



Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen

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What's new? A showdown looms in Yemen's Marib governorate between the Huthis, who control much of north-western Yemen, and forces allied with the internationally recognised Yemeni government.

Why does it matter? An all-out battle for Marib could precipitate an enormous humanitarian disaster, as the province hosts at least 800,000 Yemenis already displaced from homes elsewhere. It could also scotch already dwindling chances of a nationwide de-escalation that in turn could lead to talks to end the war.

What should be done? Outside powers should urgently convene an international contact group under UN auspices to press for a comprehensive ceasefire and inclusive negotiations to stop the war. The Huthis and Yemeni government should drop maximalist demands, and Saudi Arabia should work with the U.S., UN and others to halt the hostilities.

I. Overview

The Huthis (who call themselves Ansar Allah) are moving on Marib, the last stronghold of Yemen's internationally recognised government in the country's north. A battle for Marib city and the eponymous governorate could trigger mass civilian displacement, shift the war for the north decisively in the Huthis' favour and open new rounds of combat along the border with Saudi Arabia and in the south. When battles began in January, Crisis Group called for a coordinated international initiative pushing for nationwide de-escalation and comprehensive UN-led political talks, warning that otherwise the belligerents would throw away an opportunity to end the war through a negotiated settlement. No such initiative has occurred. Now the situation is more urgent, and a new chapter of conflict may be taking shape. Before a political settlement becomes even more difficult, outside powers should form a UN-chaired international contact group based in Riyadh to orchestrate efforts to stop the fighting and bring the parties to talks.

II. Marib, the Imperilled Province

Since January, the Huthis have seized strategic government military bases to the north east of Sanaa, the rebel-held capital, and swathes of territory in al-Jawf governorate bordering Saudi Arabia, including the provincial capital, al-Hazm. The fighting

broke a four-year-old stalemate along the northern front lines that had been sustained in part by locally negotiated non-aggression pacts between the Huthis and their domestic rivals.

Huthi fighters are advancing east across multiple fronts toward Marib, a once sleepy city that is now an economic hub and a rare bastion of government control. If they capture oil and gas production facilities to Marib's east, they will be able to cut off the city's main economic lifeline and the eastbound highway to Seiyoun in neighbouring Hadramawt. A Huthi victory in Marib governorate would give them access to vital resources after years of war-restricted trade in their areas, while largely ending the war with the government for the north – at least for now, and barring a coalition-supported counterattack. Huthi officials say their commanders believe that they can capture Marib.¹ Yet doing so may take a bloody battle. To avoid one, the Huthis have offered local authorities a deal whereby they would halt their advance in exchange for some of Marib's oil, gas and electricity and some administrative oversight in the governorate.² But for the government and allied tribal groups in Marib, the battle is quasi-existential; they say they are preparing a stout defence, as well as a counter-offensive to retake al-Hazm and other lost areas.³

A fight for Marib, both the city and the governorate, would deepen what is already the world's biggest humanitarian emergency. The governorate's population has swollen from 300,000 before the war to as many as three million today, according to local authorities. The International Organization for Migration estimates that about 800,000 displaced people have moved to Marib since the war began and that an additional 4,800 families fleeing the fighting in al-Jawf have arrived in the governorate since January.⁴ If fighting around oil facilities were to cut off energy supplies and the eastbound highway, it would leave only a single tarmacked southbound road as an escape route. Those using this treacherous road would have to travel through Shebwa province, possibly with the Huthis not far behind them. Humanitarian organisations have a minimal presence in Shebwa and aid agencies are ill-prepared to deal with a million or more uprooted people on the move at the same time.

Some aid officials believe that Marib's population would suffer more than people in the Red Sea port of Hodeida might have in 2018, had a battle proceeded there, citing the greater number of people in Marib and the inability of many to cover the cost of travel.⁵ In Hodeida's case, political negotiations informed by fears of humanitarian catastrophe produced a UN-brokered deal between the Yemeni government and the Huthis that averted a fight for the city and its ports.⁶ Yet little outside help appears to be forthcoming in Marib. The situation is not exactly the same, as a battle for Ho-

¹ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representatives, 10 March 2020, 13 March 2020; Marib-based Yemeni government official, 8 March 2020; and Crisis Group review of audio message detailing Huthi deal offer, 3 March 2020.

² Ibid.

³ Crisis Group interviews, pro-government sheikh from Sanaa governorate, 5 March 2020; senior Yemeni government military official, 6 March 2020; local tribal leaders, 5 March 2020.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior official from Marib local authority, 2 January 2020; "Displacement in Marib", International Organization of Migration, 5 March 2020.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, three senior aid officials, 8 and 11 March 2020.

⁶ Crisis Group Middle East Report N°203, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Confrontation in Yemen*, 18 July 2019.

deida would have cut off food and other basic supplies to two thirds of the population. Marib is a less important trade hub overall, but government and locals are understandably resentful of what they perceive as international disinterest in the population's plight, even after the UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, visited the city and warned of grave consequences if a fight were to break out there.⁷

III. The Stakes for Yemen as a Whole

A battle for Marib could spill over into other parts of the country. It could expand the Huthis' border war with Saudi Arabia to the desert regions in northern al-Jawf, in the form of missile and drone strikes on targets inside the kingdom and/or ground combat with rival Yemeni and Saudi forces. In the south, the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) is already engaged in fierce fighting with the Huthis in al-Dhale and Lahij provinces, where clashes have intensified since January. Both the government and the STC have reported a build-up of Huthi forces near front lines in the southern governorates of Shebwa and Abyan as well.⁸ The STC is preparing for a collapse of government positions and even a replay of the Huthis' 2015 attempt to capture the southern port city of Aden.⁹ Moreover, both the government and the Huthis may seek to reignite battles for Hodeida and along the Saudi-Yemeni border in hopes of strengthening their positions.

At stake in Marib is the narrow opportunity that opened in late 2019 to end Yemen's devastating conflict through a negotiated settlement. In November and December 2019, a bilateral de-escalation track between the Huthis and Saudi Arabia brought calm to previously active fronts along the Yemeni-Saudi border and raised the possibility that the two could reach a deal, notably to secure the frontier and address Saudi concerns over Iran's support for the Huthis. At the same time, the Saudi-brokered November 2019 Riyadh Agreement prevented a civil war within a civil war in the south and sparked hopes that a more representative Yemeni government could form to participate in future peace talks. By the end of 2019, prospects of bringing three negotiating tracks – Huthi-Saudi talks, the Riyadh Agreement and the 2018 Stockholm Agreement (which prevented the battle for Hodeida) – under a single UN-led effort to end the civil war seemed somewhat promising.

Today, and especially with renewed fighting along the previously quiet northern front lines, all the above tracks are in jeopardy. As battles rage in the north and cross-border attacks resume, Huthi-Saudi talks have faltered. The Stockholm Agreement, too, is hanging by a thread, as violence intensifies along the Red Sea coast and a long-awaited prisoner swap continues to be delayed by wrangling among the Huthis, the government and Riyadh, despite recent progress in negotiations in Amman.¹⁰ Finally, the STC's military mobilisation and tensions between the secessionists and Saudi forces in Aden are placing the Riyadh Agreement under immense strain.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, 8 March 2020; senior official from Marib local authority, 9 March 2020.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior STC official, 6 March 2020; senior government official, 8 March 2020.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, pro-STC journalist, March 2020.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior government negotiator, Huthi official, 8 March 2020. The parties have agreed on the details of the multi-phase prisoner swaps but repeatedly put off an exchange.

Yemen's political map is set to change dramatically. Should the government lose Marib, it will forfeit much of its credibility as a counterpart to the Huthis in peace talks. Many on the government side fear that the Huthis would sue for a victor's peace, becoming even less willing to accept some of the military/security and power-sharing compromises that their many opponents seek.¹¹ The government, despite its weakened position, would balk at maximalist Huthi demands, likely preferring no solution to one in which the Huthis were so clearly dominant. Saudi-Huthi talks would also suffer. Riyadh likely had hoped to broker a deal that allowed it to declare success in Yemen and negotiate a settlement protecting its southern border. If the Huthis can consolidate control over al-Jawf, including its long border with Saudi Arabia, their leaders in Sanaa may feel that it is they who should dictate terms to the Saudis. Many Yemenis now fear a scenario in which the Huthis continue to extend their writ in large portions of Yemen as the government loses its remaining sway and the chances of an inclusive political process slip away.¹²

As part of this scenario, some Yemenis worry that the Saudis may bow to Huthi pressure and agree to a settlement that will protect their borders but not their Yemeni allies, leaving anti-Huthi Yemenis to fend for themselves.¹³ There is another possible scenario: a concerted coalition attempt to push the Huthis back through stepped-up bombing and mobilisation on multiple fronts, to include reopening the Hodeida front, where arguably the Huthis are vulnerable militarily.

IV. What Needs to Happen

The fighting needs to stop, something that will require international involvement and direct mediation. There is reason to doubt that the Huthis would accept a pause in fighting if they are convinced that they can strike a death blow to the government, at least absent meaningful incentives. Their own offer of a pause in return for primarily economic benefits indicates that, for them, breaking the financial siege of their areas is paramount. The government has not responded, making clear that it sees the proposal as impinging upon its sovereignty.¹⁴

The Huthis have suggested that, if local authorities reject their offer, the only solution will be a nationwide de-escalation agreement, arguing that regionally focused agreements like the one for Hodeida are ultimately unsustainable anyway.¹⁵ As part of such a process, they will want tangible economic benefits – such as free passage of ships into Hodeida, reopening of Sanaa's airport and a unified national mechanism for revenue collection and salary payments.¹⁶ This deal would not only lessen the Huthis' economic woes but also spare them a drawn-out battle for areas long known for antipathy toward the Huthis and, for that matter, Sanaa's rule.

¹¹ The Huthis have until now accepted the need for both power-sharing and military/security arrangements in any political settlement, although not to the extent that the government demands.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, multiple anti-Huthi activists, government officials and local fighters, 5-10 March 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government officials, 11 and 13 March 2020.

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representatives, 13 and 14 March 2020.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, 13 March 2020.

Halting a battle for Marib is a priority, yet recent experience has shown the limitations of a piecemeal approach to ending the war. It has also shown that the Huthis and Saudis cannot end the war alone, as both may have hoped they could at the end of 2019. Far more preferable would be a nationwide cessation of hostilities brokered by an effective mediator, namely the UN, backed by international stakeholders in Yemen, and followed by inclusive talks among all main Yemeni parties in pursuit of a realistic political deal. In theory, both the Huthis and the government would welcome a comprehensive approach. Both have repeatedly expressed resentment of regionally specific agreements that tamp down violence in one area, such as Aden or Hodeida, while allowing it to flare up in others, benefiting one side or the other while doing little to solve the political impasse that continues to drive the conflict or to stabilise the cratering economy.¹⁷

A comprehensive approach that seeks to meet the core interests of all sides would need to be backed by several groupings. First, as Crisis Group has argued in the past, a new contact group should be established that, at a minimum, includes representatives from the five UN Security Council members, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and the EU, with a mandate to support the UN envoy's efforts to revive a peace process. Secondly, also as previously advocated by Crisis Group, the UN should help form a Yemeni national military body made up not just of government and Huthi representatives but of a wide range of Yemeni belligerents, including the STC, forces fighting under Tareq Saleh (nephew of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh) on the Red Sea coast and others. This body, with close support from the international contact group, would be charged with negotiating and overseeing a national de-escalation.¹⁸ Under current circumstances, these two bodies could play a critical role in negotiating a halt to the fighting in Marib as part of a wider de-escalation effort and a push for national talks.

Absent coordinated international support, and particularly a stepped-up U.S. role in mediating a deal involving national de-escalation and economic benefits, a halt to the fighting does not look likely. Nor do peace talks. In 2018, the UN envoy was able to get a deal between the Huthis and the government thanks to direct U.S. diplomatic intervention with the Saudi leadership.¹⁹ Yet since October 2019, the U.S. in particular seems to have pinned its hopes of winding down the war on the Saudis' ability to manage both their talks with the Huthis and implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Before these efforts go completely off the rails, Washington and others interested in ending the war should provide renewed backing for a UN process.

Washington is critical because it is best placed to encourage Riyadh, and particularly Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his brother Khalid, the deputy defence minister who holds the Yemen file, to engage constructively with all Yemeni parties and nudge them toward a deal. In parallel, and as part of a new international contact group, the U.S. could clarify for the Huthis the circumstances under which it would be willing to both pressure the Saudis to end the war and accept the Huthis as fully

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, 8 November 2019 and 20 January 2020; government official, 8 March 2020.

¹⁸ See Crisis Group Conflict Alert, "Breaking a Renewed Conflict Cycle in Yemen", 24 January 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group Report, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Confrontation in Yemen*, op. cit.

legitimate interlocutors. The U.S. should be realistic in this endeavour. Washington and Riyadh want the Huthis to sever ties to Tehran, but they will likely have to settle for gradual and partial disengagement rather than a complete break.

The Huthis, although feeling increasingly comfortable in their military position in Yemen, are squeezed and isolated economically. They want a break from the war, economic relief, international recognition, and a significant share of power for their movement and their allied de facto authorities in Sanaa. Through direct diplomacy, and by leading a coordinated international approach through a contact group, the U.S. could assist the Saudis in setting the terms for normalising their relationship with the Huthis as part of a wider power-sharing deal among all Yemeni parties that would need to be buttressed by significant outside economic support. Washington and Riyadh could also offer the government and anti-Huthi Yemenis reassurances that they are not rubber-stamping a Huthi takeover of the country as a quick fix to end the war and promise to hold the Huthis (along with all other parties) accountable for adhering to the terms of a signed peace accord.

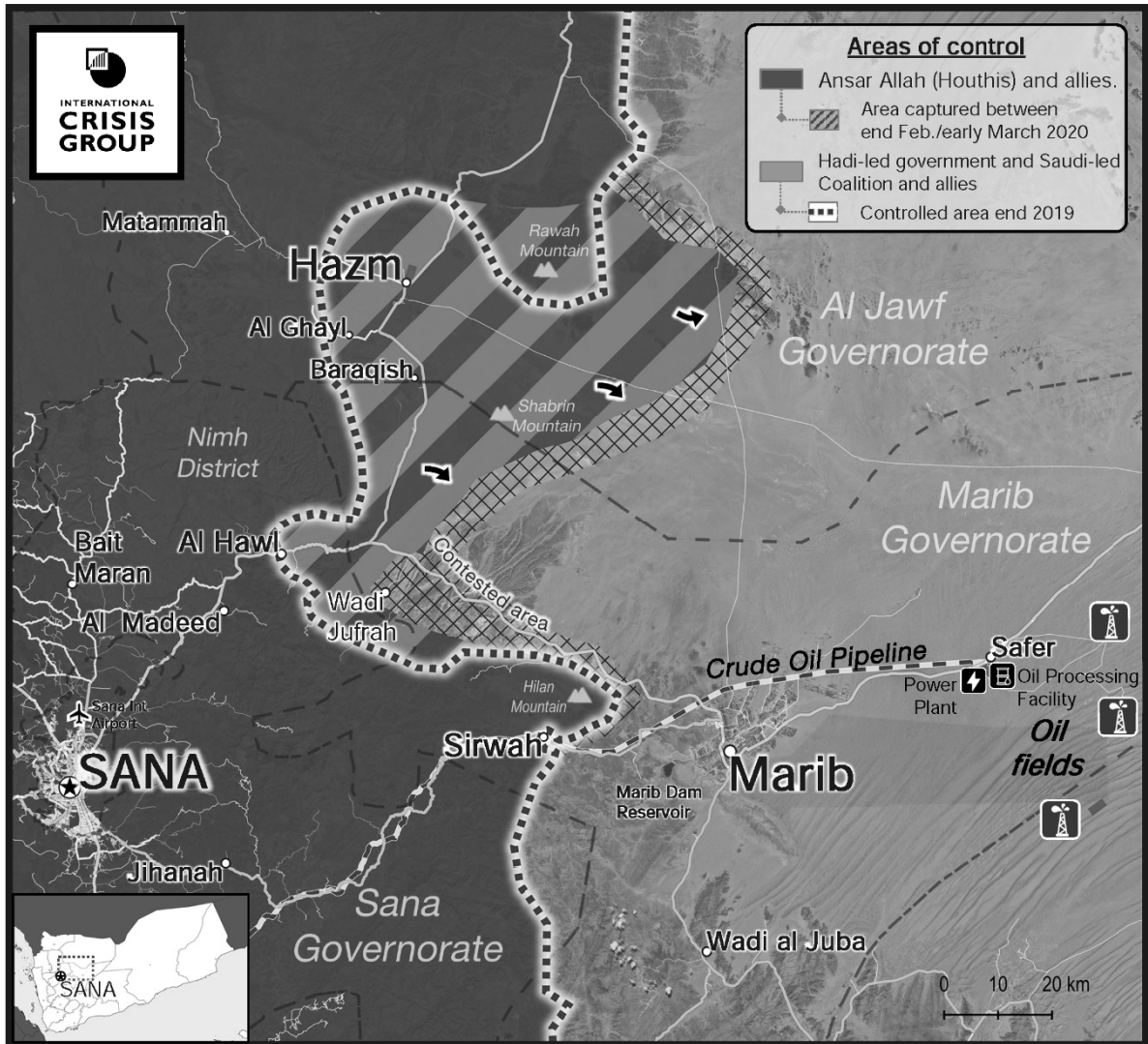
For this approach to succeed, the various Yemeni parties to the conflict also will have to accept the need to compromise to end the war. The Huthis say they believe in a future Yemen that is governed equitably through power sharing. Now that they seem to have the military upper hand in the conflict, even in areas outside their northern highlands base, they should show other Yemeni groups, including but not limited to the government, that they are capable of accepting others and willing to compromise from a position of strength. Otherwise, opposition to their rule will fester and grow, notably in areas that they have captured by force of arms. The government should also move away from maximalist positions, including demands that the Huthis essentially surrender control of all Yemen to the internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour al-Hadi. This stance, which the Hadi government has upheld since it fled Sanaa in early 2015, is increasingly far removed from reality.

If there is no viable, inclusive political process soon, some of the government's allies on the ground may see no choice but to cut deals with the Huthis, with or without the government. Rival anti-Huthi groups like the STC, which the government has sought to keep out of UN-led talks in the past, may take this path. Even if they do, however, fighting will likely grind on as the Huthis work to consolidate their control over the north while the anti-Huthi forces who have struck bargains with the Huthis carve up the rest of the country among themselves, with the government an increasingly marginal player.

During five years of war, Yemen has become poorer and more divided. A political resolution will require long, hard work and will leave most national and regional stakeholders unsatisfied. But it is better than the alternative: still more years of fighting, political and territorial atomisation, as well as ever deeper human deprivation. The opportunity to stop the fighting that opened at the end of 2019 is fading fast. It should not be allowed to disappear.

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Appendix A: Map of Republic of Yemen Al Jawf-Sana-Marib:
Estimated Areas of Control as of March 2020



Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only and does not imply endorsement by International Crisis Group. [Open Sources; OSM; ESRI, Twitter, local media outlets]



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