



## Crisis Group Yemen Update #7

*This is the seventh weekly briefing note as part of Crisis Group's Yemen Campaign. This week, we look at how tribal dynamics in the north could affect the stalled peace process.*

### **Trendline: As Stockholm Stutters, a Tribal Showdown in Yemen's North**

As UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths continued to push for the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement to demilitarise the Red Sea port city of Hodeida, images circulated on social media on 4 March purporting to show Katyusha missiles hitting houses in Kushar, a small settlement in Yemen's northern Hajja governorate.

The alleged Huthi missile strikes marked an escalation in a local conflict that has been gathering momentum for almost two months. The trigger of the fighting around Kushar remains

uncertain, with Huthis and members of the Hajour, a tribe based in the Kushar basin, each blaming the other for breaching a truce instituted between them in 2013.

The Huthis claim that elements of the Hajour with ties to Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, have been stockpiling weapons provided by Saudi Arabia and bringing fighters into the area, a breach of the six-year-old truce that has seen the Hajour remain neutral throughout the current civil war. In January, they allege, Hajouri tribesmen from Alabaaisah village set up checkpoints along an important



REUTERS / Khaled Abdullah

*A child sits on a bed near a hut in an improvised camp for internally displaced people near Abs of the northwestern province of Hajja, Yemen February 18, 2019. Picture taken 18 February 2019.*

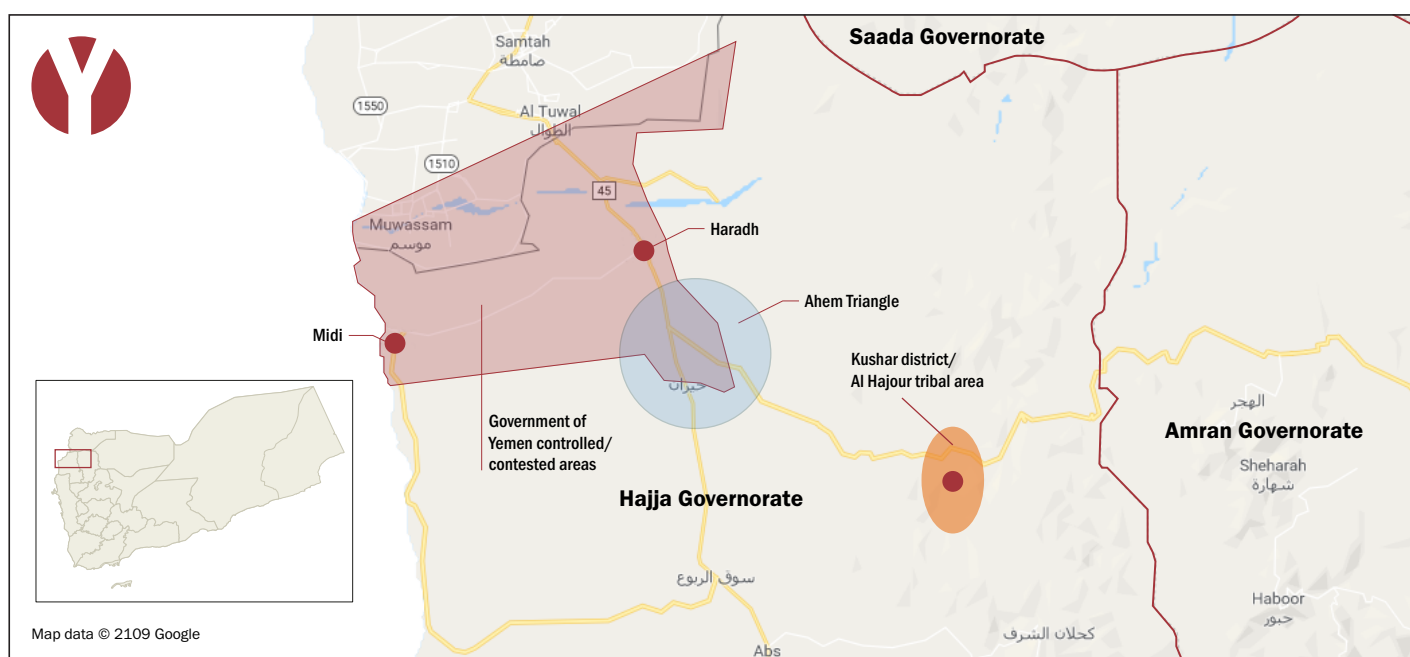
*“Fighting in Kushar demonstrates the lengths the Huthis will go to in order to demonstrate their dominance.”*

highway and detained Huthi loyalists, sparking the violence.

Hajour tribesmen opposed to the Huthis have a different story. Noting that the tribe’s numerous leaders have widely varying political affiliations, including to the General People’s Congress and Nasserist party (the main link between the tribes and the coalition has been the head of the GPC in Hajja), they claim that the Huthis violated the agreement in January after becoming unnerved by gains made by rival forces backed by Saudi Arabia in surrounding areas. Having freed up fighters previously deployed to Hodeida following the Stockholm Agreement, the Huthis, they say, decided to attempt a takeover. The Huthis, who have long coveted Kushar – an area surrounded by mountains that form a natural fortress – held a meeting with Hajour tribal leaders in early January and demanded they allow Huthi forces to set up positions on mountains around the district. When they were rebuffed, they began to force their way into the area. Saudi airstrikes on Huthi positions and airdrops of desperately needed food, medicine and arms followed soon

after. Whether or not they sought Saudi support before the fighting began, the Hajour are now receiving it.

The stakes in Kushar are high. The Huthis fear a government offensive from positions in north-western Hajja, originating from Midi port and Haradh city and now deep inside the “Ahem triangle” to the east of the two, could extend along a highway that cuts into Amran governorate, a tribal area that sits between the Huthi heartland of Saada and the capital Sanaa. Kushar, in eastern Hajja, bisects the road. If government-backed forces were to move further east and gain control of Kushar, the Huthis’ main supply line to the Ahem front (see map below) would be under threat. This in turn could allow Saudi-backed forces to advance further along the Amran road, threatening the Sanaa-Saada supply line. In short, if the Huthis are unable to assert their control over the hitherto neutral area, they will struggle to sustain the fight against Saudi-backed Yemeni forces in other parts of the northern highlands. If they win, they will have demonstrated their dominance in north-western Yemen and will further



*Key positions and areas of conflict in Hajja, Yemen. Map data © 2019 Google*

*“It will be important to keep an eye on the internal politics in ostensibly government of Yemen-controlled areas, where multiple factions continue to jostle for power.”*

consolidate their control of territory in advance of any political settlement.

The fight for Kushar is also a litmus test for the Saudi-led coalition’s “tribal strategy” in northern Yemen, a long-gestating plan to convince tribes in Huthi-controlled areas to rise up against the de facto authorities. President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi’s government has repeatedly claimed that it is deploying more fighters to the nearby towns of Midi and Haradh, and that it will soon break through to Kushar. In reality it has made very little progress. The government and the Saudis hope that a Huthi loss in Kushar will prompt other tribes to take up arms against the Huthis, sparking a tribal uprising that they have long predicted, but which has failed to materialise.

A late February announcement from Yemen’s government that it would send seven additional battalions to the main front in Hajja, combined with a call to arms by Yahya al-Hajouri, a prominent Salafi sheikh from Hajja who was among the Huthis’ chief antagonists before the war, likely prompted the Huthis to make a stronger push for Kushar. The Huthis now hold the upper hand after a major show of force and the rebels predict that internal resistance will not last long. On 7 March the Huthi-controlled interior ministry in Sanaa announced that the “outlaws” had been cleared from the area. Their rivals agree that the Huthis are in the stronger position, but warn that fighting in the area could still be bloody and destructive. Of an estimated population of 114,000, about 33,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and more than 10,000 have arrived in nearby Amran city in recent weeks, according to UN officials.

Kushar, the Huthis say, is one of a final few pockets of internal tribal resistance in areas they control, and their assault, they believe, will dampen the likelihood of future internal threats to their position in the north. This assessment

of theirs is probably optimistic. Instead, fighting in Kushar demonstrates the lengths the Huthis will go to in order to demonstrate their dominance. The government, meanwhile, holds up recent events in Kushar as an example of the Huthis’ bad faith. The Huthis have used deliberations over implementing the Stockholm Agreement as a stalling tactic, they say, and are using the truce around Hodeida as an opportunity to consolidate their position elsewhere. While accurate, this analysis is selective: it ignores the government’s and coalition’s own attempts to gain ground in the north and other areas.

**Bottom Line:** Fighting around Kushar is a reminder that even if the deal to demilitarise Hodeida can be implemented, elsewhere the war continues and in some cases has intensified. Should it continue, the conflict in Hajja will, at a minimum, exacerbate the lack of trust between the warring parties. Should the fighting become bloodier, it could precipitate the Yemeni government’s or the Huthis’ withdrawal from the Stockholm Agreement. In the longer term the fighting likely foreshadows the nature of post-Hodeida conflict: battles for much smaller prizes that nonetheless have national ramifications.

### **Political and Military Developments**

Another week passed without visible progress in implementing the Stockholm Agreement. UN officials believe they are close to finalising details of a first phase of redeployment from in and around Hodeida and two nearby ports (See Update #6, Update #5) after a series of delays. The major sticking point among the Huthis, the Yemeni government and its backers in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh remains how to secure territory after both sides have redeployed their military forces. While they have agreed to postpone detailed negotiations over the issue for the time

being, the first phase of redeployments requires front-line forces to pull back from the “Kilo 8” triangle on the eastern edge of Hodeida. The UN is struggling to find a security arrangement for the area that is suitable for both sides.

Elsewhere, Aydrous al-Zubaidi, president of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), Yemen’s self-styled southern government-in-waiting, was touching down in London, where he made a series of high-profile appearances. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Zubaidi argued that a peace process in Yemen can be effective only if it includes southern representatives. Tensions have been rising in the south in recent weeks. Reports emerged on 6 March of fighting between the Hadi-loyalist Presidential Guard and STC-affiliated Security Belt forces in Aden’s Khormaksar district. The fighting came after protests a day earlier over the alleged killing of a witness in a sexual assault case by local counter-terrorism forces affiliated with the STC. It also followed unrest, understood to be STC-led, over fuel and power shortages in the city, reportedly caused by wrangling between the government and a powerful local businessman over payments for fuel.

In Mukalla, the capital of Yemen’s eastern Hadramawt governorate, yet more protesters called for a unified security cordon across the province. The protestors demanded that STC-affiliated Hadrami Elite forces oversee security in the governorate and called for the removal of security forces loyal to Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, Hadi’s vice president and de facto leader of anti-Huthi military forces in northern Yemen. Hadi loyalists held meetings of their new Southern National Congress, a purported counterweight to the STC, in Cairo on 6-7 March.

Marib governorate was rocked by the reappearance of the conservative Salafi cleric Yahya al-Hajouri. Hajouri made a public call for support of the Hajour tribes from his new base in Marib, a reconstituted version of Dar al-Hadith, the Salafi training centre he led in the Huthi heartland of Saada until he was forced out in February 2014. Marib has long been dominated by groups affiliated with Islah, which has had an uncomfortable relationship with Salafi thinkers

like Hajouri who preach against engagement in politics. Islah is viewed with suspicion by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which sees political Islamism as a threat to its stability and has backed quietist Salafi groups in southern Yemen. A number of Islah members see Hajouri’s reappearance in Marib as an attempt to counteract their influence. Further complicating matters, one of the two most powerful tribes in Marib, the Murad, is hosting Hajouri, while a rival Salafi cleric, Abu Hassan al-Maribi, has a close relationship with the other, Abidah. The two tribes put aside their historical differences to mount resistance to the Huthis at the beginning of the war. Now local observers worry that the clerics’ rivalry could undermine the tribal détente.

**Bottom Line:** Implementing the Stockholm Agreement rightly remains a top priority for the UN and the wider international community in Yemen. But it will be important to keep an eye on the internal politics in ostensibly government of Yemen-controlled areas, where multiple factions continue to jostle for power, a process that will intensify if the Stockholm Agreement transitions into a political process.

### **Regional and International Developments**

Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to complain in public and private that the Stockholm Agreement is not being implemented and they criticise the UN for failing to maintain sufficient pressure on the Huthis to redeploy their forces from Hodeida. On 4 March, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and the Yemeni government sent a joint letter to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres highlighting their concerns and outlining allegations of ceasefire violations around Hodeida. The UN Security Council might hold closed consultations with the UN envoy to discuss the slow pace of progress in the coming days.

In Washington, several bills to reduce U.S. support for the war in Yemen remain under discussion in Congress, although no firm dates for debate have been set.

In Europe, Der Spiegel reported on Friday that German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Vice Chancellor Olaf Scholz agreed to extend the moratorium on German arms exports to Saudi Arabia for another two weeks. The government spokesperson confirmed that a new agreement on the extension will be needed in the course of March. The controversy over the extension of the export freeze is increasingly splitting Germany's ruling coalition: Scholz's Social Democrats are calling for another extension of the moratorium while Merkel's Christian Democrats, including party leader Annegret

Kramp-Karrenbauer, argue that Germany needs to cooperate with European partners on joint security and that the export ban is hurting these partnerships.

**Bottom line:** Pressure continues to mount on Saudi Arabia over its role in Yemen. If sustained, this is likely to help prevent a collapse of the shaky truce around Hodeida and the gradual implementation of the evolving demilitarisation plan. Public pressure on the Huthis from the coalition has also served as a useful tool during the process.