



Crisis Group Yemen Update #8

This is the eighth briefing note in Crisis Group's Yemen Campaign. This week, we explain why ending the internal conflict in Taiz should be a priority step toward national-level peacebuilding efforts.

Trendline: Trouble in Taiz

Taiz, Yemen's largest pre-war manufacturing hub and cultural capital nestled in the country's central highlands, is widely regarded by its inhabitants as a forgotten city. Any future political settlement will have to include a mechanism to end the struggle for Taiz, but internal wrangling among anti-Huthi forces may prove as much of a barrier to progress as their rivalry with the Huthis.

The site of some of the fiercest front-line fighting in the ongoing four-year war, Taiz was besieged by an erstwhile Huthi-Saleh alliance from 2015 until 2017 and has since connected

to the outside world through a single, winding mountain road linking it with Turbah, a town 70 kilometres south. The battle for Taiz is now as much for control of the main highways that extend west to the Red Sea coast, north to Sanaa and south to the government controlled city of Aden and the city's surrounding mountains – over which the Huthis maintain a stranglehold – as of the city itself, which is largely under the control of forces backed by the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition.

With a pre-war population of 600,000, thought to have dwindled to a third of that over the course of the conflict, Taiz is roughly the



REUTERS/Anees Mahyoub

People walk past a school, damaged during the ongoing war in Taiz, Yemen 18 December 2018.

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same size as the Red Sea port city of Hodeida in terms of both pre-war and current population. The Hawban industrial zone to the north east of Taiz, which is under Huthi control, is a crucial processing, packaging and distribution hub for foodstuffs, which traders say play an important role in feeding the country. Residents of Taiz complain that the battle for their city has not attracted anything like the international attention Hodeida commanded when a battle for that coastal city loomed in 2018, sparking fears of catastrophic humanitarian fallout. As the country’s busiest port and also a centre for food storage and distribution, the focus on Hodeida was well justified, but Taiz too is a humanitarian disaster with ripple effects on the rest of the country. Although not as significant to the overall humanitarian picture as Hodeida, it is fair to say it has not attracted a proportionate level of outcry.

Along with other major front lines in the broader conflict, an accord on Taiz city and the wider eponymous governorate will be a key component of any political settlement to end the war, not least because so many of Yemen’s warring factions and parties are present there. Taiz was discussed during UN-led talks between the Huthis and government of Yemen in December 2018. But with most energy in Sweden directed at brokering a deal on Hodeida, the parties made no substantive agreement beyond committing to create a new committee to discuss the status of the city.

Opening the Taiz-Aden Highway

UN officials say that this has led to constructive discussions that are now centred around reopening the main highway linking Taiz with Aden, currently cut off by fighting. Doing so would allow for huge improvements to daily life in Taiz, cutting an at times perilous six-plus hour journey to a one- or two-hour drive. Yet internal tensions among the loose coalition

of anti-Huthi forces inside the city – and their wider tensions with the broader Yemeni government coalition – continue to pose an additional obstacle to improving life.

On 20 March, Taiz governor Nabeel Shamsan issued an order calling for “outlawed” groups to leave the city and hand over their positions to formal security forces. The order notably included groups loyal to Abu al-Abbas, a Salafi leader who says he is backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and whose men have repeatedly clashed in the past with government military units allegedly affiliated with Islah, Yemen’s main Sunni Islamist political party. All of these groups are nominal allies in the fight against the Huthis.

Shamsan’s order was part of a wider initiative aimed at transferring control of the city to a civilian police force. But members of the Islah-affiliated 22nd Brigade, a military unit, then reportedly advanced into Taiz’s old city where Abu al-Abbas’s men are based, leading to several days of clashes that reportedly killed six people, left dozens wounded and caused significant damage to Al-Mudhaffar Hospital, including the destruction of its generator. Shamsan had not intended to precipitate violence in heavily-populated parts of the city, and repeatedly called on both groups to end the fighting, threatening to resign if they did not.

The two sides agreed to a truce after four days of fighting. Abu al-Abbas’s men agreed to redeploy heavy weapons to front lines to the west of Taiz, but will retain a presence in the old city. Meanwhile, the Fifth Presidential Protection Brigade, widely regarded as loyal to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, is expected to serve as buffer, taking over security duties in Taiz city. But this may not be enough to prevent further fighting between Abu al-Abbas’s men and their Islah-affiliated rivals.

Many Yemeni observers believe that the UAE, a major powerbroker in nearby Aden

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and an adversary of Islah, objects to the city’s domination by Islah-affiliated forces. Abu al-Abbas’s presence in the city acts as a brake on Islah’s consolidation of power there, as does the presence of the 35th Brigade, a UAE-backed military unit of which Abu al-Abbas’ men are nominally a part. Adenis sceptical of Islah’s intentions and Taizis who question the UAE’s agenda in Taiz both worry that if the main highway between Aden and Taiz is reopened, it may have the unintended consequence of deepening hostilities in the two cities between Islah-affiliated groups and Hadi loyalists who oppose the UAE’s influence in south Yemen on one hand and UAE-linked groups on the other. The two sides have come to blows in Aden as well as Taiz recently. In January 2018, UAE-backed forces fought Hadi loyalists they labelled Islah supporters in Aden for several days. Opening the Aden-Taiz highway would allow the different groups to cooperate with their respective allies and heighten suspicions among their rivals that they plan to displace their rivals in the two cities, Crisis Group contacts worry.

Violence in Aden prompted a backlash by Islah supporters against the UAE and its affiliates in Taiz. On 25 March, Islah-affiliated groups held a protest, reported to be thousands strong, calling for the “liberation” of the city and echoing a longstanding Islah claim that its forces can defeat the Huthis if provided the necessary military equipment – including armoured vehicles – and if rival forces withdraw. Many Islah leaders believe that the UAE has blocked the delivery of such materiel to their allies, not wanting the group to gain a military edge that it could use elsewhere.

Bottom Line: Yemen’s war is complex and multifaceted, as Taiz demonstrates. De-escalating the conflict in the city and wider governorate requires the UN and other international

players not only to reach an agreement between the Huthis and their adversaries, but also to achieve a compromise within the anti-Huthi front, namely between Islah, the Hadi government and UAE-backed groups. Taiz was also part of the Stockholm Agreement and its importance should not be lost amid the focus on Hodeida. Any success in Taiz, for example in opening roads, would help buttress the chances for future nation-wide de-escalation and the prospect of peace talks.

Political and Military Developments

Hodeida continues to be the centre of gravity for diplomatic efforts in Yemen. UN Envoy Martin Griffiths and Michael Anker Løllegaard, head of the UN Mission to support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA), have spent much of the past month working through a series of proposals to ease the concerns of Huthi and Yemeni government regarding the details of mutual redeployments and the status of the local security forces that will control the city after redeployments take place.

The Hadi government has reportedly agreed to a series of compromises the UN believes are required to enable the first phase of redeployments. But the Huthis are seeking more clarity on who will secure the city after redeployments begin – an issue left unresolved during the December talks in Sweden.

Underlining the need to move ahead with force redeployments, intense clashes broke out on the outskirts of Hodeida on 24-25 March, among the heaviest seen since a ceasefire was announced in December 2018, signalling heightened tensions and eroding patience with the status quo. Fighting also intensified in Al Dhale governorate in March, with Huthi and coalition-backed forces claiming victories against one another in Damt and Al Qatabah districts. Fighting in both areas is focused on taking control of highway intersections that the Huthis worry could be used for a coalition-backed assault into Taiz and Ibb governorates.

On the northern border, local media reported fierce clashes between the Huthis and Yemeni government and allied Saudi forces in

Najran and Asir governorates, at the border crossings at Baqim and Buqa, as well as in Al Jawf governorate. A 26 March coalition air-strike reportedly killed 8 people after hitting a gas station adjacent to a hospital in the Ritaf area of Kitaf in Saada governorate. The next day, UAE-backed Shabwa Elite Forces launched an assault on a suspected AQAP base in the locally-named “White Mountain” range in the west of the governorate.

Elsewhere, the Hadi government named a new central bank governor on 20 March. Hafedh Mayad, a prominent and sometimes controversial member of the pre-war economic elite, replaced Mohammed Zammam. The two had been locked in an increasingly public war of words before Mayad’s appointment, with the new governor accusing his predecessor of corruption. Mayad is seen as the architect of a plan to wrest control of the levers of Yemen’s economy from the Huthis, leading the formation of the government’s powerful Economic Committee and the formulation of the controversial Decree 75 announced in September 2018. The decree calls for all imports to be approved by the committee and for all dollar transactions to be conducted through the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden, allegedly leading to delays in imports. Mayad is said to believe that he can tip the economic balance of power toward the government with additional measures that may cause some short-term economic pain, including measures to further consolidate control over imports and currency markets.

Separately, humanitarian organisations warned in late March that Yemen’s cholera epidemic was worsening after earlier improvements, with both Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children reporting a 150 per cent increase in cholera cases over the course of a month. Save the Children says 124,493

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suspected cases of cholera have emerged since the beginning of 2019.

Bottom Line: Griffiths hopes to pivot toward a political process to end the war later in 2019, but he will need, at a minimum, to convince the Huthis and the Hadi government to implement the first phase of redeployments, which includes the Huthis redeploying from Yemen’s Red Sea ports. To do this, the local security force issue – which has as much to do with longer-term matters of sovereignty and legitimacy as with control of Hodeida itself – may have to be fully postponed and settled during discussions over a wider transitional arrangement. Hodeida has absorbed most diplomatic energy focused on Yemen, and for good reason given that both sides view it as a litmus test for moving forward with broader political discussion. As fighting in Hodeida has been limited since the agreement was signed, however, battles have intensified in other part of the country. Still, and for better or worse, shifting toward talks largely hinges on Hodeida implementation.

Regional and International Developments

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill directing the U.S. to “remove its armed forces from hostilities in or affecting the Republic of Yemen, except U.S. armed forces engaged in operations directed at al-Qaeda or associated forces” within 30 days of enactment on 4 April. The bill, which passed the Senate in February, will now move to President Trump’s desk.

Trump has said in the past that he will veto the bill if passed, and in a statement issued on 1 April, the White House’s Office of Management and Budget again indicated that the President’s senior advisors will recommend he veto it. The Statement of Policy argues that the premise of the legislation is wrong because the U.S.’s provision of limited support to the coalition has not caused U.S. forces to be introduced into “hostilities”. It also argues that to withdraw support would impinge the president’s constitutional prerogatives, harm bilateral relations with partners in the region, negatively affect

U.S. counterterrorism efforts, and “establish bad precedent” by broadening the definition of “hostilities” for war powers purposes. A veto – only the second President Trump will have made since taking office – seems highly likely.

Brussels has also been active on Yemen, with the war on the agenda of the first EU-League of Arab States summit at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt in late February. EU foreign ministers met to discuss developments in Yemen on 18 March and officials also debated it during EU-Iran talks the same day. However, differing European positions on arms exports continue to drive internal tensions. Germany has decided to maintain its ban on weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia for another six months despite pressure from France and the UK – whose arms industry supply chains rely on some German components and as such are affected by the ban – to reverse its decision.

Bottom Line: Increasing U.S. Congressional pressure over the last several months has sent an important signal to the Saudi-led coalition about the costs of the Yemen war to long-term bilateral relations with the U.S. This pressure likely contributed to the success of UN-led negotiations in December 2018 and the emergence of the Stockholm agreement. In order to ensure that the results of this effort are not fleeting, Congress should keep up its pressure once the president issues his all-but-certain veto. Congressional opponents of the war in Yemen should include provisions for the withdrawal of U.S. support in must-pass legislation like the annual National Defense Authorization Act. This will need to be part of a wider effort to end the war that will necessarily include pressure on the Huthis.

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