

## Crisis Group Yemen Update #3

*This is Crisis Group's third weekly update published as part of our Yemen Campaign. The trend we identify in this edition is new hope for a political compromise to end the four-year-old civil war and ease the country's grave humanitarian crisis.*



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### Trendline: A Shift to the Political in 2019?

After a year of unrelenting military pressure along Yemen's Red Sea coast, there are some indications that the Saudi-led coalition may be pivoting toward a greater recognition that a political compromise is needed to end the war. Military pressure succeeded in bringing the Huthis to the table, the coalition argues, but a different toolkit will be needed to end the war.

The language marks a shift from the rhetoric of mid-to-late-2018, when United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia officials argued that the only way to end the war in Yemen was by removing the Huthis from Hodeida port and city by military force, sparking fears of a battle for Hodeida that could cut off the flow of some 70 per cent of all goods shipped into the heavily import-dependent country.

Opinion within the coalition is not uniform and not all signals point in this direction. UAE officials express particular concern that Huthi ceasefire violations are wearing down trust and straining the forces it backs on the ground. One UAE official signalled that coalition patience could run out by late March or early April, if the current impasse on mutual redeployments from Hodeida cannot be overcome. Still, the pivot appears to be at least partially credible, and both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi seem to have concluded that the Stockholm Agreement serves their interests better than military action in Hodeida – for now.

The shift comes as the result of a combination of factors. International outcry from humanitarian organisations in late 2018 highlighted the risk of famine. The U.S. and other coalition allies increased their scrutiny of Saudi behaviour after the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the country's consulate in Istanbul in early October. And UN negotiations in Sweden reached a deal that served the coalition's primary objective in Hodeida of removing it from direct Huthi control. Under the Stockholm Agreement, Huthi and rival coalition-backed Yemeni forces are meant to pull their main frontline units back from the vital Red Sea trade corridor, including a redeployment of Huthi forces from Hodeida, Ras Issa and Saleef ports.

The coalition and the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi appeared reluctant backers of the Stockholm Agreement. But Saudi and Emirati officials have since come to play up its importance as a potential game-changer in the war. In an optimistic telling, both countries' officials say they hope the agreement's implementation would lead to a cascade effect accelerating broader negotiations between the Huthis and the Hadi government, and then a widely inclusive political process.

For their part, the Huthis remain suspicious of the coalition's intentions, believing that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are more interested in changing perceptions and public narratives than the conflict's trajectory. The group has been the major proximate barrier to implementing the agreement and helping open a humanitarian corridor, but Huthi insiders argue that the blockages are either misunderstood or being deliberately misrepresented. With no agreement on which "local forces" will control the ports and eventually Hodeida city within the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) it is functionally impossible for the Huthis to redeploy, they argue, beyond replacing frontline fighters with Huthi-aligned security forces (a distinction that is hard to make or verify). And the group's military leaders are leery of reopening the Sanaa-Hodeida road to the east of the city, as they believe doing so will make them vulnerable to coalition attack. The group alleges that coalition-backed forces have violated the

ceasefire as many times as the Huthis – a claim that, absent a full UN monitoring mission, is impossible to judge.

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What happens next will be defined, at least partially, by the outcome of discussions that took place on a ship anchored just off Yemen’s Red Sea coast between 3-6 February. Representatives of the Huthis and Hadi government to the RCC gathered on board to find a way forward in implementing the Stockholm Agreement’s demilitarisation of Hodeida. The UN announced on 7 February that the two sides had reached an agreement in principle, but that their political masters would need to give the go-ahead. If Lt. Gen. Michael Anker Lolloesgaard, the newly-installed UN chair of the RCC, can convince the parties to at least partially break the deadlock in the coming days and weeks, UN officials and diplomats argue that the progress could serve as a bridge to a broader political process. The redeployment plan is expected to be finalised within the coming seven days.

Bottom line: If the Stockholm Agreement can be made to stick and Hodeida demilitarised, there will be increasingly little territory for the coalition to fight for with game-changing consequences. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as the government of Yemen and the Huthis, should reiterate their support for the UN process and work to properly implement the ceasefire if they do not wish to prolong the conflict indefinitely at growing cost for Yemen’s people. And in implementing the Stockholm Agreement, the UN should remain alert to the risk of spoilers and ensure that any newly arising political questions are addressed through diplomacy, rather than scuffles behind the scenes.

### **Political and Military Developments**

Gen. Patrick Cammaert, the UN’s point man in Hodeida, handed over his responsibilities to his successor and the head of the newly-constituted UN Mission to support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA) Lt. Gen. Michael Anker Lolloesgaard on 5 February with talks over the port and city at a crucial juncture. Cammaert had arranged for the

Huthi and Hadi government delegates to the RCC to meet on a World Food Programme vessel moored in the Red Sea. (After two initial meetings in Huthi-controlled territory, the Huthis refused to cross the frontlines into coalition-held areas. This forced Cammaert to shuttle between the two, a process that yielded diminishing returns.) His plan was to negotiate a compromise that would keep the Stockholm Agreement alive by having both parties redeploy forces, the Huthis from Hodeida, Ras Issa and Saleef ports, and the government from key positions to the east of Hodeida city and around the main Sanaa-Hodeida highway. If a deal can be brokered, UN officials expect it to translate into almost immediate movement on the ground.

Lollesgaard's next task will be to deploy the people he needs for the newly-initiated UNMHA, including a team of up to 75 monitors and support staff. Beyond the usual logistical constraints, this will also require the Huthis to show more flexibility on visas to UN staff and UN movement around Hodeida than they have done to date.

Meanwhile, the prisoner swap agreed as part of the Stockholm Agreement is “**hanging in the balance**”, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The Huthi and Hadi government delegations met in Amman on 5 February, with the ICRC struggling to verify the lists of up to 8,000 detainees provided by the two sides. Each says it has a “significantly lower” number than listed; further complicating matters, the ICRC does not have full access to detention centres in Yemen and Saudi Arabia where detainees are held.

Beyond Hodeida, the often-ignored competition for control of state institutions – and the legitimacy they bestow – between the Huthis and the Hadi government heated up this week with a series of tit-for-tat moves aimed at demonstrating control of Yemen's House of Representatives. On 1 February, the newly-appointed head of the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER) in Huthi-held Sanaa announced plans to hold elections to fill “vacant seats” in the House of Representatives.

The Huthi move came in apparent response to Hadi's long-rumoured attempts to convene the House of Representatives in Aden. Hadi insiders claim that he has enough MPs to pass new laws, including an extension of his presidential term. On 3 February, Hadi announced that he was relocating the SCER headquarters to Aden in an apparent attempt to undercut Huthi manoeuvring.

The Yemeni riyal, which had regained some steam at the end of 2018 after falling to a record low of YR800 to the U.S. dollar in September-

October, has started to decline again, falling this week to YR600 to the dollar. Crisis Group contacts blame a mix of currency market manipulation by traders and an ongoing spat between Hafez Mayad, the head of the powerful Hadi-appointed Economic Committee, and Mohammed Zammam, the Central Bank of Yemen governor. The decline of the riyal, coupled with ongoing logistical constraints – particularly access issues around Red Sea Mills (see Crisis Group Update #2) – is likely to edge the humanitarian situation closer to famine.

The Huthis continue to crack down on civil society and non-governmental organisations in northern Yemen, meanwhile, detaining Awfa al-Naami, the country director of Saferworld, a peacebuilding NGO, on 28 January, after a series of threats against her. This tracks a wider campaign of intimidation.

**Bottom Line:** As the chances of UN-led political dialogue in 2019 increase, political and institutional manoeuvring between the Huthis, Hadi government and other political and military players is likely to become more pronounced, as are efforts to control territory (see Crisis Group Update #2) and the public narrative. The UN and international diplomats, who will make a critical contribution to the success or failure of a political process in the longer term, should show they take these machinations seriously by seeking to prevent further gamesmanship of this kind in the coming months.

## **Regional and International Developments**

Anwar Gargash, the UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, was in the U.S. last week, meeting with U.S. officials, Congress, UN officials and others in Washington and New York. Gargash was clear in messaging that the UAE position has changed, that the UAE sees Stockholm as a turning point, and that if implemented it will mean a “transitional 2019” that sees the war give way for a UN-led political process. A touted end to major Saudi and UAE combat operations in Yemen would not necessarily mean an end to the conflict: other local battlegrounds could be revived, and neither country has any intention to stop backing the – often competing – armed groups they have been cultivating since 2015.

Meanwhile, the UN was active in the Gulf. On 29 January, the Resident Coordinator of the UN in Yemen, Lise Grande, held meetings in Riyadh with Saudi and Emirati aid authorities to discuss aid distribution and access concerns. On 30 January, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss Yemen. The Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent a

letter to Guterres on 31 January reiterating support for the Stockholm process while asking the UN to expand its reporting on ceasefire violations to include attribution of responsibility.

Scrutiny of coalition activities in Yemen continues unabated. On 4 February, Amnesty International and CNN both ran stories on the UAE and Saudi Arabia supplying arms and other materiel to allied Yemeni armed groups, which subsequently have leaked into the local and regional arms market, and at times have ended up in the hands of the Huthis.

In New York, the UN Security Council published a press statement on 4 February stressing the importance of implementing the Stockholm Agreement, including redeployments around Hodeida and prisoner swaps, and expressing concern at ceasefire violations. Council members told Crisis Group that the statement reflected frustration at the agreement's slow pace of implementation, and growing pressure from the coalition on the UN Secretariat to identify the parties breaking the ceasefire and blocking implementation. With Lollesgaard now in place, and UNMHA scheduled to issue its first report on 14 February, it is possible that the UN could take a more critical line in the coming weeks.

Negotiations on the renewal of the Security Council-imposed sanctions regime in Yemen are due to begin soon, with a renewal scheduled by the end of February. Members of the Council's sanctions committee on Yemen have largely endorsed the latest UN Panel of Experts report on Yemen, but the U.S. and others are likely to attempt to add language on Iran.

In Washington, Congressional activity around Yemen is once again gathering momentum. The House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on 6 February on U.S. Policy in the Arabian Peninsula, where Yemen was a principal topic of debate. The committee discussed a resolution introduced by Representative Ro Khanna aimed at using the War Powers Resolution to force a removal of all U.S. forces from a direct or indirect role in Yemen, and agreed to pass it out of the committee for discussion among all House members, in a vote that broke down along party lines, 25-17. It is unclear when the full House will act on the bill. The Senate passed a similar bill in December but a vote was not held on the legislation in the House of Representatives before the new Democratically-controlled House was seated in January. The Yemeni parties, meanwhile, will keep a close eye on a U.S.-organised meeting on the Middle East in Warsaw on 13-14 February, which will reportedly focus on Iran's role in the region and will be followed by a discussion by the Yemen "Quad": the U.S., UK, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Bottom Line: With negotiations over Hodeida finely poised, statements by the UN Security Council, White House and Congress can have important knock-on effects on the ground in Yemen. Congress in particular has an important role to play in maintaining pressure. All efforts should be concentrated on seeing the Stockholm Agreement implemented.