



Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida

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What's new? Three years into Yemen's destructive war, a battle is shaping up for the Huthi-held port city of Hodeida, a lifeline for the bulk of Yemen's population. Forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are advancing on the port and may soon seek to make a final push.

Why does it matter? A battle for Hodeida is likely to be prolonged and leave millions of Yemenis without food, fuel and other vital supplies. The fighting will discourage rather than enable a return to the negotiating table. Yemen will fall even deeper into what is already the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

What should be done? The U.S. should not greenlight a Hodeida offensive, should press the UAE to halt the movement of men under its control, and convince the coalition, along with its Yemeni partners, to participate in UN-led negotiations over control of the port.

I. Overview

Yemen's civil war has reached an inflection point. In late May, an array of irregular forces backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) made a breakthrough in their campaign along the country's Red Sea coast, arriving within 10km of the port city of Hodeida, which, like most of north-western Yemen, is held by Huthi rebels. By mid-June it had become clear that the UAE intended to go ahead with the assault despite international pressure, including from the U.S., and despite having previously said it was willing to consider a UN-brokered deal for a handover of the port. This continues a clear trend in Yemen's war: the warring factions are overconfident in their military prospects, almost always press for military advantage when there is an opportunity for negotiation, and are all too often starkly indifferent to the humanitarian impact of their actions and the plight of ordinary citizens.

It seems likely this trend will continue in Hodeida, and that the conflict will descend into a more devastating new phase. The most likely outcome of a battle for Hodeida is not a quick, clean victory for government forces followed by outright Huthi capitulation, as some hope, but prolonged and destructive fighting in Hodeida's city, port and immediate environs, followed by a period of maximalist demands from all sides. Because the port is the principal lifeline for not just the Huthi-controlled

highlands but also just under two thirds of Yemen's population, the humanitarian crisis, already the worst in the world, will deepen.

Time to avert such a scenario is fast running out. Government officials and diplomats in the region report that the UAE has informed them the assault on Hodeida is imminent and has reportedly given humanitarian organisations until 12 June to pull staff out of the city. The U.S. government appears to have given the UAE a "yellow light" for the attack. But if Martin Griffiths, the UN's recently appointed successor to Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed as envoy to Yemen, can mobilise international support and pressure for negotiations, he might yet broker a deal that prevents an outright battle for the port and city of Hodeida. This would have dual benefits: avoiding a bloody and costly fight, and creating momentum toward a broader agreement to end the fighting nationwide. The U.S. in particular should support such an initiative and make a determined last-minute diplomatic pitch to persuade the UAE to stop the advance of forces under its control.

Failing that, Yemen will slip further into humanitarian catastrophe. Policymakers need to work urgently and energetically to effect a course correction. But as the offensive looms, they also must accelerate preparations for the worst-case scenario: a bloody, destructive battle for the port and city. This means holding the UAE to its commitment to mitigate human suffering, pressing the Huthis to do the same, providing additional targeted humanitarian assistance, putting in place measures to keep open Hodeida and Saleef ports, and increasing aid and supplies channelled through ports in areas held by Saudi-UAE-led forces.

II. A Three-Year War, Stalemated

Shortly after Yemen's Huthi rebels seized Sanaa with the assistance of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in September 2014, their combined forces tried to bring all of Yemen under their control. In October 2014, the Huthi-Saleh alliance secured Hodeida, Yemen's biggest port, facing little to no resistance. Hodeida was the entry point for more than 70 per cent of the country's food and fuel imports; trade there generated more than 40 per cent of its customs income before the war. The allies also moved south along the Red Sea coast, taking control of the smaller port of Mokha.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi see the Huthis, who receive support from Iran, as the Yemeni equivalent of Hizbollah. Angered by the Huthi takeover and worried about the group's access to Yemen's stock of ballistic missiles, the Saudis announced a coalition (in which Saudi Arabia and the UAE have played the biggest roles) that entered the conflict in March 2015, launching a huge campaign of aerial bombardments. This assault was initially able to cut off maritime access to Hodeida and nearby Saleef, which coalition leaders argued at the time were being used by the Huthis to smuggle weapons into Yemen. Under pressure to allow humanitarian aid into Yemen, the coalition eased access restrictions somewhat, particularly after the establishment of the UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM). This is a UN-run offshore inspections system developed to allay coalition concerns and ease commercial traffic. It operates in coordination with the coalition-run Evacuation and Humanitarian Operations Committee (EHOC).

During the war's first two years, Hodeida was not a military target, although coalition airstrikes badly damaged two cranes at the port in August 2016. Saudi Arabia focussed on supporting tribal, military and other forces loosely structured around Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, to the east of Sanaa. For its part, the UAE, whose leadership reviles Islah as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, limited its operations to the south and east of Yemen. There it worked with secessionist and Salafist forces first to push out the Huthi-Saleh alliance and then to roll back al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in cooperation with the U.S.

Yet Huthi-Saleh control of Hodeida remained a source of frustration for the coalition, which claims that weapons, including missile components, continue to find their way into the country through the port. (A UN panel of experts has said it does not believe Hodeida to be a weapons transit point.¹) Repeated Huthi-Saleh attacks on Red Sea maritime traffic, including on a UAE navy high-speed "Swift" trimaran in October 2016, and mounting evidence that the Huthi-Saleh alliance was benefitting economically from control of the port, led the UAE in late 2016 to begin discussing options for a military takeover.

Western policymakers, including senior officials in the Barack Obama administration, pressed the UAE and other coalition members not to attempt an amphibious assault on the city, citing the risks associated with such an operation. In early 2017, UAE-backed forces launched Operation Golden Spear, an overland campaign to seize Hodeida by pushing north along the Red Sea coast from their base in south Yemen. Islah-affiliated forces supported by Saudi Arabia and barracked in the north-western port town of Midi were said to be planning a simultaneous southbound campaign in order to surround Hodeida in a pincer move. UAE-backed forces seized Mokha in February 2017, but thereafter progress along the coast was slow.

III. An Assault on Hodeida to Break the Stalemate

A turning point might have come in December 2017 when the Huthi-Saleh alliance broke down after months of visible strain. During fighting in Sanaa, the Huthis killed Saleh along with several other senior members of his General People's Congress Party (GPC). Saleh's nephew and military avatar, Tareq Mohammed Saleh, fled to the UAE-controlled port of Aden. Tareq has since undergone a rapid transformation, from prominent commander in the Huthi-Saleh alliance's war against the coalition into the public face of that very coalition's Red Sea coast campaign, renamed Red Thunder earlier this year. Leading the so-called Republican Guards, he has based himself in Mokha; his fighters (understood to be remnants of the Saleh-era elite Republican Guard and new recruits from northern Yemen) are now reputedly among the best trained and equipped of all the coalition-backed forces in Yemen.

¹ In a January 2018 report to the UN Security Council's 2140 committee, which oversees the sanctions regime in Yemen initiated by UN Security Council Resolution 2216 in April 2015, the panel said it was "unlikely" that weapons were being trafficked via Hodeida. "Possible for non-explosive weapons in component form concealed in cargo", the panel noted, "but land routes are a better option, as interdiction risks are lower". See letter from the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by Security Council Resolution 2342 (2017) addressed to the President of the Security Council, 26 January 2018, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2018/68.

Since the beginning of 2018 the pace of the coalition's progress along the Red Sea coast has increased. In late May, units affiliated with Saleh, along with the local Tihama Resistance, southern secessionists and the Giants Brigade led by loyalists of the coalition-backed and internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, announced major advances. (Together, these forces are branded the National Resistance Forces.) They had pushed up to Hodeida governorate's al-Durayhimi district, which borders Hodeida port and city, raising assumptions that the battle for Hodeida would soon begin.

But Red Thunder then came to a near standstill. UAE and Saudi officials told Western counterparts and UN officials that they had paused the operation to give Griffiths a chance to broker a deal for Hodeida. Reports from the battlefield, however, suggested that after a burst of movement, coalition-backed forces had become bogged down. The UAE-backed forces are almost all Yemenis with limited or no experience fighting in an urban environment. If the coastal advance has stopped, it is largely because these irregular forces have gone as far as they can, blasting their way up a flat road with the help of UAE drones, Apache helicopters and fighter bombers. Taking a city is different. A similar group of forces took months to consolidate control over Mokha, which is comparatively tiny. Hodeida and its environs have a population of around 600,000, according to the UN. Fierce fighting continues in al-Durayhimi and other strategically important areas along the Red Sea coast.

IV. Obstacles to a Quick Coalition Victory in Hodeida

While regional media outlets have long presented an assault on Hodeida as both imminent and inevitable, the UAE-backed forces have needed time to position effectively to seize the city. There are two roads leading from Mokha to Hodeida, one along the coast, the other tracking inland mountain ranges. Most military observers believe that, if they are to take Hodeida port and city, UAE-backed forces will need to either control both the coastal and inland roads, or isolate and cut off Huthi positions and supply lines along them, including the main eastbound highway linking Hodeida with Sanaa.

UAE-backed forces have made considerable progress along the coastal road. Unable to hold positions on flat terrain under a sustained ground and air assault, the Huthis fell back to the city, using landmines to slow their enemies' pursuit before mounting a stiff defence of al-Durayhimi. The coalition is now attempting to push both north to Hodeida airport, on the outskirts of the city, and north east, towards the Sanaa-Hodeida highway.

Progress along the mountain road has been slower. UAE-backed forces have yet to enter Zabid, a town of around 50,000 people sitting on the inland road, or al-Jarraahi, a smaller town to its south. Strategically valuable, Zabid is also a town of considerable religious and cultural significance to Muslims and Yemenis, and in particular to the Huthis (who are Zaydis, a Shiite sect largely unique to Yemen that is often conflated with but is significantly different from the Twelver Shiism practiced

in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon).² It is the site of the world's fifth-oldest mosque and a large Sufi community, and it was Yemen's capital under the Zaydi-led Imamate. The Huthis are said to be embedded in both the town and nearby mountains. Between Zabid and Hodeida is Bayt al-Faqih, a historic Yemeni market town, which the Huthis also reportedly plan to defend.³ The Huthis could use these positions to mount a rear-guard action and cut off coalition supply lines when fighting for Hodeida begins, although this would likely be achieved at considerable cost.

An additional stumbling block is the challenge the UAE has faced in coordinating among the various Yemeni forces it is working with on the ground. The Tihama Resistance has led most frontline fighting along with southern separatist groups, supported by the Giants Brigade and the Republican Guards. These groups are not a coherent unit, and tensions among them have been evident, as each claims battlefield successes and downplays the role of its supposed allies. Moreover, the coastal campaign's unexpectedly rapid initial advance has strained supply lines. Further preparations will be needed to launch a full-scale assault on Hodeida and ensure the different forces are well supplied. A UAE Special Forces-led amphibious assault on the port – of the kind first discussed in late 2016 and opposed by the U.S. at the time – may still be among considered policy options.

For their part, the Huthis are entrenched in Hodeida and believe that holding on to the city for as long as possible is a symbolic, if not strategic, necessity. They view the fight as an opportunity to harm both the Saudi-led coalition and its U.S. backers, who they believe will have to greenlight the operation before it goes ahead. In an interview in Beirut this May, a Huthi official promised that coalition-backed forces advancing into Hodeida would “step into hell and meet their demise”.⁴ The Huthis have been recruiting throughout the territories they control and moving large numbers of men into Hodeida and nearby towns. They have tried to prevent civilian officials, including the local police force, from leaving Hodeida, but it appears that a significant portion of the local population has fled.⁵

Part of the Huthis' calculus may be that a UAE-backed assault on the city will provoke an international outcry, on the basis of both humanitarian impact and the large number of civilians caught in the crossfire. The Huthis may think that – if they fight long and hard enough – those costs will prompt the international community to broker a ceasefire or condemn the coalition publicly. The coalition, meanwhile, is likely to pin the blame for any human suffering on the Huthis.

The coalition has argued repeatedly that a Hodeida offensive can be mounted quickly and effectively, with the port functioning at a higher capacity than it current-

² Zaydism is seen as being closest to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam and is sometimes described as the “the Shiites' Sunna”.

³ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi official, Beirut, May 2018; Yemeni journalist and analyst with deep Hodeida knowledge, New York and Yemen, May 2018, via messaging app; several political and military analysts, May 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Huthi spokesman, Beirut, May 2018. The phrase is derived from the Quran: “The lot of those who abandon their God will be hell's sufferings and the most miserable of fates”.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni journalist and analyst with deep Hodeida knowledge, New York and Yemen, May 2018, via messaging app; senior humanitarian official, 2 June 2018.

ly does within weeks or even days of its liberation.⁶ One option being touted by UAE officials in discussions with Western policymakers is for UAE-backed forces to seize the port only and isolate the city, without engaging in urban warfare, in order to reduce civilian casualties. But it is unclear such an approach would work, given the close proximity of the port to the city and the Huthis' stated intention to engage the coalition in battle. Moreover, while the UAE military may be highly skilled, the bulk of the fighting is likely to be done by less well-trained Yemeni forces – unless the UAE plans on transporting a large contingent of its own military into Yemen, as has been rumoured.⁷

Another potential obstacle is the absence until now of a U.S. green light for the assault. The UAE has asked the U.S. military to assist the campaign to ensure it will be as quick and clean as possible. President Donald Trump's administration has debated its participation but appears intent on avoiding taking part in an offensive that it does not think the UAE and associated forces can bring off without considerable humanitarian cost on a relatively short timeline, even with U.S. support. On 11 June, the U.S. secretary of state released a statement suggesting something like a "yellow light" for the offensive:

I have spoken with Emirati leaders and made clear our desire to address their security concerns while preserving the free flow of humanitarian aid and life-saving commercial imports. We expect all parties to honor their commitments to work with the UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen on this issue, support a political process to resolve this conflict, ensure humanitarian access to the Yemeni people, and map a stable political future for Yemen.⁸

As this report went to press the formal U.S. position on Hodeida remained the same: an attack on the port was a red line, but the military pressure created by Red Thunder should be used as leverage to deliver a settlement on the issue of the port. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have indicated to U.S. policymakers and to Crisis Group that such is their plan, arguing that the Huthis' apparent willingness to cede control of the port, in a break from past refusals, is a sign that military pressure is working.

But the coalition has a track record of signalling a willingness to compromise before taking a more maximalist path, as do the Huthis. This would appear to have been the case with Hodeida: multiple Crisis Group contacts indicate that the UAE is planning to go ahead with the offensive.⁹ The irregular forces on the ground – who the UAE says are making their own battlefield decisions – may end up moving on the city in an attempt to drag the U.S. into the conflict on their side. The UAE has argued that it has little choice but to continue or sustain losses from Huthi attacks.¹⁰ If these forces move ahead, or if the U.S. publicly greenlights the offensive, the Huthis will

⁶ Crisis Group interviews with Western diplomats who have discussed the issue with coalition officials. See also, Alexandre Mello and Michael Knights, "The Hodeida campaign (part 2): Can Yemen recapture major ports from the Houthi rebels?", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 May 2018, for an outline of the coalition's best-case scenario.

⁷ Crisis group interviews, Western diplomatic official, 2 June 2018; former Western defence official, 2 June 2018.

⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Developments in Hudaydah", press statement, 11 June 2018.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, June 2018.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, senior UAE policymaker, June 2018.

feel justified in their rhetoric about a “U.S.” war on Yemen. If, moreover, the assault worsens the humanitarian crisis, as is likely, they will try to hold the U.S. to account in the court of public opinion.

Griffiths, who took over the role of UN envoy in March, has built some momentum around a “negotiation framework” to end the war. A battle for Hodeida would cost him both valuable time and credibility, particularly with the Huthis, who largely refused to speak to his predecessor.

V. The Risk of Even Greater Humanitarian Tragedy

A sustained battle for the port will likely shut off trade and humanitarian aid access for a sustained period. If coalition forces seize control of even part of the city, the Huthis likely will attack them from nearby towns and mountainous areas. Meanwhile, the battle might not stop at the city. Fighting could continue along the main Hodeida-Sanaa road, into the mountainous regions of Rayma and Haraz. This would impede traffic from the port unless an agreement on access is brokered. UN officials estimate that fighting for the city alone could displace hundreds of thousands of people and warn of a “catastrophic humanitarian impact”.¹¹

Hodeida is the entry point for most basic goods into the north, accounting for around 37 per cent of Yemen’s fuel and 69 per cent of its food imports via ship in 2018 to date, serving the country’s main populated areas.¹² Along with Ibb and Taiz governorates – which the Huthis partially control – Yemen’s northern highlands are home to around 60 per cent of an overall estimated population of 27.4 million. The UN says Yemen’s humanitarian crisis is already the worst in the world; some 22.2 million people are in need of assistance.¹³ When the coalition prevented ships from entering Hodeida port for sixteen days in November 2017 following a Huthi missile attack on Riyadh, humanitarian organisations reported “skyrocketing” prices for food and price increases of up to 100 per cent for fuel.¹⁴

In the past, the coalition has regularly predicted that it would win its battles quickly and cleanly – before adjusting its estimates when reality sank in. At the start of the war in March 2015, for example, Saudi officials forecast that the war would last only a few weeks. The Hadi government and the coalition struggle to provide basic services and security in areas liberated from Huthi control such as Aden – the site of battles between Yemeni forces – further undermining the argument that they will be able to operate Hodeida more efficiently than at present.

¹¹ “A military assault on Hodeidah will almost certainly have catastrophic humanitarian impact”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, 8 June 2018, available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/military-assault-hodeidah-will-almost-certainly-have-catastrophic-humanitarian-impact>.

¹² Data provided to Crisis Group by a government organisation, based on UNVIM data and record-keeping at ports.

¹³ Yemen Humanitarian Bulletin, Issue 30, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, 28 January 2018, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Hum%20bulletin%20-%20Issue%2030_%20January2018_FINAL.pdf.

¹⁴ “Missiles and Food: Yemen’s man-made food security crisis”, Oxfam, December 2017.

The loss of the port would be a serious financial blow to the Huthis. But the rebels are unlikely to collapse as a result. The Huthis have been stockpiling food and fuel in preparation for the Hodeida offensive since late 2016. At present, improvised customs checkpoints in Amran, Dhammar and al-Beida governorates, which they established at the start of the war, are generating considerable revenues from overland trade – which, when combined, could amount to as much as those furnished by Hodeida. The coalition is aware that if the Huthis are pushed out of the city, they are likely to set up a similar operation to tax “imports” entering territory they hold from Hodeida and further inflate the cost of basic goods in order to make up for any revenue shortfall due to loss of the port. As has been the case since the beginning of the war, the cost of the battle for Hodeida will largely accrue to the already impoverished civilian population.

The coalition has also argued that the loss of Hodeida will force the Huthis to the negotiating table. The Huthis have signalled repeatedly since mid-to-late 2017 to both Griffiths and his predecessor Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed that they are willing to enter into a new round of talks. What the coalition appears to imply is that the Huthis need to be made to feel more pain in order to get them to adopt a more flexible posture at the negotiating table. Coalition officials have also said that once the port is under their control they would be more comfortable with cutting a deal with the rebels. But the Huthis’ top leadership has now been fighting for fourteen years – the war that broke out in 2015 is just the latest in a series that they have fought. It is not clear that they see their negotiating position as being as weak as the coalition does, even if they are willing to consider a compromise deal that effectively amounts to the handover of Hodeida – a move that would save them considerable blood and treasure.

Nor is it common in any conflict for peace talks to commence swiftly after a bloody battle for an important piece of territory. A new military imbalance could instead dissuade the weaker party from coming to the table and embolden the coalition and Hadi government to demand ever more ambitious – and unrealistic – concessions from the Huthis.

VI. A Way Out?

For much of Yemen’s war the parties driving the conflict have made poor choices, often based on overconfidence, wishful thinking and general indifference to the plight of ordinary Yemenis. Combined, the advance on Hodeida, the Huthis’ apparent willingness to compromise, the coalition’s self-assurance and Washington’s desire to avert a battle for the port city offer a rare moment of opportunity to break this cycle, especially if the recently appointed UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, continues to move quickly. (He visited Sanaa in early June and has toured the region’s capitals.)

Maximising chances of brokering a deal around Hodeida will require several elements. First, in devising a proposal to prevent a battle for Hodeida Griffiths will need to balance the Huthis’ desire for tangible benefits in return for concessions they make against the coalition’s demand for a quick and complete handover of the port. The conflict’s history is littered with failed attempts at establishing ceasefires and confidence-building measures.

Second, Griffiths will require the full backing of the international community, particularly the U.S. This support will need to go beyond current diplomatic efforts to dissuade the coalition from launching an offensive at this time. The U.S. should pressure Abu Dhabi to pull back its Yemeni allies from positions they do not hold fully and implement a genuine pause. Failure to do so – leaving the forces in contested areas – will simply mean that a battle for the port city becomes unavoidable. (The UAE may argue that it cannot compel the different Yemeni groups to do so, but much of their success along the Red Sea coast has been driven by UAE air support and armoured vehicles, and by UAE-run supply lines.)

Third, any deal for the port will necessitate buy-in from Yemeni forces operating on the ground, not just assurances from senior Huthi and coalition officials. Past experience shows that the coalition rarely has full command and control over its local allies – and that the banner of “government forces” oversells the coherence of the different armed groups at play. (At times, however, the coalition will use this argument to create plausible deniability for the actions of the forces it supports). In both Taiz and Aden, groups that are nominally working together on the coalition/government side have, at times, expended as much energy on fighting one another as on fighting the Huthis. Likewise, Huthi field commanders tend to operate largely independently of the group’s political leadership in Sanaa. The identities of the commanders in charge of the Giants Brigade, the Tihama Resistance and the Republican Guards are known; the same is true for the Huthis. The envoy’s team should establish a direct line of contact with each commander to deal with any flare-ups in real time.

Finally, Griffiths should avoid an overambitious plan for a complete handover of the port to a neutral third party within a short timeline, particularly given that at present no such party has volunteered to take on such a complex and risky role, and that both sides will remain primed for combat. Instead he should seek international support for a gradual process built around the following two steps:

- The Hadi government and Huthi leadership should agree to place Hodeida and Saleef ports under the management of a Yemeni-led technocratic body that works with an international organisation such as UNVIM to ensure the steady flow of goods into Yemen and satisfies coalition concerns over arms trafficking into Yemen by coordinating with the Saudi-run EHOOC.¹⁵ This body would also oversee the management of revenues from port fees and customs payments. Ideally, the funds would accrue to the Central Bank of Yemen and be used to pay civil service salaries.
- Both sides should agree to security arrangements that turn Hodeida and Saleef ports into neutral zones where rival Huthi and coalition-backed forces are not present. This arrangement will require both mediation and coordination among armed groups present on the ground, the Hadi government, the Huthis and coalition leaders, and should be accompanied by an agreement on how the port can be

¹⁵ A security force tied to one side or the other would have little incentive to administer the city and port fairly. If UNVIM were asked to assume the task, it would be unable to comply without a peace-keeping or security force to accompany its inspectors and administrators. This, in turn, would require a change in UNVIM’s mandate via a new Security Council resolution. Crisis Group has repeatedly suggested the need for a new resolution. See, for example, Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°54, *Discord in Yemen’s North Could Be a Chance for Peace*, 11 October 2017; and Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016.

secured and policed jointly, by a unified Yemeni police force, by another neutral Yemeni body or, if possible, by a third party such as a UN peacekeeping force (although that possibility appears very small).¹⁶

Such an approach would necessitate three separate but simultaneous negotiation tracks. A first track would involve the coalition, the U.S. and other international stakeholders, the Yemeni government and the Huthis. A second track would involve discussions between Yemeni technocrats over how to manage the port in as neutral and cooperative a manner as possible, including more intensive joint inspections and/or a third-party inspection and monitoring regime, along with a new joint revenue management mechanism. A third track, possibly the most crucial, would involve mediation among different commanders and security forces on the ground in Hodeida governorate to develop a security and deconfliction plan to which all forces would subscribe, and to which participants in the first negotiation track would also agree.

Such an arrangement will be difficult to put in place, face resistance from all would-be participants and, even if agreed, could collapse quickly. Timing will be particularly difficult. The Huthis will want to move as slowly as possible, while the coalition will demand rapid action. All parties will work to paint any agreement as a victory for their side and a defeat for their rivals, potentially goading their counterparts into the resumption of hostilities. Yet if it can be implemented successfully a deal for Hodeida could help build much-needed confidence that a broader agreement is possible to end the war.

The chances of success are slim. But the Huthis' apparent willingness to engage in negotiations over the port, coupled with the coalition's apparent willingness to engage in a mediation process – once the Hodeida question is settled – and the U.S.'s desire to see the war ended without further unnecessary bloodshed, together provide an opportunity that should not be missed. UAE and Saudi officials have told Crisis Group that they want a political settlement to end the war, and that they have “great confidence” in Griffiths.¹⁷ If this is the case, rather than undermining him – and the prospects for relaunching a peace process in earnest this year – they should shelve the Hodeida campaign and provide him more time to negotiate a settlement for the port as a stepping stone for negotiations to end the war.

VII. Conclusion: If Mediation is Allowed to Fail

International political and humanitarian leaders should not be lulled into a false sense of security by military pauses or mediation attempts, even if these show initial signs of success. The warring sides' patterns of behaviour are clear: the Huthis have a long track record of using negotiations to reposition militarily while the coalition regularly signals to diplomats that it is willing to discuss a political settlement before returning to a military path. Policymakers should start contingency planning for the worst.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, UN officials and diplomats, June 2018.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, with senior UAE, Saudi, officials, June 2018.

Tens if not hundreds of thousands of Yemenis would be displaced as the hunger crisis worsens and large numbers of civilians are caught in the crossfire of a battle for Hodeida city. The fighting and the war over the narrative will only heighten rancour between the parties. Regardless of the battle's outcome, the coalition, its Yemeni partners, and the Huthis are likely to return to maximalist positions once it is over, making ending the conflict an even more onerous task.

The Huthis have made increasing use of long-range ballistic missiles to target Saudi Arabia since mid-2017, and have threatened attacks on Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in the event of an assault on Hodeida. A battle for Hodeida may also see the Huthis attacking trade routes along the Yemeni coast. Saudi and Emirati leaders see these provocations as more than ample justification for continuation of the war.

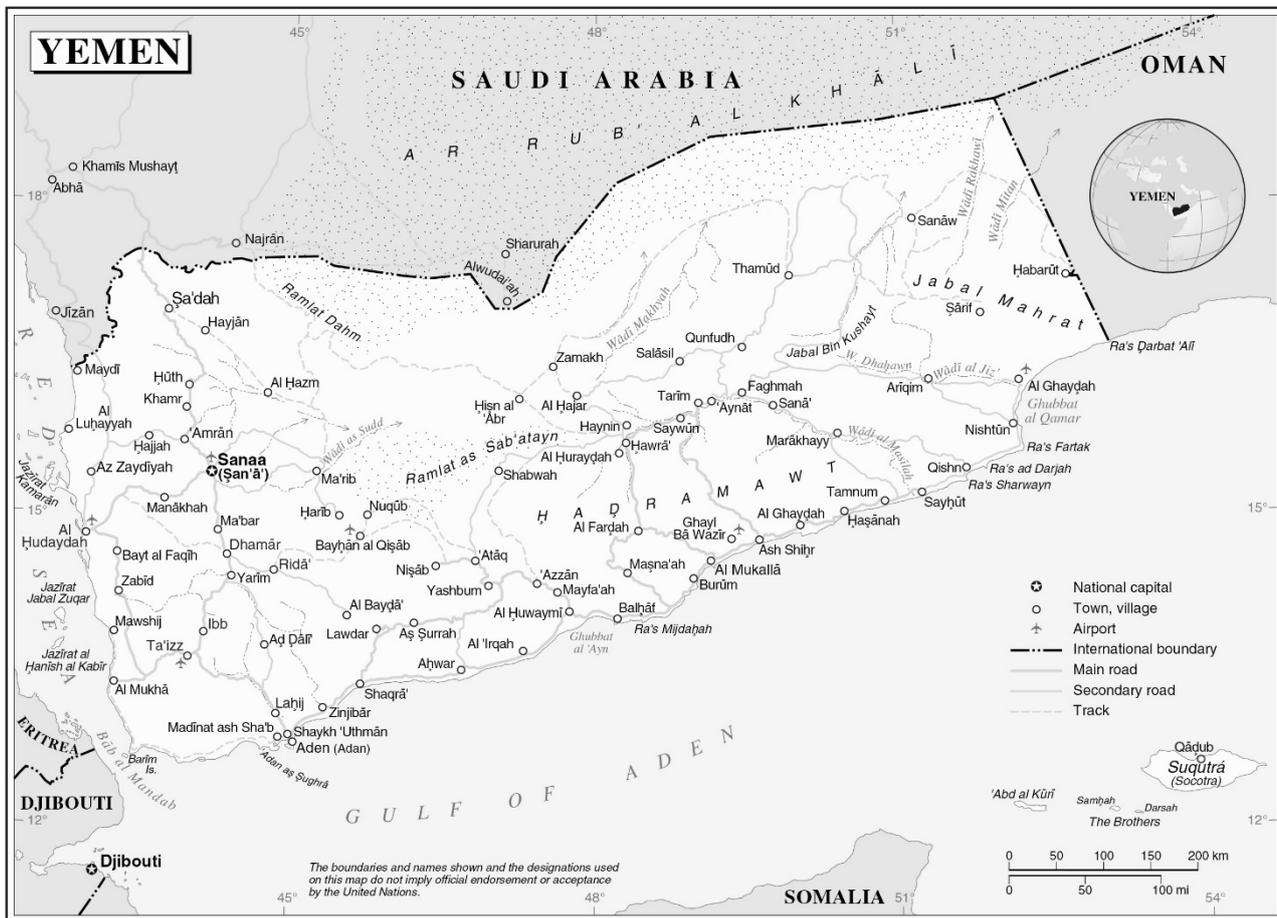
The UN has been told to leave Hodeida by 12 June and other humanitarian organisations have also been advised to withdraw, limiting their ability to assess and deal with the humanitarian fallout in real time. UAE officials have told their foreign counterparts that they have plans in place to mitigate the battle's humanitarian impact for the city. The international community must hold them to this commitment, and press the Huthis to do the same.

The UN and other humanitarian organisations will need to maintain open lines of communication with the Huthis, the coalition and each other in order to provide as much targeted assistance as possible. Finally, measures should be put in place to protect Hodeida and Saleef ports, and to hold to account any party that willfully damages this vital infrastructure. The U.S. and other international stakeholders should work closely with the coalition and port authorities in Mukalla and Aden, and with transporters and the different local authorities across the country, to ensure that the import and transportation process running through these ports is as streamlined and efficient as possible.

Yemen is rarely afforded the time and resources its strategic position and depth of human suffering demand from policymakers. Much U.S. attention is currently focussed on talks with North Korea in Singapore. But resources – time, people, money – must be made available, and genuine pressure brought to bear on all parties to the conflict. The confrontation around Hodeida could still offer an opportunity to break the cycle of conflict in Yemen. Failure to seize it can only extend and deepen a humanitarian catastrophe, rendering Yemen enduringly unstable.

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Appendix A: Map of Yemen



Map No. 3847 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
 January 2004

Department of Peacekeeping Operations
 Cartographic Section

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

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June 2018

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

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 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).

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

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).

Oil and Borders: How to Fix Iraq's Kurdish Crisis, Middle East Briefing N°55, 17 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Middle East and North Africa Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

North Africa

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

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

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

The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth, Middle East and 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 and French).

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

Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

Making the Best of France's Libya Summit, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

Iran/Yemen/Gulf

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).

Discord in Yemen's North Could Be a Chance for Peace, Middle East Briefing N°54, 11 October 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

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