi militants, Sanaa had good reason to demonstrate its disposition to fight terrorist groups even if – or perhaps especially because – the "Huthi terrorists" were an isolated, grievance-based group detached from any al-Qaeda-type network and represented a group, Zaydi Hashemites, that already had lost out in the 1962 revolution.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, Western governments also might have feared that pressure risked

---

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group's January 2009 request to the interior ministry for permission to travel to Saada has remained unanswered. More troubling, in April 2009, Crisis Group's consultant who did field work for this report and has worked in Yemen since 2001 was barred from re-entry at Sanaa airport. Security officials took a draft of the report. Yemeni authorities have not responded to multiple requests for an explanation.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>130</sup> Ludmila du Bouchet, "The State, Political Islam and Violence: The Reconfiguration of Yemeni Politics since 9/11", in Amélie Blom, Laetitia Bucaille and Luis Martinez, eds., *The Enigma of Islamist Violence* (London, 2007), p. 144.

weakening a government already facing multiple challenges, including al-Qaeda and a sinking economy.<sup>131</sup>

The conflict gradually attracted greater, but still insufficient, attention, primarily thanks to efforts by humanitarian aid agencies.<sup>132</sup> Independent journalists, Western diplomats and international humanitarian workers believe that the resulting international pressure, albeit belated, contributed to the July 2008 ceasefire.<sup>133</sup> The U.S. and EU request early that month for improved combat zone access for international NGOs and UN agencies signalled growing concern and heightened pressure on the parties.<sup>134</sup> Likewise, once the ceasefire was in place, the donor community enjoyed leverage, as the government sought reconstruction funding.<sup>135</sup> All of this makes the relative lack of global interest during the war's early years – when the conflict, arguably, could have been halted in its tracks – the more regrettable.

## V. MEDIATION ATTEMPTS

Efforts to end the war have taken on numerous forms. The government gave a green light to various mediation committees consisting of tribal, religious and political leaders; Libya and especially Qatar intervened; and the government set up groups to survey damage, assess costs and launch reconstruction. Each failed. It is important to understand why.

### A. TRIBAL AND POLITICAL MEDIATION COMMITTEES

From the outset, and to its credit, the government pursued an authentically Yemeni negotiated solution.<sup>136</sup> Before, during and after each round of fighting, it established indigenous mediation committees, building on the country's tradition of dialogue between competing individuals and groups.<sup>137</sup> Ultimately, insufficient political will on both sides undid the committees' work.

Mediation efforts took off in early 2004, as tensions rose between Husein al-Huthi and the government. Local informal efforts were reminiscent of traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms between tribes that historically were conducted by Hashemites who, as outsiders, were deemed independent – even though, this time, the Hashemites were party to the conflict.<sup>138</sup> In June 2004, the government set up a committee comprising a mix of local and national figures, several close to al-Huthi.<sup>139</sup> In parallel, a civil society initia-

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist and mediation committee member in 2004, Sanaa, 8 January 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Examples include circulation of the *Saada Update* bi-weekly newsletter by the World Food Programme to all Yemen-based UN agencies and NGOs; the International Committee of the Red Cross's programs in Saada governorate beginning with the fourth round; creation of an emergency response group in 2008 to coordinate local and international NGO action; and, more generally, growing involvement of international humanitarian organisations since 2007. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian NGO country director, Sanaa, 13 January 2009. During the fifth round in 2008, Human Rights Watch sent two separate missions to Yemen to assess the situation after the July ceasefire.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, General People's Congress executive, Sanaa, 20 January 2009.

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group interview, EU member state diplomat, Sanaa, 10 January 2009.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western development official, Sanaa, 6 January 2009.

<sup>136</sup> In a senior government official's words, "by favouring mediation, the president wanted to show there is no military solution to the conflict". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 7 January 2009.

<sup>137</sup> It is difficult to determine precisely how many mediation committees have been active since 2004, a symptom of their decentralised nature. Some received their mandate directly from the president; others acted on their own initiative. The overall number ranges from five (Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, director of the Bureau of National Security and presidential office, Sanaa, 14 January 2009) to "seven or eight" (Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 January 2009).

<sup>138</sup> Steven Caton, *Yemeni Chronicle: An Anthropology of War and Mediation* (New York, 2005).

<sup>139</sup> These included his brother Yahya, also a member of parliament; Muhammad al-Mansur, a prominent Zaydi scholar and al-Haqq party member; and Abd-al-Karim Jadban, a parliament member for the ruling party and a founder of the Believing Youth. Crisis Group interview, tribal sheikh from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

tive endorsed by the president gathered leading figures from the ruling and opposition parties. According to participants, the initiatives foundered essentially due to lack of coordination – and consensus – between government and army. Access to Saada was unsafe and, just as mediators were scheduled to meet with Husein al-Huthi, the army began shelling rebel positions (see below), arguably in order to scuttle the effort.<sup>140</sup>

The government established similar political committees during subsequent rounds, each with a different makeup – and each with a similar fate. They faced multiple challenges, for example absence of telephone communications with the rebel leadership after security forces cut the lines.<sup>141</sup> They were complemented by local committees comprising tribal and religious elements, which loosely coordinated their work with the more political track.<sup>142</sup>

A third type of committee, spearheaded by Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, aimed at opening a dialogue with detained Believing Youth militants and convincing them there was no religious basis for taking arms against the government. In line with government policy, it lumped together Huthi-led rebels and al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadis. The committee was viewed in a somewhat positive light both domestically and internationally as an original means of fighting terrorism.<sup>143</sup> Al-Hitar claimed success, estimating that half those involved were convinced to halt their violent activity,<sup>144</sup> although figures are unverifiable. However, the U.S. and many analysts ultimately were more sceptical, arguing that a number of militants involved in the process continued to fight, notably by going to Iraq.<sup>145</sup> The project was discarded in April 2007 after al-Hitar was named minister of religious endowments (*awqaf*) and the regime altered its anti-terror policy, opting for more forceful repression.

The government took other steps, alongside mediation, to appease the situation. In September 2005, on the revolution's 43rd anniversary, President Salih announced compensation payments to the Hamid al-Din family, whose three successive Zaydi imams (Yahya, Ahmad and Muhammad al-Badr) had ruled North Yemen until the 1962 revolution.<sup>146</sup> In 2006 the appointment of Yahya al-Shami, a Hashemite, as Saada governor, replacing the more hardline Yahya al-Amri,<sup>147</sup> and the pardon and release of prisoners all were intended to support mediation efforts.

There are many possible explanations for the failure of non-military attempts. According to some, committee participants were too overtly political, lacked local roots, nurtured preconceived ideas about the actors or lacked sufficient knowledge about the Saada region.<sup>148</sup>

Arguably the most serious impediment was that both mediation efforts and steps announced by the government to calm the situation were either undermined by accompanying repressive measures or, more simply, not implemented at all.<sup>149</sup> This partly resulted from competing approaches between the political leadership and army command. According to a Zaydi scholar who participated in unofficial mediation efforts, “when the president called for mediation, the army did not always cooperate. Mediation efforts would have succeeded had there been a consensus between the politicians and the army. Instead, they were sabotaged by disagreement”.<sup>150</sup> This claim was supported by different participants and independent observers. Another mediator offered an example of government branches working at cross-purposes:

---

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interview, civil society activist and mediation committee member in 2004, Sanaa, 8 January 2009.

<sup>141</sup> News Yemen, 15 February 2007.

<sup>142</sup> During the fifth round, tribal sheikhs from Saada had some success, reportedly dissuading the president from creating a “popular army” and persuading him a ceasefire was possible. Crisis Group interview, journalist affiliated with the Yemeni Socialist Party, Sanaa, 17 January 2009.

<sup>143</sup> See Laurent Bonnefoy, “Yemen’s nervous balancing act”, *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 2006.

<sup>144</sup> *Yemen Observer* (Sanaa weekly), 4 June 2008.

<sup>145</sup> Chris Boucek, Shazadi Beg and John Borgan, “Opening Up the Jihadi Debate: Yemen’s Committee for Dialogue”, in Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (New York, 2009).

---

<sup>146</sup> *Al-Thawra*, 26 September 2005.

<sup>147</sup> Yahya al-Shami was replaced in April 2007, allegedly because he was too soft toward the rebels. Two sons are said to have been briefly imprisoned for rebel ties during the fifth round. Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, al-Haqq secretary general, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi intellectual, Sanaa, 14 January 2009. Faiz al-Awjari, a tribal sheikh from Saada and ruling party parliamentarian said, “participation in the political mediation committees by people from all parts of the country actually broadened the war and turned it into a big affair. Things could have been solved locally. The opposition used this war as a way to put pressure on the ruling party”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>149</sup> For example, only 70 of the 500 prisoners whose release was announced in September 2007 appear to have been effectively freed at the time. Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Sanaa, 5 January 2009.

<sup>150</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi intellectual, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

The president asked us to go to Saada. We had arranged a meeting with Husein al-Huthi to discuss ways of resolving the conflict. A helicopter was ready to take us. Just as we were about to leave, army forces close to where we were located started bombing Huthi positions, so it had to be cancelled. I think their real objective was to undermine mediation attempts, to show that the only effective response to the Huthis was a military one.<sup>151</sup>

The committees' work was further hampered by the arrest of a number of Zaydi intellectuals, journalists and former committee members, including Abd-al-Karim al-Khaywani (in 2005 and 2008), Yahya al-Daylami (2005), Muhammad Luqman (2005) and Muhammad Muftah (2005). They were either detained without trial or sentenced to lengthy prison terms by a special criminal court in proceedings deemed unfair by Amnesty International.<sup>152</sup> Purported repressive actions by security forces in Saada also are said to have played a negative role.<sup>153</sup> The arrest and imprisonment of important mediators such as Abdallah Husein al-Muayyad, a Saada cleric, and Salih al-Wajaman, a tribal sheikh also from Saada, validated the view among many that the army, if not the government as a whole, was intent on disrupting conciliation efforts.<sup>154</sup>

## B. QATAR'S MEDIATION

Several regional governments were involved in efforts to end fighting, at times in response to the Yemeni government's request. During the third round, it reportedly asked Libya for help, though relations gradually soured as the government accused Tripoli of supporting the rebels.<sup>155</sup> Saudi Arabia also is said to have discreetly intervened to settle conflicts between various tribes with which it was allied and which were fighting one another in the context of the Saada war.<sup>156</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition party mediation committee member, Sanaa, 8 January 2009.

<sup>152</sup> "Yemen", Amnesty International, report for 2006, published May 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>154</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Sanaa, 20 January 2009. "Disappearances and Arbitrary Arrests in the Armed Conflict with Huthi Rebels in Yemen", Human Rights Watch report, October 2008.

<sup>155</sup> In May 2007, Yemen recalled its ambassadors to Iran and Libya for consultation. *Yemen Times*, 14 May 2007; however, it has yet to produce evidence of Libyan meddling. An apparent cause of irritation was Yahya al-Huthi's intermittent presence in Libya and Tripoli's refusal to extradite him. Almotamar.net, 16 February 2007.

<sup>156</sup> Crisis Group interview, tribal sheikh from Saada, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

The most significant mediation initiative came from Qatar, part of its broader conflict resolution strategy that has included Lebanon, Palestine and Sudan.<sup>157</sup> The effort apparently began during a May 2007 visit to Yemen by Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. According to reports, he sent a foreign ministry team to Saada along with government-appointed Yemeni mediators to meet the rebel leadership. Yahya al-Huthi also travelled to Qatar to convey the rebels' demands. The result was the 16 June 2007 joint ceasefire announcement, based on a list of general principles that remained secret until the rebels released it almost a year later.<sup>158</sup> These included, inter alia, an agreement by the rebels to relinquish their positions and lay down heavy arms and government commitment to declare an amnesty and launch Qatari-supported reconstruction projects in Saada. The government also was to set up another committee comprising Yemenis from both sides as well as Qataris who would seek to reach a peace agreement.

On 1 February 2008, the two sides met in Doha to sign a peace accord.<sup>159</sup> Although violence never ceased, even after the ceasefire agreement,<sup>160</sup> expectations soared, particularly in terms of Qatari funding and, in the subsequent period, both sides took tangible steps toward implementation.<sup>161</sup> At the core of the agreement was

---

<sup>157</sup> *The New York Times*, 9 July 2008.

<sup>158</sup> The rebels revealed the text in late March 2008, when tensions in the war zone threatened to undermine the accord. *Al-Sharea*, 22 March 2008.

<sup>159</sup> The rebels were represented by Yahya al-Huthi and their spokesman Salih Habra; the government sent Abd-al-Karim al-Iryani, a former prime minister and political adviser to President Salih, and Gen. Ali Muhsin. Hamad Bin Jasim Al Thani, Qatar's prime minister, signed for his government. Terms of the accord included a halt in effect to all military operations, release of all prisoners within a month from February 2008, exile to Qatar of Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi, Abd-al-Karim al-Huthi (another of Husein's brothers and a rebel leader) and Abdallah al-Ruzami (who refused to leave Yemen, alleging tensions on the ground) and establishment of reconstruction and compensation committees. *Al-Sharea*, 22 March 2008.

<sup>160</sup> On 15 July, a convoy carrying three Qatari mediators and Yemeni parliament and consultative council members came under rebel fire near the town of al-Talh in Sahar district. Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi condemned the attack and denied any involvement; the government claimed it had been planned and carried out by al-Huthi supporters. *News Yemen*, 16 July 2007. Four days before signing the Doha agreement, Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi accused government forces of shelling his positions in Haydan district, threatening the peace accord. *Al-Nida*, 30 January 2008.

<sup>161</sup> Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi declared that the rebels had handed over 72 prisoners (officers and persons who had fought alongside the armed forces). *Al-Sharea*, 14 July 2007. The

Qatar's pledge to finance reconstruction and launch major development projects in Saada, possibly to the tune of \$300 million-\$500 million, although figures were never released.<sup>162</sup>

Optimism was short-lived. Renewed heavy fighting soon rendered the peace accord obsolete. Whereas the rebels continued to press for its implementation even after Qatar disengaged,<sup>163</sup> the government claimed it had lived up to its commitments, the rebels had not and thus Qatar's intervention no longer was needed.<sup>164</sup> In March 2009, President Salih confirmed that Qatar's mediation had failed. He suggested that Doha unintentionally had enabled the rebels to believe they were "equal to the state" because they were negotiating directly with the government.<sup>165</sup>

The Qatari effort broke down for several reasons. First was the absence of an effective follow-up mechanism to monitor implementation and adjudicate disputes. In a way, the initiative essentially amounted to throwing money at a problem, hoping it would disappear. Yemeni members of the implementation committee met with rebel leaders but made little progress because they operated in a vacuum; there were no regular contacts between signatories and Qatari officials and no formal mechanism to address disagreements.<sup>166</sup>

Disagreements abounded over the extent to which the parties implemented the accord, with each side blaming the other for the breakdown.<sup>167</sup> The government claimed that rebel commander Abdallah al-Ruzami had "refused to come down from the mountains, as stipulated in the peace deal",<sup>168</sup> while the rebels contended that "the Yemeni government did not respect

---

government launched a damage assessment of public and private properties in six Saada districts. The reconstruction committee was headed by Saada's governor, Mutahhar al-Masri. IRIN News, 11 November 2007.

<sup>162</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aydarus al-Naqib, Yemeni Socialist Party parliament member, Sanaa, 21 January 2009. The contribution was part of a wider effort by the newly established Qatar Foundation for Development, which at the time promised to undertake infrastructure and development projects outside Saada governorate as well. 26 September, 21 June 2007.

<sup>163</sup> News Yemen, 19 July 2008.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interview, Zaydi intellectual, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>165</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 26 March 2009.

<sup>166</sup> Uthman al-Majali, a ruling party parliamentarian, said, "Qatar tried to mediate, but they didn't really know what was happening in Saada". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>167</sup> *Al-Sharea*, 10 May 2008.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Sanaa, 7 January 2009.

its promises"<sup>169</sup> to normalise the situation in Saada and stop harassing its people. Rebel leaders also mentioned the arrest by security forces of a mediator representing the Huthis and accused media outlets close to the army of organising a campaign against the Doha agreement.<sup>170</sup>

A second complicating factor was competition between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Since Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani acceded to power in 1995, Doha has forged an independent foreign policy, mediating regional conflicts, developing commercial partnerships with both Iran and Israel and publicly criticising Saudi policy at Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council meetings. In so doing, it provoked Riyadh's ire, and tensions between the small emirate and large monarchy grew apace.<sup>171</sup> Creation of the Al-Jazeera news channel in 1997 and its frequent attacks against the Saudi ruling family proved another major irritant.<sup>172</sup> Qatari mediation in Saada – a region that borders Saudi Arabia – appears to have prompted Riyadh to pour money into the Yemeni military and allied tribes. At the same time, Saudi media portrayed the Qatari intercession as guided by Iran, suggesting that its timing reflected a joint bid to save the rebels from looming defeat.<sup>173</sup>

### C. RECONSTRUCTION COMMITTEES

In the words of a parliament member, "without compensation and reconstruction, the war will never stop".<sup>174</sup> Accordingly, less than a week after he officially "ended" the war on 17 July 2008, President Salih created the Saada Committee for Peace and Reconstruction. In parallel, he formed a local committee comprising notable Saada figures, such as Faris Manaa (a tribal sheikh, prominent businessman and brother of Hasan

---

<sup>169</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, Berlin, 3 February 2009. Local government supporters also claimed Qatar's payments to local tribes and armed groups amounted to indirect rebel funding, tainting Doha's role in their eyes. "Qatar paid important sums of money as gifts to rebels. People were unhappy with this, and it led to the failure of the Doha accord". Crisis Group interview, Faiz al-Awjari, parliament member from Saada governorate for the General Congress Party, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>170</sup> *Yemen Times*, 24 April 2008. For criticism of the Qatari mediation, see *Al-Shumua* (Sanaa independent weekly), 20 and 27 April 2008.

<sup>171</sup> See John Peterson, "Qatar and the World: Branding for a Micro-State", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 60, no. 4 (2006).

<sup>172</sup> See Mamoun Fandy, *(Un)Civil War of Words: Media and Politics in the Arab World* (Westport, 2007); and *The New York Times*, 4 January 2008.

<sup>173</sup> *Ukaz* (Saudi daily), 23 August 2007.

<sup>174</sup> Crisis Group interview, Aydarus al-Naqib, Yemeni Socialist Party parliament member, Sanaa, 21 January 2009.

Manaa, Saada's governor) and members of elected local councils. The presence in both committees of individuals perceived as close to the rebels, such as Sheikh Ali Nassir al-Qirsha, mollified Huthi leaders.<sup>175</sup> The committees appeared to work cooperatively and were given access to a \$55 million special fund under the prime minister's authority – a sum far less than anticipated or needed, but a start nonetheless.<sup>176</sup> Their goal was to survey the destruction, start reconstruction and dispense compensation in war-affected areas.<sup>177</sup> They also were mandated to solve disputes between the various parties.

By late December 2008, the committees reportedly had completed 80 per cent of the survey in the affected districts; they assessed that 7,180 houses, 1,412 farms, 267 mosques, 94 schools, eight medical centres, four police stations, three court buildings, three other government facilities and two religious centres had been destroyed in the fighting or by air bombardments.<sup>178</sup> By mid-March 2009, the government claimed it has rebuilt 960 private homes during the first reconstruction phase (focusing on Sahar and Razih districts)<sup>179</sup> and completed the damage survey in Harf Sufyan and Bani Hushaysh.<sup>180</sup>

Local and international organisations simultaneously launched a humanitarian assistance drive in Saada immediately after the end of the fifth round. UN agencies

and international NGOs carried out a joint rapid-needs assessment in August–September 2008, covering a range of sectors (including sanitation, health, education and civilian protection) and budgeting \$4.6 million to various implementing agencies to deal with the emergency between October and December 2008.<sup>181</sup> The Qatari Red Crescent Society, as well as the presidentially-established Salih foundation, distributed goods to refugees, while Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières, Médecins du Monde, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Islamic Relief pursued their own relief programs, including in zones that remained under rebel control.<sup>182</sup> The government encouraged displaced persons to go home, providing cash incentives, transportation, food and other commodities to families willing to return to their villages,<sup>183</sup> albeit with mixed results.<sup>184</sup>

Although reconstruction officially is proceeding apace,<sup>185</sup> it faces severe challenges that could jeopardise efforts to avert another round of warfare. Funding became an issue immediately after the fifth round in the context of the global economic meltdown and plummeting oil prices that forced the government to revise its already approved 2009 budget.<sup>186</sup> In response, Sanaa appealed to the international community for financial support. A senior government official said, “there is no external solution to the conflict, and the reconstruction committees must address the main grievances. But the government needs resources to fulfil its commitments”.<sup>187</sup> Although officials met with Western governments in

---

<sup>175</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hasan Zayd, secretary general of al-Haqq party, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>176</sup> Nabil al-Shayban, a planning ministry official, said, “as an initial requirement the reconstruction fund would need \$190 million for immediate needs. The government has contributed \$55 million. The rest will need to be provided by the donor community”. IRIN News, 18 September 2008. The planning ministry also projected that the plan should be completed with a four-year (2009–2012) special development effort in Saada costing an additional \$500 million. *Al-Nida*, 12 November 2008.

<sup>177</sup> Crisis Group interview, Rashad al-Alimi, vice-prime minister for security and defence, Sanaa, 11 March 2009. The committees' work and creation of the fund were designed to avoid the experience of a previous reconstruction effort. In November 2007, a committee surveyed damage in nine of Saada's fifteen districts. According to Rashad al-Alimi, much of the money allocated to residents ended up in rebel hands and was used to rearm. “This time the people are given 25 per cent of the sum needed to rebuild their homes. Only once they have started, they receive the rest of the money”. Crisis Group interview, Faiz al-Awjari, parliament member from Saada governorate for the General Congress Party, Sanaa, 12 January 2009.

<sup>178</sup> Saba News, 23 December 2008.

<sup>179</sup> Saba News, 15 March 2009.

<sup>180</sup> Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Thabit, executive director, Saada reconstruction fund, Sanaa, 21 March 2009.

---

<sup>181</sup> Crisis Group interview, international development worker, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Crisis Group interview, country director, international humanitarian NGO, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>183</sup> World Food Programme, bi-weekly report on Saada emergency operation, 30 August 2008.

<sup>184</sup> Many displaced persons balked either because their original areas of residence had been mined or out of fear of insurgent reprisals for allegedly supporting the government. Crisis Group interviews, international development expert, Sanaa, 4 January 2009; tribal sheikh from Saada governorate, Sanaa, 9 January 2009. The question of the internally displaced has continued to vex the government and relief agencies. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian NGO official, Paris, 28 January 2009.

<sup>185</sup> *26 September*, 27 November 2008.

<sup>186</sup> In the six months following the 17 July 2008 ceasefire, oil prices dropped precipitously. Parliament approved the 2009 budget on the basis of \$93 per barrel; between January and May 2009, the price of a barrel remained at an average of around \$50. In response, the government announced it would cut spending (excluding public sector salaries) by half. Oil revenues are around 70 per cent of the government's overall income. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>187</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 7 January 2009.

the weeks following the proclaimed end to fighting, the donor community was cautious. In the words of a diplomat from an important donor country:

There is a consensus in the international community that we should wait for guarantees before launching development projects in Saada. No one will invest in that region unless there is a guarantee that war will not resume. This is a way to put pressure on the government and elicit information on the reconstruction and conciliation process.<sup>188</sup>

Another diplomat explained that Western governments would be reluctant to financially back a government-controlled fund meant to repair what government forces themselves had destroyed and were likely to destroy again if another round erupted, unless conditions on the ground stabilised.<sup>189</sup>

Persistent instability in the affected regions is another factor hindering reconstruction efforts. Since the July 2008 ceasefire, Saada governorate remains unstable principally due to skirmishes between pro-Huthi and pro-government tribal groups. In particular, the latter accuse the committees of bias, and, in retaliation, members of aggrieved tribes block roads and attack rival tribes. Regime hardliners who oppose reconciliation also criticise the committees' work and take steps to undermine them.<sup>190</sup> They might well be behind the forced resignation in mid-November 2008 of Abd-al-Qadir Hilal as minister of local administration and head of the national reconstruction committee. Security officials had accused Hilal of excessive leniency toward the rebels.<sup>191</sup> For several independent observers, this was another sign of regime division and hesitation to end the war.<sup>192</sup> Under his replacement as reconstruction committee head, Abd-al-Aziz Dhahab, the committee has lost dynamism and much of the credit it previously had gained.

The Huthi leadership likewise has displayed ambivalence toward the reconstruction committees. Although international NGOs and UN agencies have been able to carry out programs in war-affected zones without apparent difficulty, access by national fund and com-

mittee members has been less smooth.<sup>193</sup> Yahya al-Huthi has accused both governmental and local reconstruction committees of lying about their objectives as well as spying on the Huthis and their sympathisers. Moreover, he said, "the government is using the committees to convince foreigners that it is taking positive steps".<sup>194</sup> Others echoed al-Huthi's message.<sup>195</sup> As a result, relief officials assert, the national reconstruction fund has been unable to fully assess the damage in Huthi-controlled regions – reportedly those that suffered most from bombardments and fighting.<sup>196</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nabil al-Sufi, independent journalist, editor in chief of *Abwab* monthly magazine, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>191</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 16 November 2008.

<sup>192</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nabil al-Sufi, independent journalist, editor in chief of *Abwab* monthly magazine, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

---

<sup>193</sup> Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian NGO official, Paris, 28 January 2008.

<sup>194</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Yahya al-Huthi, Berlin, 3 February 2009.

<sup>195</sup> An opposition figure asserted: "The government agreed to have pro-Huthi individuals on the reconstruction committees only because it wanted the Huthis to believe that it genuinely has the will to end the war, while in fact it does not". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 9 January 2009.

<sup>196</sup> Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian NGO country representative, Sanaa, 13 January 2009. The claim reconstruction fund officials have had no access to rebel-controlled zones was contested by the fund's executive director: "We work with everyone. We do not care if they are Huthis or with the government. The fund's role is not political. We treat all Yemeni citizens equally. We only carry out a technical evaluation and then we give people whose property has been destroyed a cheque so that they can buy what they need to rebuild their house or farm. Frankly, there is no ban on our reconstruction work by the Huthis. We work wherever we want. If Yahya al-Huthi, who is abroad, criticises us and accuses us, it is because he does not know what we are doing exactly, how many houses have already been rebuilt and how much progress we have made with the population". Crisis Group interview, Muhammad Thabit, Sanaa, 21 March 2009.

## VI. BUILDING A LASTING PEACE

Belligerents as well as independent observers agree on one thing: under current conditions, a sixth round is only a matter of time. The prospect of parliamentary elections in April 2009 was cause for some relief; many observers believed the government would wish to avoid renewed confrontation ahead of polling. On 22 February, however, President Salih and the opposition jointly announced a two-year postponement of the vote, removing a possible obstacle to war.<sup>197</sup> Fears heightened as rumours swirled of a \$1 billion arms deal with Russia which, if true, would reinvigorate the army.<sup>198</sup> At the same time, Huthi leaders demonstrated their ability to mobilise large numbers. During the January Gaza war, they staged anti-Israel demonstrations in Saada replete with the Believing Youth's standard slogans. On the Prophet's birthday in March, rebels organised a rally reportedly attended by tens of thousands and at which Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi denounced Yemen's alliance with the U.S., warning the government it would lose if it were to launch an attack.<sup>199</sup>

Also in March, rebel spokesman Salih Habra declared that "the war is in no one's interest" but went on to accuse the government of preparing a sixth round.<sup>200</sup> Two weeks later the army's official media outlet referred to the Huthis as a "seditionist and subversive group" and charged them with pursuing "terrorist activities" and "oppressing communities and households".<sup>201</sup> Serious skirmishes broke out in early April between rebels and army units in Saada's Ghamir and Razih districts<sup>202</sup> and persisted for weeks. Each party promptly accused the other of violating the peace agreement. Several steps are required to forestall renewed war.

### A. BRIDGING THE SECTARIAN GAP

The portrayal of Huthi militants, both in the media and official discourse, as agents of a wider Shiite conspiracy to take over the country is largely unfounded and – in the context of deepening regional sectarian polarisation – dangerous. Instead, the state should renew efforts undertaken by the republic in the late 1960s

<sup>197</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 26 February 2009.

<sup>198</sup> Reuters, 28 February 2009. The army denied the rumour. *26 September*, 26 February 2009.

<sup>199</sup> Marib Press, 10 March 2009.

<sup>200</sup> Ishtiraki.net (Yemeni Socialist Party information website), 15 March 2009.

<sup>201</sup> *26 September*, 2 April 2009.

<sup>202</sup> News Yemen, 2 April 2009.

to more systematically integrate Zaydis and Hashemites into the political system. It also should discourage media outlets from fanning social or religious prejudice. Finally, it ought to take steps to ensure representation of Hashemites and Zaydi revivalist figures in higher government and ruling party circles.

Although Zaydi revivalist fears of Salafi or Wahhabi attempts to eradicate them are exaggerated, they contain a kernel of truth and have led to a self-defence reflex. For the state, the appropriate response should be not exclusion and repression but accommodation and inclusion. This would entail a concerted effort to stress positive aspects and contributions to Yemeni identity of Zaydi and Hashemite histories as well as to incorporate Zaydi religious interpretations in textbooks. Public radio and television might, for example, regularly broadcast conferences or sermons by Zaydi scholars, report their views and even encourage cross-sectarian conferences and ecumenical sermons.<sup>203</sup>

### B. REINTEGRATING THE HUTHIS INTO POLITICS

Five years into the conflict, it remains difficult to identify the rebels' objectives. Huthi leaders never spelled them out clearly, often limiting themselves to rejecting government claims. Failure to articulate a coherent political platform has encouraged rumours of secret political and sectarian projects as well as of foreign manipulation. If they are to facilitate resolution of this conflict, the rebels will have to cogently list their grievances – Saada's underdevelopment and exclusion; stigmatisation of Zaydi and Hashemite identities; detention and disappearance of Huthi fighters and allied political figures and intellectuals; and governmental failure to fully compensate war victims – and demands.<sup>204</sup>

<sup>203</sup> President Salih's position is ambivalent. Although nominally a Zaydi, he built a large mosque, inaugurated in November 2008, that uses the Sunni call to prayer (*adhan*), not the Zaydi one. Of the three clerics he appointed to it – from different religious branches – none was associated with Zaydism. Crisis Group interview, official, religious endowments ministry, Sanaa, 21 March 2009. The mosque administration has repeatedly invited Zaydi clerics to deliver the Friday sermon, an initiative that deserves praise and emulation in other mosques. Crisis Group interview, intellectual and GPC member, Sanaa, January 2009.

<sup>204</sup> Rebels took tentative steps in this direction in 2007, establishing the Minbar website. Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi and Salih Habra now send frequent assessments to Sanaa-based journalists of the situation in Saada governorate and giving names and casualty estimates. Crisis Group interview, independent journalist, Sanaa, 8 January 2009. These steps

More broadly, a key to lasting peace likely will be the Huthi movement's normalisation as a political party, a Zaydi revivalist religious-cultural movement, or both. Such reintegration of former dissidents into state structures is not unprecedented. Both the 1960s civil war and the 1994 war of secession witnessed similar outcomes with the progressive co-optation of many rebel leaders in state institutions. Indeed, an array of government and opposition actors have advocated the insurgents' transformation into a political party, an option Salih himself said he favoured.<sup>205</sup> Likewise, Ali al-Anissi, head of the Bureau of National Security and director of the presidential office, claimed that the Huthis' conversion into a political party was a precondition for peace, provided the party respected the constitution and was not based on discrimination against other sects.<sup>206</sup> In the words of a well-informed journalist:

The Huthis actually are a political party but one that refuses to recognise itself as such. They represent a force and a lot of people. They have followers not just in Saada but in many other governorates. It is therefore necessary for them to establish themselves as an institutionalised political structure.<sup>207</sup>

So far, Huthi leaders have balked. The same journalist explained:

Their point is that political parties have failed and that current conditions do not allow for free and fair competition. Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi explicitly rejected the idea because he wants the war to remain a war of self-defence. He said that if he were to articulate a political platform, people would start fighting to defend it – something he rejects.<sup>208</sup>

---

are insufficient, however, as they lack coherence and documentation and are far from constituting a political platform.

<sup>205</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 28 March 2009.

<sup>206</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anissi, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

<sup>207</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni Socialist Party-affiliated journalist, Sanaa, 17 January 2009.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.* Yahya al-Huthi argues that the political system's shortcomings are the primary obstacle to the Huthis' transformation: "We had the experience of the al-Haqq party when we worked within its framework in the early 1990s. It was useless. No one wanted to listen to us. The government tried to manipulate us, especially when it named Ahmad al-Shami as minister of religious endowments in 1997. So we decided to become independent and reject the party system, and we set up the Believing Youth". Crisis Group telephone interview, Berlin, 3 February 2009. In 1997, the nomination of Ahmad al-Shami, secretary general of the al-Haqq party, as religious endowments minister was criticised by Believing Youth leaders, including Husein al-Huthi, who

Rebel leaders might favour an alternative scenario under which they would focus on Zaydi religious activities, assuming tolerance of religious diversity by the state and other religious actors, particularly Salafi groups. In a way, this would be a throwback to the 1990s, when the Believing Youth ran successful summer educational activities and when inter-sectarian tensions were less prominent.<sup>209</sup> Tentative steps in this direction could be under way. According to a journalist:

Since Ramadan [September] 2008, the Huthis have shifted from violence to social, cultural and religious actions, even as they focus on foreign policy issues. This trend mainly is the work of Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi, however; we do not yet know the other leaders' positions.<sup>210</sup>

### C. ENCOURAGING CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Muted reactions from civil society, the opposition and media have been an important and unfortunate feature of the Saada war from the start. Criticism and in-depth analysis of the belligerents' actions have remained rare, in part due to the information vacuum, in part due to fear of state repression. Public reaction also has been low-key, a possible reflection of the government's successful stigmatisation of Huthis as criminals and terrorists.<sup>211</sup>

There have been some notable exceptions. Early in the war, Zaydi-affiliated organisations documented and denounced war-related human rights violations in Saada despite government pressure on its members.<sup>212</sup> More

---

left the party to found his own movement. Samy Dorlian, "Les reformulations identitaires du zaydisme dans leur contexte sociopolitique contemporain", *Chroniques Yéménites*, no. 15 (2008), p. 164.

<sup>209</sup> Bernard Haykel, "A Zaydi revival?", *Yemen Update*, no. 36 (1995).

<sup>210</sup> Crisis Group interview, Nabil al-Sufi, independent journalist, chief editor, *Abwab* monthly, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>211</sup> The government's war blackout has meant media coverage and public debate based on partial information and unverified rumours. Examples of unsubstantiated (at times absurd) assertions abound. On 21 April 2005, *al-Shumua*, a Sanaa weekly close to some army officers, portrayed Huthi militants as agents of international freemasonry; conversely, rumours have spread alleging massive al-Qaeda involvement with army forces since the beginning of the fourth round in 2007.

<sup>212</sup> This was the case in particular of the Yemeni Organisation for the Defence of Democratic Rights and Liberties. It was created in 1993 by Muhammad Abd-al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, a renowned intellectual of Hashemite background and a political science professor at Sanaa University.

recently, in 2007, a group of Yemeni organisations set up “Together against the Saada War”; they chose as their director a non-Zaydi intellectual, Abu Bakr al-Saqqaf, to discourage the notion that it supported the rebels.<sup>213</sup> Activists have met with government officials, staged sit-ins in front of parliament and the presidency building and called for the release of detainees.<sup>214</sup> In 2008, various NGOs convened conferences to draw attention and discuss issues related to the war.<sup>215</sup>

None of these efforts have effectively challenged official discourse or affected public debate; they remain marginal – tolerated but ineffectual and, indeed, tolerated because ineffectual. That is not a reason to abandon them, for they hold a key to improving public information, debunking myths on both sides and building confidence between belligerents by establishing forums for open expression and debate. Local, non-affiliated organisations also could help provide credible assessments of destruction and casualties and assist in reconstruction projects,<sup>216</sup> thus enhancing their credibility in rebel and international eyes.<sup>217</sup>

#### D. A NEW INTERNATIONAL ROLE

International efforts essentially have been of two types: regional intervention (at times well-intentioned but unable to solve the conflict) and humanitarian (chiefly by UN agencies and international humanitarian organisations). A more positive, political and proactive international role is important. This will require a change in outlook on the nature of the war and a more acute understanding of the dangers it poses.

Working with regional actors (notably Gulf Cooperation Council members) and existing Yemeni mediation and reconstruction committees, Western governments should consider several steps: pressing the government to end its information blackout and lift its ban on access to war-affected areas by media, independent researchers, human rights organisations and most humanitarian agencies; pushing the Huthi leadership to articulate practical demands; indicating backing for a negotiated settlement; and pledging reconstruction assistance and

diplomatic support as a means of nudging the parties back to the negotiating table. The last point is of particular importance: donor countries should hold out the promise of long-term development aid to neglected regions such as Saada as an incentive to end the war.<sup>218</sup>

How aid is structured also matters. Support should be allocated to specific reconstruction projects jointly identified by the government, rebels and members of civil society; this should be preceded by an independent survey of destruction and casualties. For both tasks, an inclusive mediation and reconstruction committee ought to be established comprising representatives of the government, rebel movement, civil society and international donor community. Priority development projects – health, education, water sanitation and transportation – should be aimed at improving civilian lives. Longer-term development could be supported by incentives for private investment, notably in the labour-intensive agricultural sector. Although the promise of assistance for the most part should encourage the parties to reach a durable settlement, some funding could begin immediately, both to alleviate hardships and to demonstrate concretely the benefits that can accrue with enhanced stability.

Regionally, there are lessons to be learned from the well-meaning Qatari experience. Because it ran afoul of Saudi Arabia’s perceived interests, some inside the Kingdom’s leadership allegedly undermined the effort – even though this imperilled Yemen’s stability, and all Arabian peninsula states have an interest in such stability given large Yemeni migrant communities in their midst and potential spillover effects from the country’s disintegration. The early 2009 merger of al-Qaeda’s Saudi and Yemeni branches (giving rise to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, whose leaders are

---

<sup>213</sup> Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Sanaa, 20 January 2009.

<sup>214</sup> *Sawt al-Shura* (Sanaa Zaydi weekly), 1 December 2008.

<sup>215</sup> For example, on 28 June 2008, the NGO Muntada Hiwar organised a conference on possible solutions for Saada; on 19 August the independent English-language *Yemen Times* organised a conference on detainees and the disappeared.

<sup>216</sup> Crisis Group interview, international development expert, Sanaa, 4 January 2009.

<sup>217</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009.

---

<sup>218</sup> Muhammad Thabit, head of the Saada reconstruction fund, asserted: “In early 2009, Great Britain and Italy both announced aid reaching a total of \$7 million, but it is intended primarily for food distribution and to answer other urgent needs. This is not the main problem in Saada right now. Refugees have returned to their villages, and communal solidarity is playing a big role in addressing urgent needs. What the people really need is reconstruction and development. Satisfying urgent needs is important, but it will not solve the conflict in the long term”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 21 March 2009. Donors have been wary of infusing additional resources for lack of certainty that, Salih’s pronouncements notwithstanding, the war truly is over. A major donor country representative said, “additional money could be made available to support projects linked to water, health and education once we get the sense that a political process between the government and the Huthis has been launched”. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Sanaa, 14 January 2009.

in hiding in Yemen) is yet another indication of the interdependence of regional security.<sup>219</sup> Gulf countries ought to act collectively, most likely via the Gulf Cooperation Council, of which Yemen aspires to be a member.<sup>220</sup> As in the case of Western governments, its intervention should aim at fostering an environment favourable to negotiations by encouraging dialogue while backing reconstruction, reconciliation and development.<sup>221</sup>

## VII. CONCLUSION

Since unification of North and South in May 1990, Yemen has been confronted with serious challenges that have undermined the state's capacity to govern. While a failed-state scenario is much feared and often discussed,<sup>222</sup> including by Yemeni officials,<sup>223</sup> the regime so far has preserved both its rule and the country's overall stability. The Saada war potentially is of a different sort for – together with other negative trends, including the economic crisis, resource depletion (of both oil and water) and renewed and rising resentment among residents of the former South Yemen – it threatens the state's capacity to cope and survive.

The Saada war has long been ignored by civil society, the opposition, general public and international community. Yet, the officially-declared peace notwithstanding, the situation remains extremely fragile. Underlying grievances remain unaddressed. The roots of the conflict – social, political and religious – should be tackled head-on by all.

Primary responsibility falls on local actors, whether independent or associated with either the government or the rebels. They are the ones who must take the steps to lessen sectarian tensions, help reabsorb the alienated Huthis, release war-related prisoners and stop playing the dangerous card of tribal allegiances. But the international community also has a significant role to play. This it can do by using its political leverage and the promise of increased aid for reconstruction and development in order to promote an environment more conducive to sustained peace.

**Sanaa/Brussels, 27 May 2009**

---

<sup>219</sup> Al-Jazeera International website, 28 January 2009.

<sup>220</sup> Crisis Group interview, Arab diplomat, Sanaa, January 2009. Debate around Yemen's integration in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been ongoing for years. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia traditionally opposed it in apparent retaliation for Yemen's refusal during the 1990-1991 Gulf War to condemn Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Since 2007, however, their positions appear to have evolved, and the secretariat and member states now seem to support Yemen's integration. Such a move would not become effective until 2017, however, and is contingent on structural political and economic reforms by the government. Gregory Johnsen, "Yemen: Empty Economic Reforms Slow Bid to Join the GCC", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>221</sup> Amounts officially deemed necessary for Saada's reconstruction and development (\$700 million for 2009-2012, according to the Yemeni government) are not particularly significant and, in a civil society activist's words, "represent mere pocket change for the Gulf states". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 8 January 2009.

---

<sup>222</sup> Jeremy Sharp, "Where is the stability tipping point?", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, July 2008.

<sup>223</sup> For instance, in March 2009, Abd-al-Karim al-Arhabi, Yemen's vice-prime minister and planning minister, asserted that if Yemen was to escape a Somalia-like fate, it needed greater international involvement: "Look at the Somalis – a few million people, and they are creating problems for the world. Yemenis are 24 million, and they are tough warriors. And they have nothing to lose, like the Somalis". Agence France-Presse, 13 March 2009.

## APPENDIX A MAP OF YEMEN

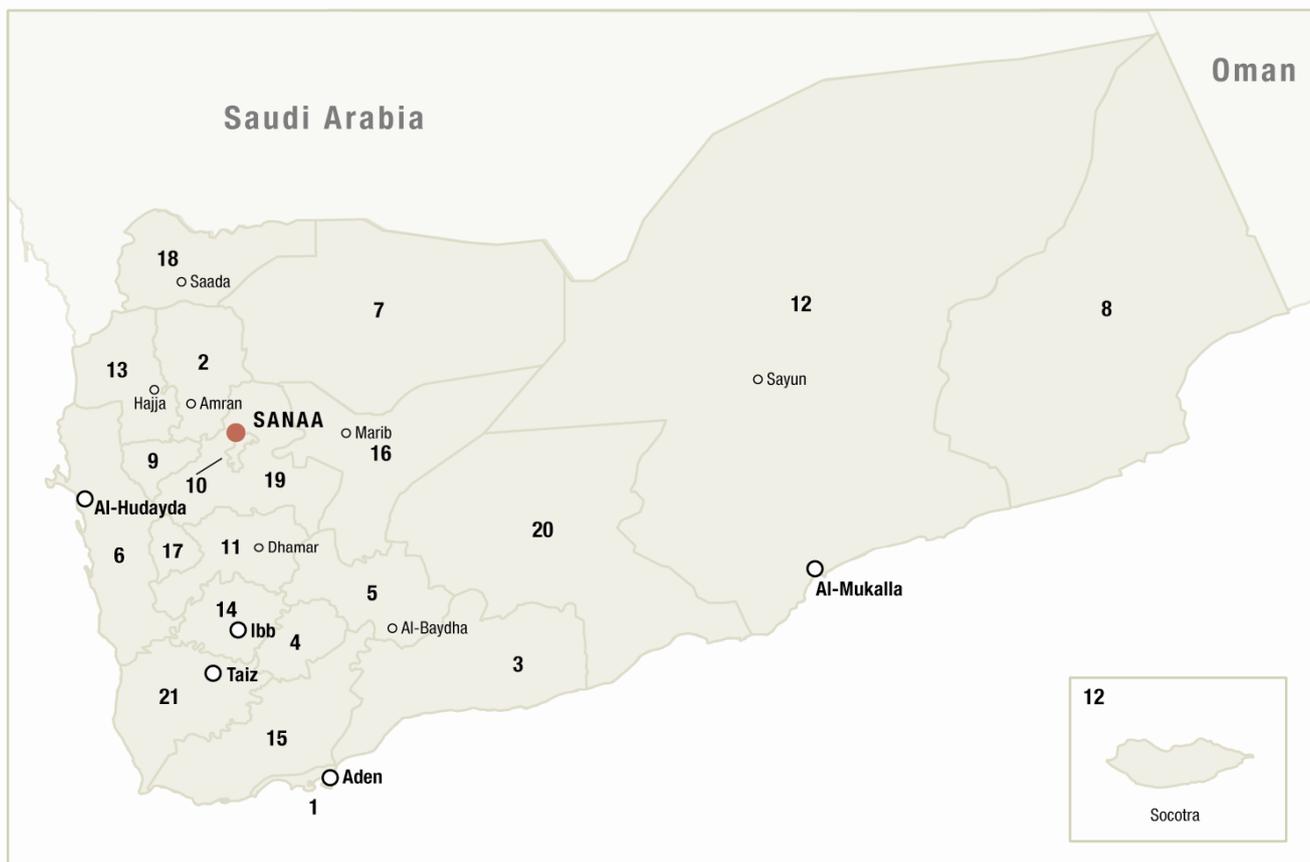


Map No. 3847 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS  
January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations  
Cartographic Section

## APPENDIX B

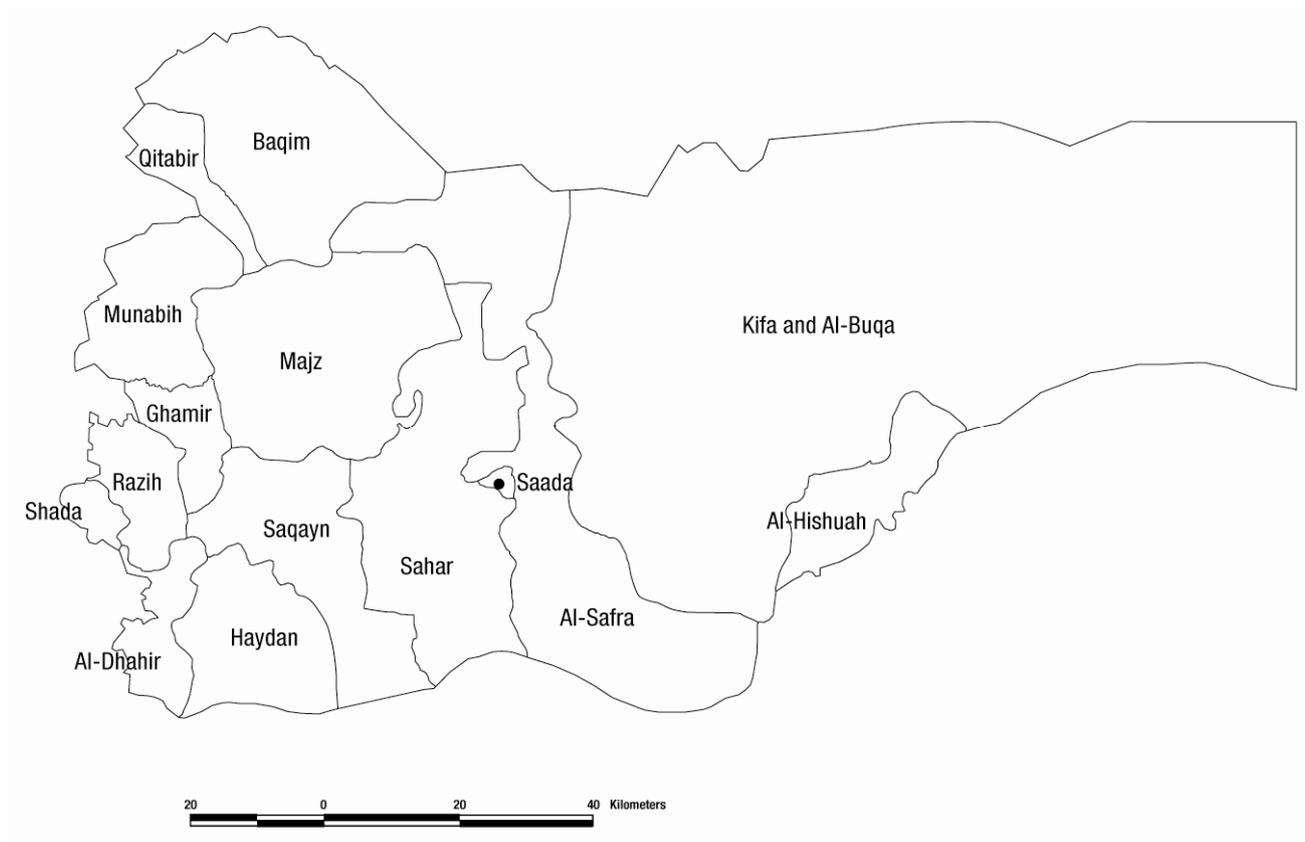
### MAP OF YEMEN WITH GOVERNORATES AND CITIES



- |               |                |            |
|---------------|----------------|------------|
| 1. Aden       | 8. Al-Mahra    | 15. Lahij  |
| 2. Amran      | 9. Al-Mahwit   | 16. Marib  |
| 3. Abyan      | 10. Sanaa City | 17. Rayma  |
| 4. Al-Dhala   | 11. Dhamar     | 18. Saada  |
| 5. Al-Baydha  | 12. Hadramawt  | 19. Sanaa  |
| 6. Al-Hudayda | 13. Hajja      | 20. Shabwa |
| 7. Al-Jawf    | 14. Ibb        | 21. Taiz   |

## APPENDIX C

### SAADA GOVERNORATE DISTRICTS MAP



Produced by Crisis Group