



# Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace

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## I. Overview

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A public rift between Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress party (GPC) and the Huthis (aka Ansar Allah) may change the course of Yemen's two-and-a-half-year war. Despite significant ideological and political differences, the two have been allied against the Saudi Arabia-led military intervention in support of the Yemeni government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Yet tensions between them rose to an all-time high following a GPC rally in Sanaa on 24 August to celebrate the party's 35th anniversary and to demonstrate its political strength. This rift could expand and prolong Yemen's regionalised civil war, further shattering the country and threatening regional security – or it could be seized upon as an opportunity to advance peace. This will require Saudi Arabia and its international backers, including the U.S. and the UK, to act quickly to capitalise on a division they have encouraged by supporting an immediate ceasefire and an inclusive political settlement.

After a period of rapid advances, the Huthi/Saleh alliance lost territory in the south in July and August 2015. They since fought the opposing side to a stalemate, maintaining control over the northern Zaydi (version of Shia Islam) highlands, which includes the country's capital, Sanaa, and the majority of Yemen's population. This has produced a tense status quo, from which several parties in the conflict benefit, but which has produced immense suffering among the Yemeni people as well as additional instability in a region that has no shortage. For Saudi Arabia in particular, the fighting has created a growing security threat, with Huthi/Saleh forces firing rockets deep into Saudi territory and threatening to target Riyadh's closest regional ally, Abu Dhabi. It is a financially costly war and a diplomatic headache, as Riyadh has borne considerable criticism for the devastating humanitarian consequences, including near famine conditions and widespread cholera.

To take advantage of heightened Huthi/Saleh tensions, Riyadh should champion a political process, agree to suspend military operations, and forgo the temptation to simply wait for its adversaries to turn their guns on each other. Indeed, direct Huthi/Saleh confrontation is unlikely and, even if it were to occur, the result would be even less likely to redound to Riyadh's benefit: the Huthis could defeat the GPC or the civil war could spread to the highlands, further facilitating both Iranian intervention and al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) expansion. If by

contrast the Saudis – in partnership with regional states like Oman and with support from the UN Security Council and the UN special envoy – sponsor a realistic peace initiative, the onus would shift to the Huthis and GPC to accept it, lest they provoke even greater suffering and possibly destabilise areas under their control. Saleh's GPC almost certainly would entertain the offer, placing Huthi hardliners in an awkward position if they were to reject it, changing the political dynamic and possibly paving the way for a settlement. The stakes have never been higher. With Huthi forces threatening to target Riyadh and Abu Dhabi and the Trump Administration eager to push back against Iran in the region, there is a serious risk of wider escalation. This could include direct U.S. confrontation with Iran, which Washington and its allies blame for providing the Huthis with the requisite missile technology. Too many opportunities have come and gone to end the Yemen war. Neither Yemenis nor their neighbours can afford to lose this one.

## II. GPC-Huthi Relations

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### A. *Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges*

Tension between the Huthis and Saleh's GPC is nothing new. Between 2004 and 2010, then-President Saleh fought six wars with the Huthis, killing their leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi, in 2004 and laying waste to much of their home governorate, Saada. Common enemies brought the two sides together in 2014 as they sought to shift the balance of power in Yemen's north against the Sunni Islamist party, Islah, and Hadi, who had alienated both groups during the country's transition period (in which Saleh transferred power to Hadi through a political agreement known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative).

Their cooperation, initially tacit, may well have faded if not for the Saudi military intervention, which began in March 2015, to reinstate Hadi and reverse Huthi/Saleh military advances. The campaign bound them together against what in Yemen's northern highlands is commonly perceived as a national, existential struggle against Saudi Arabia – rather than as a Yemeni civil war, which is how the national conflict is viewed elsewhere in the country.

Beneath the surface, however, differences festered. The GPC views itself as a party of the political centre, an umbrella organisation encompassing a range of political perspectives and confessional groups, with appeal throughout the country. It sees the Huthis in much the same way it views Islah, an intolerant religion-based political organisation with ties to foreign actors – in the Huthis' case, Iran, in Islah's case, Qatar and chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood elsewhere in the region.<sup>1</sup> Like many Yemenis, they suspect the Huthis of plotting to bring back the rule of Zaydi Imams, who ruled northern Yemen for a millennium before the 1962 republican revolution ousted them. In this view, the Huthis are a throwback to Yemen's oppressive, discriminatory past, an anathema to a modern state and institutions, let alone an inclusive democracy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group interviews, group of eight GPC supporters, Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GPC members, Sanaa, November 2014; GPC member, Sanaa, February 2015; GPC member, September 2015; GPC members, Sanaa, April 2017.

Similarly, the Huthis have fundamental problems with Saleh and the GPC. They view him and his close supporters as dangerous and unreliable allies. From their perspective, Saleh's GPC is responsible for a corrupt past in which the government failed to develop the country, marginalised them politically, facilitated the spread of Salafi/Wahhabi doctrine (their ideological adversary) and destroyed their territory.<sup>3</sup> Huthis are hostile to the U.S., viewing its Middle East policy as part of an improbable Israel/Saudi/Wahhabi plot to sow discord among Muslims, and as such are deeply suspicious of Saleh's past support for and cooperation with the U.S. and its counter-terrorism activities.<sup>4</sup> Some Huthis want eventually to hold Saleh and other GPC leaders accountable for past crimes, including killing Hussein al-Huthi. As the GPC doubts Huthi commitment to democracy, the Huthis doubt the GPC's commitment to real power sharing.<sup>5</sup>

These mutual suspicions have left both groups ill at ease. Ever since October 2016, when they formed a "national salvation government" with the Huthis, GPC leaders have complained that the Huthis have not honoured their commitment to disband the "revolutionary committee", which the Huthis had established in February 2015 after they toppled the Hadi government. Still active, the committee oversees government functioning and forms a kind of shadow government with final say in decision-making, in effect undermining weak state institutions.<sup>6</sup> Their frustration with Huthi interference has been exacerbated by the Huthis' relative inexperience in the governance realm – not only do they as a movement lack know-how, but in many cases have appointed young loyalists who interfere in the decision-making of long-serving bureaucrats.<sup>7</sup>

In an ironic reversal of their traditional roles, GPC members today accuse the Huthis of corruption, disregard for the country's laws, for example regarding detentions, and failure to treat them as an equal partner in government. In particular, the GPC resents Huthi control of the limited resources flowing into the north in the form of customs, taxes and telecommunications fees.<sup>8</sup> After dividing ministerial portfolios, the two sides fought over the appointment of ministerial deputies. Arguably most importantly, they disagree on the leadership and future of the Republican Guards, the most qualified military unit in the army before the 2011 Arab Spring, which was led by Saleh's son Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh and was largely loyal to him. Today it is a shadow of its former self, disbanded under Hadi in 2012 and later

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<sup>3</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporters, Sanaa, February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi leader, Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, Yemen 2017, who said: "Saleh wants to return to power as it was before 2011 [when the GPC ruled alone], but this time through his son [Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh]. Saleh only wants cooperation with Ansar Allah now so that he can gain a bigger share in power to make this possible in the future. The GPC is not committed to long-term power sharing".

<sup>6</sup> GPC politicians gave numerous examples of the revolutionary committee interfering in decision-making and refusing to vacate ministries under GPC authority, such as the higher education, religious endowments and health ministries. Crisis Group interviews, group of GPC members, Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Saleh supporter, GPC member, GPC bureaucrat, Sanaa, Yemen, 2017.

partially reconstituted during the current war.<sup>9</sup> The GPC would like to strengthen and lead it; the Huthis are blocking them.<sup>10</sup>

The Huthis accuse the GPC of stoking public resentment against them instead of focusing on the fight against the Saudi-led coalition. Bearing the brunt of casualties, they view GPC politicking as an affront to their sacrifices.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the civil service, they say, Saleh's party continues to dominate decisions on retirement and recruitment, encumbering their ability to implement the law, which requires, for example, pensioning off individuals above a certain age. The Huthis also are quick to point out that integrating their members into all parts of the state is one of the agreements reached by the 2014 National Dialogue Conference, the centrepiece of the country's UN-sponsored transition.<sup>12</sup> Arguably most importantly, the Huthis suspect the GPC of trying to strike deals with their mutual enemies, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, to end the war to its advantage. Some Huthi supporters, for example, were convinced that the massive GPC rally in Sanaa on 24 August was a plot by Saleh to oust the Huthis from power and push them from Sanaa, with the help of the UAE.<sup>13</sup>

Until August 2017, the leadership of both groups successfully contained their many differences. Under attack by the Saudi-led military campaign, both political leaderships continue to argue that what unites them – especially defence of the parts of Yemen they each control – is more significant than what drives them apart.<sup>14</sup> But the groups' respective rank-and-file, and certainly their hardliners, do not uniformly agree.

Many GPC cadres, in Yemen and elsewhere, do not see value in the relationship.<sup>15</sup> They are blunt in their hostility to its continuance and even support going on the offensive against the Huthis, should an opportunity arise to shift the balance of power. A GPC supporter expressed a perspective common among the rank-and-file in Sanaa:

Now the Huthis control the army and the resources of the north. Everything is going to them because of the war. The GPC would be ready to fight the Huthis, but they cannot open a second front. The Huthis are doing many things that harm the Yemeni people. They are completely destroying the army. But if the

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<sup>9</sup> On 19 December 2012, President Hadi issued a decree disbanding the Republican Guards, announcing that its units would be integrated into the regional command structure. For an overview of changes to the military-security apparatus during the transition period, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°139, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, 4 April 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interviews, group of GPC supporters, Sanaa, Yemen 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, two Huthi supporters, September 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, August 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interviews, three Huthi supporters, September 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, two GPC leaders and a Huthi representative, Sanaa, Yemen 2017; GPC leader and Huthi representative, September 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, GPC leader, Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017, who said: "At the top the relationship is very strong. But at the middle levels, and especially over the issue of government jobs, there is a lot of tension".

GPC turned on the Huthis now, the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Islah would fight the GPC from the other direction.<sup>16</sup>

The Huthi movement at all levels evinces internal differences about the necessity and desirability of cooperation with the GPC. The political side of the movement, represented by figures such as Saleh Somad, head of the supreme political council (a ten-person organisation formed by the GPC and Huthis in August 2016 and split equally between them that serves as a presidential council) appears to value the partnership and works pragmatically to maintain it by mediating conflict between the two sides.<sup>17</sup> Hardliners in the revolutionary council and the military-security apparatus, including Mohammed al-Huthi, head of the revolutionary council, are seemingly less keen on cooperation and aggressively attack the GPC in public. One Huthi supporter summed up scepticism of the partnership:

Partnership with the GPC is not important for the war because Ansar Allah is controlling all of the fronts and Saleh is not really contributing to the fight. The alliance is only really in the area of government and there, the GPC needs the alliance more than Ansar Allah. Without it, the GPC would lose all power and influence. Many in Ansar Allah think that the partnership with the GPC has damaged its reputation in the north as the GPC has conducted a smear campaign, accusing it of corruption even as the GPC obstructs proper running of the government. A break-up of the alliance could be better for Ansar Allah.<sup>18</sup>

Though the security situation and resulting territorial fragmentation make it hard to judge, the prevailing wisdom among a range of interlocutors in Sanaa, including GPC members, independents and analysts, is that a group of Huthi sceptics and hardliners have the upper hand, a situation that bodes poorly for the future of cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

#### **B. 24 August and its Aftermath**

The GPC-Huthi coalition has been deeply strained, possibly irreparably damaged, by events surrounding the GPC's 24 August political rally. In the lead-up to the gathering, the groups engaged in a vicious war of words. Saleh gave a bombastic speech calling the Huthi popular committees a "militia" and warning them not to interfere in the GPC's celebration or to cause chaos in Sanaa. The Huthis accused

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<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group interview, GPC member, Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017.

<sup>17</sup> That said, even politicians on the Huthi side who are supportive of continuing the alliance view themselves as the stronger partner in the relationship. According to a Huthi politician: "It is not in the interest of either party to break the partnership and relationship, but this is especially true of the GPC, which has made many gains by aligning with Ansar Allah against the aggression [the Saudi military intervention] and would lose these completely if they stopped the relationship with Ansar Allah". Crisis Group interview, September 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, September 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GPC leaders, tribal sheikh from the Hashid confederation, Yemeni political analyst, August 2017; two tribal sheikhs from the Bakil confederation, Yemeni government supporter, tribal sheikh fighting with Yemeni government side, Huthi supporter, September 2017.

Saleh of “backstabbing”, lacking commitment to the war and trying to secure a deal with the Saudi-led coalition to remove them from power.<sup>20</sup>

While the rally went forward without incident, the following day a prominent GPC politician, Khaled al-Radi, and three Huthi-aligned security personnel were killed in a gun battle at a Huthi-controlled checkpoint. The next day saw further clashes near one of Saleh’s son’s homes in south Sanaa; a large contingent of Huthi security forces deployed in the area. Since then the two sides have agreed to de-escalation measures, but tensions remain high. The Huthis have increased their security presence, which risks minor disagreements escalating into clashes.

With the rally, Saleh sought to send a message to the Huthis and the international community that he and his party are politically strong, key to any settlement, and ought not be treated as junior partners in negotiations, which has been the case in both UN-led and informal negotiations. His supporters suggest that the rally’s timing was based on his calculation that his political support and popular frustration with the Huthis are at relative highs.<sup>21</sup>

The events of 24 August were a culmination of what could be considered a GPC revival. After surviving attempts by Saudi Arabia to divide it and pull its leadership to Hadi’s side, Saleh’s camp has emerged stronger, at least for now. GPC members inside Yemen describe a new conviction that the GPC is the only party capable of protecting the country from the ravages of sectarianism and preserving its republican system from religious groups like the Huthis or Islah.<sup>22</sup> But this awakening is as much an indicator of weakness as strength. It is driven in part by the fear that if the war continues, religious actors and militias will gain greater strength, while the GPC and political parties will lose influence and relevance.

Rally participation was not limited to the GPC. Many other people attended or supported it on social media, including those aligned with the Hadi government and even Islah.<sup>23</sup> For them, the gathering was a chance to demonstrate their opposition to the Huthis (not their support for Saleh) and, for some, to encourage the brewing fight between the two to knock both down to size.<sup>24</sup>

Though the rally’s size – a least tens of thousands, with local reports saying around 300,000 – and eclectic backing might indicate that the GPC’s political fortunes have eclipsed the Huthis’, the military balance is still clearly in the latter’s favour.<sup>25</sup> The Huthis allowed the GPC rally, but the same day organised their own smaller demonstrations at the city’s entrances and imposed a heavy security presence in Sanaa. After the rally, loyal forces further increased their presence around the city,

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<sup>20</sup> “Saleh warns Huthis against causing chaos in Sanaa”, *al-Masdar* (online), 20 August 2017, <http://almasdaronline.com/article/93458>; “Yemen’s Saleh rallies followers in Sanaa amid Houthi rift”, Reuters, 24 August 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, two prominent GPC members, Cairo, Egypt, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, group of eight senior and mid-level GPC leaders, Sanaa, Yemen, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalist aligned with the Yemeni government, Islah members, Yemeni Socialist party member, tribal sheikh not aligned with either Huthi/Saleh or Yemeni government, Cairo, Egypt, August 2017; member of the Yemeni government, tribal sheikh supporting Yemeni government, September 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “Tens of thousands rally in support of Yemen’s former president amid growing rifts”, *Washington Post*, 24 August 2017.

especially in neighbourhoods dominated by Saleh sympathisers. They too had a message: their dedicated supporters and fighters were ready to confront any challenge to their authority. The Huthis then held their own massive public rally, to celebrate what they call the 21 September Revolution, the anniversary of their entering in Sanaa (in 2014), demonstrating that they too can rally significant support, albeit not as politically diverse.

Those who hoped that Saleh would pursue a more confrontational course in the wake of the rally have been disappointed. Instead of backing out of the coalition government or fighting to regain control of the capital, Saleh ultimately adopted a more conciliatory tone. At the GPC rally, he gave a short speech praising the GPC and called more fighters to the war fronts, but since then he has called for calm and reaffirmed his commitment to the alliance. According to a prominent Yemeni politician who has remained neutral during the war, "GPC supporters and anti-Huthi groups alike experienced a moment of collective depression when Saleh failed to act. Most attribute his inaction to weakness in the face of the Huthis' superior military strength".<sup>26</sup> Indeed GPC, Huthi and Hadi government supporters interpret his actions as a sign of weakness and evidence that the GPC cannot challenge the Huthis in the context of war.<sup>27</sup> It is unclear whether Saleh changed his course of action in light of Huthi pressure or whether he knew all along that he could not risk opening a second front with them. In any case, he is walking a fine line, straining but not breaking the relationship, and in doing so raising yet more questions about the future of the coalition with Ansar Allah and the course of the war writ large.

### **III. A Way Forward**

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Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the Yemeni government and their backers, including the U.S. and UK, have long encouraged a break in the Huthi/Saleh alliance either to enable a popular uprising in the north or improve the Yemeni government's (and by extension Saudi Arabia's) bargaining position. Post-August 2017, U.S. and UK officials say they increasingly recognise the dangers of such a split, while their allies in the region appear determined to pursue it.<sup>28</sup> Putting aside how likely they are to succeed, they should be careful what they wish for. If the two allies turn on each other, the more likely result is the prolongation of the civil war and the complication of peace efforts.

#### *A. Danger Ahead?*

It is hard to predict the course of a putative Huthi-Saleh fight. In a worst-case scenario for Saudi Arabia, the Huthis would win a military confrontation and consolidate political and military control of the north. Already the Huthis dominate the military-security apparatus in Sanaa and over the course of the war they have gained the upper hand over Saleh, though the extent of their advantage is widely

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<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, September 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interviews, three Hadi government supporters, tribal sheikh, Huthi supporter, Huthi leader, political independent, two GPC members, September 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and UK officials, September 2017.

debated among Yemenis.<sup>29</sup> That said, the Huthis have miscalculated in the past. In Aden, for example, they were confident that the population would support them against what they viewed as the al-Qaeda threat there. But ultimately they were perceived as invaders and pushed out by local forces, with the help of the UAE, in July 2015. In Sanaa too, they may overestimate their strength. Certainly Saleh and his party are politically popular; over 33 years of Saleh's rule they built strong networks inside the military-security apparatus. Today it is not clear how many of these GPC loyalists are keeping their distance but would answer the call if violence erupted with the Huthis.

There is also the issue of the tribes. In Yemen, they are a critical component of hard power. Here again, the relative power balance is not clear. Saleh enjoys influence and support, both personally and because the Huthis have insulted and bullied many sheikhs, some of whom are eager to take revenge when the time is ready.<sup>30</sup> But the Huthis also have cultivated their own tribal networks, which often are a product of frustration with Saleh and his former allies like the al-Ahmar of the Hashid confederation.<sup>31</sup>

The uncertainty about the two sides' relative strength suggests that the consequences of a fight between them would be disastrous for Yemen and likely for Saudi Arabia as well. The Huthis and Saleh would lose ground as they pull their fighters from the war fronts, but their losses would not necessarily translate into sustainable gains for the Hadi government. Two years since the UAE and aligned southern fighters pushed the Huthis and Saleh's forces out of southern territories, the Hadi government has been unable to successfully control, let alone govern, these areas. Instead, infighting between Hadi's forces and southern separatists in the government's temporary capital of Aden has divided the coalition, with Saudi Arabia

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<sup>29</sup> The senior commanders of the military are Huthis, including the defence minister, the chief of staff and the deputy chief of staff. All military personnel go through Huthi religious training, but it is unclear how this has affected their loyalties. Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, April 2017. In what appears to be an indication of their relative strength, the Huthis have been responsible for negotiating security issues like withdrawals of militias and disarmament in the context of UN talks. According to a Huthi representative: "The GPC does not negotiate a security plan for Sanaa because it is not their file. It is not their responsibility. It is Ansar Allah's responsibility". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, April 2017. Huthi supporters and many of their critics say that Saleh has weak support in the military and virtually no influence over security decisions in Sanaa. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporter, Huthi leader, Sanaa, April 2017; Yemeni analyst, Huthi tribal supporter, sheikh from Bakil, sheikh from Marib, Islah member, Hadi government representative, August and September 2017. That said, some say Saleh maintains significant influence beneath the surface. A GPC leader says that "Saleh is smart. He sent most of the Republican Guard members home when the war started and they will come back to the fight if called by Saleh. It is true that some Republican Guards are fighting at the war fronts, but not all of them. Many refuse to fight under Huthi command". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, April 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, pro-Saleh sheikh, August 2017. According to a prominent GPC member, "90 per cent of the seven tribes that surround Sanaa are pro-Saleh. Only 10 per cent are aligned with the Huthis. This was not the case before the war. But over time, the Huthis' mistakes and mistreatment of sheikhs increased Saleh's popularity. The seven tribes surrounding Sanaa are critical to the balance of power in Sanaa. Most of the Republican Guards come from these areas". Crisis Group interview, August 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, prominent tribal sheikh, Huthi tribal supporter, Huthi supporter, September 2017.

backing Hadi and the UAE closely aligned with his competitors. Southern territories also are plagued by al-Qaeda's expansion.<sup>32</sup> Despite hardships in Huthi/Saleh controlled areas, residents express relief that they are not living in the south's "liberated areas", a term they use to suggest chaos.<sup>33</sup>

In the north, the prospect of the government profiting from an internecine Huthi-Saleh fight is even weaker. Given widespread resentment toward Hadi and Saudi Arabia in the Zaydi highlands in particular, it is virtually impossible to see his government as an alternative to the Huthis or Saleh's GPC. The likely result of a clash would be the north's fragmentation, leading to the same civil strife and sectarianism that has racked areas like Taiz. Islah, which has popular support in the north, could join forces on some fronts with the GPC against the Huthis. The GPC itself could fracture, with some continuing to ally with the Huthis while others join their enemies, including Islah and tribal forces aligned with the government in Marib. Almost certainly the conflict would be a magnet for Yemen's al-Qaeda branch, which has forged alliances against the Huthis with local fighters in other parts of the country;<sup>34</sup> given the collapse of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Yemen could provide an attractive destination for these fighters to relocate.

These dynamics could shred the north's social fabric, which hitherto has been strained but not as severely as the south's, and accelerate the country's humanitarian disaster, already one of the worst globally.<sup>35</sup> The weaker Yemen's north, the more likely chaos is to spread to Saudi Arabia. Iran would find ample opportunity to keep the Saudis bogged down. Perhaps most dangerously for Riyadh, it will become increasingly difficult to engineer a way out: as intra-group fragmentation grows, there will be no clear address for negotiation.

That said, the most likely scenario is a continuation of the troubled Huthi/Saleh partnership. The danger of a split is obvious to both political leaderships.<sup>36</sup> Any military escalation by the Saudi-led coalition likely would reinforce this sense, and push them to paper over their differences. Yet the continuation of the Huthi/Saleh alliance does not bode any better for Saudi Arabia and Hadi. If the two stay together and the war continues, the Huthis likely will tighten their control of the north. Already, they have announced a new round of changes in the government, which they say are meant to weed out corruption but which are being made at the GPC's expense; they also have tightened restrictions on the press and some in the movement are calling for a state of emergency, which the GPC fears will facilitate an even greater crackdown. If the Huthis consolidate power, the north's precarious political balance will be lost and their relatively hard-line position will complicate negotiations. Their propensity to form shadow state institutions and supervisory bodies through the revolutionary committee also would further hollow out already weak state institutions.

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<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°174, *Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, 2 February 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Over two dozen Crisis Group interviews and conversations with residents of Sanaa, Yemen, April 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Yemen's al-Qaeda*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°52, *Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, GPC politician, August 2017; Huthi politician, September 2017.

## B. *A Way Out*

Saudi Arabia and its partners have long sought to pry the GPC away from the Huthis. However, now that divisions have become more apparent, Riyadh should forgo the temptation to push for military advantage or wait for its adversaries to fight each other, scenarios that, as explained above, almost certainly will not give them a decisive advantage. Instead, along with regional partners including Oman, and with the encouragement of the Security Council and UN special envoy, it should champion a political solution. The timing is ripe but the opportunity easily could slip away. There is widespread frustration with the Huthis in the north and a desire, including within the GPC and some parts of the Huthi movement, to find an exit to the war. If Riyadh, through a regional initiative, supported a realistic compromise to end the fighting – outside the narrow requirements of UN Security Resolution 2216,<sup>37</sup> which are perceived as tantamount to surrender by GPC and Huthi constituencies alike – both would be hard-pressed to reject it in the face of public pressure.

A new Saudi-backed regional initiative also would allow the GPC, by reacting positively, to seize the political momentum. That in turn would give leverage to those Huthi political leaders who say that they would support a political deal, as they did in October 2016 when former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry proposed one, before the Hadi government rejected it.<sup>38</sup> Would-be Huthi dealmakers need ammunition against hardliners, especially those in the military-security apparatus who are deeply sceptical of compromise and derive benefits from continuing the war.<sup>39</sup>

Saudi Arabia is the best positioned to take advantage of the political moment. Everyone, including the GPC and the Huthis, their hesitations about Saudi intentions notwithstanding, know that it is the real powerbroker, in no small part because of its role in supporting the opposing side of the war and its superior capacity to fund reconstruction. Yet at present, Riyadh refuses to acknowledge its role in the conflict, instead insisting that it is an intra-Yemeni one that must be resolved between Yemenis. In part, the contention is correct. No agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Huthi/Saleh side will resolve intra-Yemeni disputes, particularly regarding

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<sup>37</sup> Passed on 14 April 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2216 unequivocally took the Yemen government's side in the civil war. The resolution demanded the Huthis withdraw from territories, surrender weapons to the state and cease all activities that are the government's prerogative. It also levied a travel ban and asset freeze on the Huthi leader, Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi and on Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali, and established an inspection mechanism to prevent the Huthis from rearming.

<sup>38</sup> The Huthi negotiating team grudgingly accepted the roadmap proposed by Secretary Kerry as the basis for negotiations. The roadmap itself was based on UN talks in Kuwait, which collapsed in August 2017, but unlike what was on the table in Kuwait, for the first time combined political compromises (the Huthis' priority) and security compromises (the priority of the Hadi government and Saudi Arabia) in a single agreement. Doubts existed as to whether the Huthis would live up to a deal if it were accepted, but their commitment remained untested, as the Hadi government rejected the proposal.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, September 2017. He said: "Extremists within the movement have more power in the military security apparatus and they do not want to give up the fight. But there is a group in Ansar Allah that wants a political solution and they will raise their hand in favour of one if a realistic offer is on the table. A peace agreement that secures all sides, not one that asks for the surrender of the Huthis, will give more power to moderates in the movement. Now they are at a dangerous moment when the military side may take over completely and the moderate voices will be lost".

the issue of decentralisation and the federal structure, which triggered the violence and civil war in the first place. That said, the Saudi-led military intervention has further highlighted a regional dimension to the fight. For the GPC and the Huthis, the war is now first and foremost against Saudi Arabia and only secondarily against domestic enemies. Both of Riyadh's adversaries are largely dismissive of the Hadi government, which they rightly insist has limited influence on the ground. Instead, they seek negotiations to end the war with Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, the UAE, who – in addition to launching airstrikes – are the war's main financiers in general and of anti-Huthi/Saleh fighters in particular, who comprise a mixture of Islah, tribes, Salafi groups and southern separatists. If a compromise to end the regionalised part of the war were able to gain traction, Saudi Arabia should have the leverage to bring its Yemeni allies along.

Given that UN negotiations to end the conflict have been stalled since the collapse of talks in Kuwait in August 2016, new thinking is needed. If Saudi Arabia is not willing to take a seat at the table, at a minimum it should advance a political initiative and, in cooperation with regional states and with UN support, provide the table around which Yemenis can hammer out the details. In that scenario, Riyadh optimally would co-sponsor a political initiative and dialogue with other GCC or Arab states – including Oman, which has ties to the Huthis, and possibly Kuwait, which previously has hosted UN talks.

A chief benefit of a regionally-sponsored initiative is its potential to break the diplomatic stalemate following three unsuccessful rounds of UN negotiations and an ensuing deficit of trust by all combatants, but especially the Huthi/Saleh bloc, in the UN process and the special envoy. It would also send a clear message to all Yemeni belligerents that Saudi Arabia, the pivotal regional powerbroker, is fully supportive of a settlement, something that Yemeni stakeholders from across the political spectrum say is currently lacking.<sup>40</sup>

To be successful, a regional initiative and subsequent talks should break out of the constraints imposed by UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which has impeded UN negotiations because of its one-sided and unrealistic nature. The resolution demands, in effect, the surrender of the Huthi/Saleh side and establishes a negotiating framework – the Huthis and Saleh on one side, the Hadi government on the other – that does not reflect the range of Yemeni belligerents on the ground. More inclusive, regionally-sponsored talks could comprise all relevant combatants, including Saleh's GPC, the Huthis, the Hadi government, tribal representatives, Islah, Salafi groups and representatives of the Hiraak, south Yemen's separatist movement. With wider terms of reference, more issues could be addressed, including for instance Saudi Arabia and the UAE's security concerns about Iranian influence in Yemen, as well as border and maritime security. Such talks also could have the flexibility to address the role of controversial Yemeni leaders like Saleh, Hadi, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (Saleh's former partner who defected in 2011 to join the Arab Spring and is now Hadi's vice president) and others who are central to the current

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<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islah supporters, GPC-aligned sheikh, southern separatist leaders, Hadi government representative, GPC members, political independent, non-aligned tribal sheikh, Yemeni analyst, Cairo, July and August 2017; three Huthi representatives, Huthi supporter, Hadi government representative, sheikhs aligned with the Hadi government, September 2017.

conflict and whose removal from politics may be needed for the country to move forward. For any of this to work, back-channel bilateral discussion between Saudi Arabia and Saleh on one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the Huthis on the other, will be needed to lay the conceptual foundations for an agreement to end hostilities.

Most likely, a successful regional initiative would contain the following elements, which would need further specification in the context of talks:

- ❑ Comprehensive ceasefire, lifting of all blockades and opening of international airports, with security guarantees and monitoring to ensure that Yemeni belligerents, including the Huthi/Saleh side, do not use a ceasefire to rearm;
- ❑ Return of Huthi/Saleh fighters to Yemeni territory and withdrawal of all of these fighters from the Saudi-Yemeni border;
- ❑ Commitment of all Yemeni groups to cut military ties with Iran and to combat al-Qaeda;
- ❑ Commitment by Saudi Arabia and other regional states to help in post-war reconstruction;
- ❑ Agreement on a new executive leadership, including an interim president, vice president and prime minister, and an inclusive coalition government for a limited period of time until elections, as well as agreement on the government's responsibilities, which must include a clear plan for implementing and overseeing the withdrawal of all militias from cities and the handover of heavy weapons to the state, most likely through an inclusive military-security council;
- ❑ Commitment of all Yemeni parties to the consensus outcomes of the country's National Dialogue Conference (NDC), including the principle of decentralisation, and completing the remaining tasks of the transition period, including a constitutional referendum and elections;
- ❑ Agreement to implement decentralisation measures during the transition period, giving governorates significant financial and security authorities, with a special status for the south;
- ❑ Develop a mechanism to revisit the main outstanding issues of the NDC: the number of federal regions, the status of south Yemen and the issue of national reconciliation.

The UN has an important role to play. Regionally sponsored talks over the details of the elements listed above should be supported by UN Security Council members and by the UN envoy to encourage participation and ensure that agreements have international backing. Yemenis also will need technical and political assistance from the UN to implement an agreement for ending the war and to resolve political issues, like state structure, that will likely require further negotiation. Finally, the UN could serve a vital role in ensuring that women, youth, civil society activists and a full range of political parties have a seat at the decision-making table and the influence to affect what happens during the transition phase, something they enjoyed during the NDC but which was quickly eroded by war.

Under the long shadow of Resolution 2216 and after three rounds of failed UN talks, there is little chance that the UN envoy, working under the established

framework, would be able to produce an agreement. In these circumstances and with the war poised to metastasise in Yemen's north or even spill outside its borders, the best chance for an exit resides with regional actors and Yemenis themselves, with the international community actively encouraging and supporting their efforts from behind.

**Brussels, 11 October 2017**

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## Appendix B: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2014

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### Special Reports

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

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

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

### Israel/Palestine

*The Next Round in Gaza*, Middle East Report N°149, 25 March 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza and Israel: New Obstacles, New Solutions*, Middle East Briefing N°39, 14 July 2014.

*Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question*, Middle East Report N°156, 9 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Toward a Lasting Ceasefire in Gaza*, Middle East Briefing N°42, 23 October 2014 (also available in Arabic).

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

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

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

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

### Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

*Iraq: Falluja's Faustian Bargain*, Middle East Report N°150, 28 April 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, Middle East Report N°151, 8 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, Middle East Report N°153, 27 May 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-Box*, Middle East Briefing N°38, 20 June 2014.

*Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, Middle East Report N°155, 9 September 2014 (also available in Arabic).

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

*Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies*, Middle East Report N°160, 20 July 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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

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

*Russia's Choice in Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000"*, Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

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

*Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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

### North Africa

*The Tunisian Exception: Success and Limits of Consensus*, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°37, 5 June 2014 (only available in French and Arabic).

*Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation*, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°41, 21 October 2014 (also available in French and Arabic).

*Tunisia's Elections: Old Wounds, New Fears*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°44 (only available in French).

*Libya: Getting Geneva Right*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°157, 26 February 2015. (also available in Arabic).

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

*Algeria and Its Neighbours*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°164, 12 October 2015 (also available in French and Arabic).

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

*Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Jihadist Violence in Tunisia: The Urgent Need for a National Strategy*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°50, 22 June 2016 (also available in French and Arabic).

*The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

*How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

#### **Iran/Yemen/Gulf**

*Iran and the P5+1: Solving the Nuclear Rubik's Cube*, Middle East Report N°152, 9 May 2014 (also available in Farsi).

*The Huthis: From Saada to Sanaa*, Middle East Report N°154, 10 June 2014 (also available in Arabic).

*Iran and the P5+1: Getting to "Yes"*, Middle East Briefing N°40, 27 August 2014 (also available in Farsi).

*Iran Nuclear Talks: The Fog Recedes*, Middle East Briefing N°43, 10 December 2014 (also available in Farsi).

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

*Iran After the Nuclear Deal*, Middle East Report N°166, 15 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

*Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, Middle East Report N°167, 9 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

*Turkey and Iran: Bitter Friends, Bosom Rivals*, Middle East Briefing N°51, 13 December 2016 (also available in Farsi).

*Implementing the Iran Nuclear Deal: A Status Report*, Middle East Report N°173, 16 January 2017 (also available in Farsi).

*Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the Base*, Middle East Report N°174, 2 February 2017 (also available in Arabic).

*Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, Middle East Briefing N°52, 13 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).



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