



Our Journey

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Behind the Front Lines in Yemen's Marib

Just before major battles in northern Yemen and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Crisis Group expert Peter Salisbury travelled to Marib, the government's last stronghold. He found a region coping well with massive displacement but fearing a settlement that would favour the advancing Huthis.

Five years into Yemen's civil war, it was a long, hard struggle to enter the country, as it usually is for foreigners like me. I spent the months before travelling doing bureaucratic outreach to get my government visa, and sleepless nights waiting for last-minute security clearances. So it was a relief to join in the chatter and selfie taking of the Yemenis queuing to board the flight from Cairo to Seyoun, Hadramawt, on New Year's Eve.

The eight days ahead of me were a precious chance to visit a part of Yemen I hadn't seen in a decade, since the days before the 2011 uprising that unseated former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yemen, always divided, has fragmented over the course of the conflict. Prior to the revolt, which preceded the failed transition of 2012-2014 and the current civil war, it was fairly easy to hop from one patch of the country to another. No longer. The capital, Sanaa, and



All images by the author.

Government soldier stands guard at Marib's Mahram Belqis, 170km east of the capital Sanaa.



Cliffs and mud-brick skyscrapers in Shibam.

the southern port of Aden might as well be in different countries. The war is so heated that swathes of territory often change hands on a monthly basis.

I was researching a new report on how to end the war, so I needed to talk to as many parties on the ground as possible. Since late 2018, I've travelled to the front lines of the war on the west coast, to contested Aden and to Sanaa in the Huthi-controlled northern highlands. Now I wanted to reach Marib, the internationally recognised government's last major stronghold. Over the course of the war, Marib has become a refuge for internally displaced people and an economic hub. A few weeks after I was there the Huthis launched a major offensive on government positions in the north, capturing the capital of al-Jawf province to Marib's north before marching toward Marib city and adjacent oil and gas infrastructure. Fearing that the fighting might make the war harder to end, and that the COVID-19 virus might soon reach Yemen, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a nationwide ceasefire on 25 March.

But I didn't know about the fighting or the pandemic to come at the time of my trip, and I was focused on the task at hand: getting to

“It's one thing to be told that things are normal and another to experience it in person.”



On the way to Marib.

Yemen. Yemenia Airlines had warned me that the flight would be busy. At \$1,000 for a round-trip ticket from one of the most impoverished places on the planet, it's not surprising that the Yemenis who fly out and back, many for medical treatment, make the journey count. Almost everyone seemed to have filled a luggage cart to capacity with boxes, blankets and large bags. Amazingly, the battered airliner took off with only a 45-minute delay.

We landed safely in Seiyoun. So far, the war has scarcely touched Hadramawt, the eastern governorate of which this city is part. The elegant mud-brick skyscrapers of nearby Shibam, green spaces and craggy cliffs all round reminded me of all that is beautiful about Yemen.

I had no time to linger. We needed to head out into the open desert to make the 440km drive west to Marib, with its many checkpoints.

Along the way, a detail of armed guards sent by Marib's governor appeared to accompany us along the desert road. It was still early, and they stopped for breakfast. Sipping scalding-hot cardamom-laced tea and scooping up liver and eggs with fresh flat bread helped me adjust to being back in Yemen proper. It was a far cry from the meetings with politicians that I had in hotels and cafés in Cairo on my way here.

As our car climbed from the desert into the foothills and we entered Marib city, I was struck by how busy this once-sleepy provincial centre has become. What was a town of 30,000 people



Marib street scene by night.

before the war began in 2015 has grown into a city that local authorities say now houses 1.8 million. The population of the governorate is reckoned to have grown tenfold, from 300,000 people to three million. The International Organization for Migration estimates that 800,000 people fleeing fighting in other parts of the country have come here seeking refuge.

The pace of change, everyone told me, has picked up over the past two years as security has improved and the local economy begun to grow, fuelled by an influx of money from other parts of the country and revenues from the

sale of the province's oil and gas across Yemen. Marib city, once a one-road town with a single restaurant, now has some surprisingly well-appointed hotels, private banks, big supermarkets, four-lane highways, a university, a football stadium and numerous restaurants, including an outpost of the nationally famous Shaibani chain. Authorities announced construction of a new international airport the day after I arrived.

Marib is just half an hour from the front lines, which seems to bolster a distinct sense of municipal pride. People overwhelmingly wanted to tell me about the city's growth and



Breakfast with armed guards.



General Mohammed al-Maqdashi, defence minister in the Yemeni government.

relative calm. Allies of the government and the local authorities (who each claim Marib's success story for themselves) pressed the point that the city is an island of stability and good governance in the midst of a chaotic civil war.

It's one thing to be told that things are normal and another to experience it in person. Although I was a pretty rare sight as a foreigner, I didn't feel any threat or even great curiosity. I was even able to take short walks to tea shops and restaurants at night, something that has become almost impossible for me since the war began elsewhere in the country, because of either a lack of security or heavy-handed policing by local authorities.

One of the first people I met in Marib was General Mohammed al-Maqdashi, the defence minister in the Yemeni government. After Saudi Arabia intervened in the nascent civil war in March 2015, he was part of a small group of officers who volunteered to rebuild the Yemeni army to fight the Huthis. Large parts of the military and security services defected to the Huthis' side early in the conflict, and there was little guidance for soldiers who opposed

them. Along with local tribal leaders, Maq-dashi helped mount the defence of Marib and, in 2015-2016, pushed the Huthis back toward Sanaa, located 170km to the west. His headquarters are in a modest air-conditioned building with SUVs and pickups equipped with machine guns parked outside.

The Huthis frequently target military buildings with missiles, so we soon moved to the general's home for lunch. We discussed the situation in Yemen late into the afternoon. He suggested who among the Huthis could be a partner for making peace and how important it is for him to be present in Yemen. Other ministers are either far away from the front in the temporary capital, Aden, or outside the country. Most spend their time in Cairo and Riyadh.

Marib and al-Jawf are critical to understanding the various interests of the mix of forces fighting the Huthis, their capacities and perspectives. Without taking these into account, no peace deal is likely to work.

My working days involved constant shuttling between hotels, offices and homes for meetings. On Friday morning, there were no meetings and

The former centre of the pre-Islamic Sabaean Kingdom and domain of the legendary Queen of Sheba, Marib.





Marib dam, twenty minutes from the front lines.

I decided to take in the sights of Marib, which until the mid-2000s was a popular destination for tourists visiting Yemen. The last time I was here, I hoped to find out more about this former centre of the pre-Islamic Sabaean Kingdom and domain of the legendary Queen of Sheba. But local security forces sent me back to Sanaa, saying they were nervous I'd be a target of the local al-Qaeda branch – a threat residents say the former regime blew out of proportion in order to tighten its grip on the governorate and its valuable oil and gas resources. This time, I had better luck. I visited Sheba's purported burial site and a temple to the Moon God worshipped by the Sabaean. I was not the only visitor; there were plenty of Yemeni tourists there, too.

Marib is also known for its great dam. Even though it's only a twenty-minute drive from the front lines, on the Friday morning we visited, it was clear that it continues to draw crowds.

The original dam was a pillar of the Sabeen kingdom, but it collapsed around 570 AD, the onrushing water devastating the region. The ancestors of the Nahyan family, the founding dynasty of the Gulf emirate of Abu Dhabi, are said to have emigrated from the Marib area at this time. In the 1960s and 1970s, Sheikh Zayed, Abu Dhabi's emir and founder of the United Arab Emirates, repaid his family's debt to history by financing the construction of the dam here today.



Traditional Yemeni mud-brick house in Serwa.

Before the war, the Marib dam attracted visitors from Yemen, the Gulf and the rest of the world. I was surprised to find that it's still a Yemeni holiday destination. I met families who told me they had driven 570km from Huthi-controlled Ibb in central Yemen to vacation here. Locals, like the men in this picture, also like to relax in the reservoir's cool water on a hot January day. So much of my work focuses on Yemen's fragmentation, and I was reminded by this and other conversations how much ordinary people still feel that the country is a single entity with a shared history and culture.

This traditional Yemeni mud-brick house in Sirwa, near the dam, is pockmarked with bullet holes from fighting in 2015. We didn't stop here, but I have spent time in homes like this one, which are refreshingly cool on a hot day, over the years. The setting sun refracts through the *qamariya*, half-moon stained-glass windows on the upper storey, adding to the pleasure of social meetings.

Lengthy social meetings allow me to build trust, meet people of all points of view and understand more deeply a war that has come to include multi-layered narratives. A wide range of normally divided people can still get together behind closed doors.

One such gathering on this trip included members of the former ruling party, the General People's Congress; other secular



A guard chewing *qat*.

nationalists like Nasserists; affiliates of *Islah*, a broad umbrella organisation for the Muslim Brotherhood members and conservative, religious and tribal groups; religious-conservative Salafists; and Socialists, too. At other times, I met with groups of tribal leaders and government, military and economic officials.

On many afternoons, we chewed *qat*, green leaves from a plant that is somewhere between a tree and a bush. The practice produces a gentle euphoria, leading to a gradual increase in the intensity of conversation and debate. It's a participatory experience; everyone gets a turn to talk.

To be honest, I was not partial to *qat* when I first came to Yemen as a journalist in 2009 or when I lived here for about a year and a half in 2013 and 2014. But on these hard-won return trips, I have come to truly appreciate the openness and sense of togetherness that chewing *qat* encourages.

Pictured here is the guard of a prominent sheikh in al-Jawf governorate. During a meeting with local political and tribal leaders, I felt the full strength of opposition to a deal with the Huthis. Some al-Jawf tribes have been fighting the Huthis since 2009 (first as part of the rebels' intermittent conflict with the deposed

Saleh and then as part of their war with the successor government). After more than a decade of fighting, many in the governorate fear that a future political settlement will favour the Huthis, who have emerged as the most powerful military force on the ground. They paint the Huthis as an expansionist power that wants to restore the religious authoritarian rule of the imamate that controlled northern Yemen until the 1960s (the Huthis deny such accusations).

On the western edge of Marib, at the new Saba Regional University, buildings are going up as fast as the local authorities can manage in order to keep up with demand for higher education in the area. The university expansion is part of a general construction boom driven by income from the governorate's control of local oil and gas fields and the influx of people from other parts of the country – some poor, some wealthy.

A government soldier on leave from the front stood in one of the new districts appearing outside Marib. His home is part of a huge displaced persons' camp, al-Jafina, where I met members of the Hajjour tribe who battled the Huthis and lost in early 2019. Seeing their distress, and hearing that they do not expect to be



Saba Regional University expanding, Marib.



Government soldier in a new district outside Marib.



Checkpoint between Marib, al-Jawf and Sanaa.

able to return home, impressed upon me once more why resolving this conflict and others is so important.

Travelling across Yemen is extremely challenging, even in areas under nominally unified control. I arranged to visit al-Hazm, the provincial capital of al-Jawf. But halfway there I was stopped at a checkpoint at the meeting point between the main roads to Marib, al-Jawf and

Sanaa. As I called ahead for authorisation to pass the provincial boundary, we sat in the sun for an hour.

The men manning the checkpoint had reason to be nervous. Two weeks after I was stopped here, the Huthis captured this checkpoint in some of the worst fighting in recent years.

In stark contrast to Marib's lush green mountains and carefully tended fields, the



Road to al-Hazm.



Motorbike taxis in al-Hazm.



Sabah al-Swaidi, representative from the Association of Mothers of Abductees.



Yasmin al-Qadhi, head of the Marib Girls Foundation.

former breadbasket of Arabia, much of the 170km road to al-Hazm passes through flat, stony desert. Yemen is a country of geographic extremes, yet even the desert here is dotted with ancient towns and villages. Amid this diversity and beauty, with not a soldier in sight, I sometimes felt the war was being waged in a parallel universe. Yet two weeks after I passed along this road, it was ground zero for heavy fighting.

Al-Hazm felt bustling after our hours-long drive across the desert. In some big cities, like Aden and Sanaa, authorities have banned motorbike taxis like these, since they are the ideal transport for drive-by assassins. But in smaller cities like al-Hazm and Marib, long spared by the civil war violence, they are a

normal and often colourful part of street life. Less than two months after my visit, the Huthis seized control of the city.

Sabah al-Swaidi, representative from the Association of Mothers of Abductees. CRISIS-GROUP/Peter Salisbury Back in Marib, I met representatives from the Association of Mothers of Abductees. This women's group tracks down and lobbies for the release of civilians it says are arbitrarily detained across Yemen. "We organise protests all over the country", said Sabah al-Swaidi.

People in the city say migration has a liberalising effect on society, allowing educated women like Sabah to lead an NGO, something that was considered unacceptable here before



Juba, south of Marib.

the war. There are more women than men at the Saba Regional University.

Speaking with local women activists as well as the men with the guns gave me a feeling for the bigger challenges and nuances of what true peacebuilding in a country like Yemen will entail, away from the power politics. Yemenis do not just want the shooting to stop; they want state institutions like the police and the courts to be accountable to ordinary people.

I also met with Yasmin al-Qadhi, head of the Marib Girls Foundation. She described the work her group is doing in training people to mediate conflicts. She told the story of how she led a group of women to resolve a struggle over control of the local headquarters of the electricity ministry.

Peacebuilding of this kind is vital. The fighting that consumed al-Jawf and Marib after I left likely started with a local tribal dispute.

It's increasingly clear that stopping the war won't automatically bring peace to Yemen. There is a disconnect between national politicians and the armed groups that control things on the ground – and between both these sets of actors and society as a whole. A poorly designed settlement could sow the seeds of future conflict.

I wanted to visit Juba, in the south of Marib, where I was told that I would get a new perspective on life in government-controlled areas. It took hours to negotiate my passage out of Marib. We drove through jagged mountains and green valleys, going off-road to get to the house of a senior leader from the Murad tribe.

The sheikh was critical of the local leadership in Marib, which is widely perceived to be close to Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party, and which he said was freezing out independent voices like his. He's liberal by Maribi standards: his daughters are NGO activists who went to university in Sanaa at a time when many young women in the area did not receive more than a basic education. He challenged a lot of what other interviewees said about political cohesion in Marib, making it harder to draw clear conclusions from my fieldwork, but adding much-needed nuance.

It was getting dark, and we needed to go, given the dangers of driving at night, when traffic accidents happen with disturbing regularity. My host insisted that we stay for dinner, however, saying it would take only a short while. An hour later, a generous meal of rice, lamb and half a dozen other dishes was laid before us.

The end of my journey was drawing close, but I needed more time. As happens on every trip, I felt that I was just beginning to get the insights into Yemen's deeply complex conflict that are impossible to attain from abroad.

At the height of a *qat* chew, those gathered together always find solutions for all the world's ills. But more often than not no one writes the solutions down, much less carries them out. All that's left afterward are the discarded *qat* stems and empty water bottles. What I feared was that, when I got back to Cairo airport, it would be like waking up from a dream.

Still, in a little more than a week, I had significant interviews with more than 40 people,

I spent days on the road in deserts and mountains, and, despite all the privileges I have as a foreign visitor with guards, I saw the challenges of everyday life. I could hear a signal amid all the noise. I now knew not just what people are saying and what they think, but why they think it. The clear message from Marib was fear that Saudi Arabia was going to strike a deal with the Huthis that didn't take local interests on the weaker anti-Huthi side into account. I returned even more convinced that any lasting solution will have to include local input.

Yemen has changed profoundly over the course of the decade I have worked there. Now, five years after the Saudi-led intervention

“A fight for Marib could add a new catastrophe to what is already the world's most serious humanitarian emergency.”



Discarded *qat* stems after a shared chewing moment.



View of Marib by night.

escalated a nascent civil war into a protracted regional conflict, fighting in the north has the potential to once again dramatically reshape the country's political landscape.

If the Huthis prevail in the battle for Marib, they will have in effect won the war for the north, at least for the time being, making international efforts to end the conflict even more difficult. Worse, a fight for Marib could add a new catastrophe to what is already the world's most serious humanitarian emergency – one

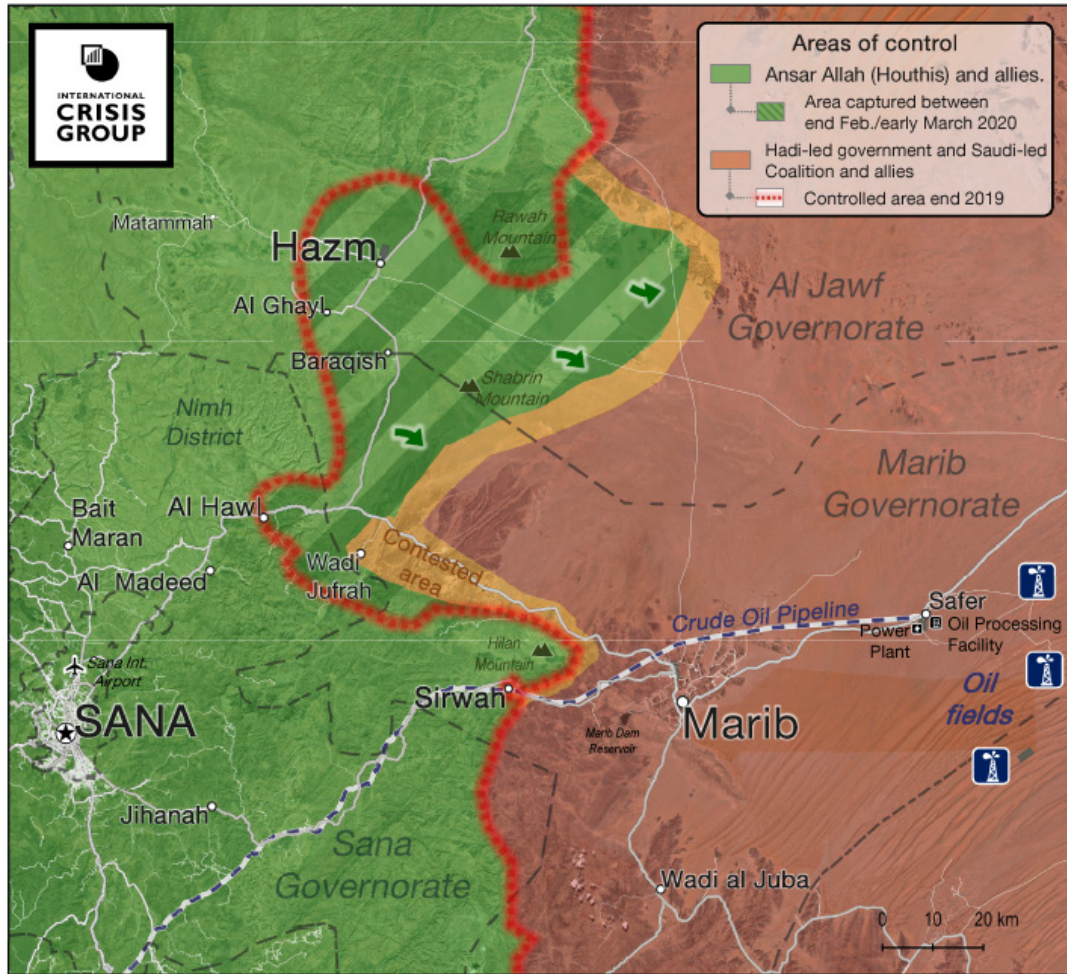
that may soon worsen badly if the COVID-19 pandemic hits Yemen hard. It could displace more than a million people, many of whom have already fled fighting in other parts of the country. To learn what my Crisis Group colleagues and I think about the fighting in the north, read our briefing, *Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen*.



Peter Salisbury (far right) in the streets of Sanaa, July 2019. Crisis Group President and CEO Rob Malley centre.

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).

