In early February, the rebel Houthi movement (also known as Ansar Allah) reinvigorated its year-long offensive in Yemen’s northern governorate of Marib, launching an intense assault and making territorial and strategic gains in the province’s west. Houthi forces are now reportedly within 30km of Marib city, the ousted government’s last major northern stronghold, and the capital of a governorate whose original population of 300,000 has been swollen by internally displaced persons to perhaps as many as three million. The Houthis have signalled their clear intent to press on, absent a nationwide truce that halts Saudi airstrikes, allows them to reopen the airport in Yemen’s capital city, Sanaa, and permits them to more easily bring goods through Hodeida, the Red Sea port that they control. If fighting reaches Marib city’s
A battle for Marib city could worsen Yemen’s already dire humanitarian situation in several ways. First, an assault on Marib would put the estimated three million civilians living there at risk of death or displacement. The Huthis are likely to push toward the city from the west and target oil and gas production facilities to its east. Fighting would probably cut off most of the main highways connecting Marib with government-controlled territory, leaving only a single paved southbound road available to fleeing civilians. The Huthis may sever that road as well while advancing from positions in the governorate’s south. Assuming that this route remains open, those using it to dash for safety would be in the Huthi forces’ crosshairs and would have to travel through Shebwa governorate to the south east, where humanitarian organisations have only a minimal presence. Aid agencies say they are ill prepared to deal with the rapid movement of hundreds of thousands of people into Shebwa and other governorates controlled by the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi where the newly displaced might seek refuge.

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Secondly, such a battle would compound Yemen’s already staggering food crisis. In an 18 February briefing to the UN Security Council, Mark Lowcock, the UN’s humanitarian chief, warned of the “worst famine the world has seen in decades”, reporting that malnutrition rates in Yemen were at record highs, with 400,000 children under the age of five severely malnourished and “in their last weeks and months” of life. This hunger crisis is driven not just by direct conflict but also by growing poverty and rising prices of staples. Marib is a trading hub through which large volumes of food and other basic goods are transported into Huthi-held areas; prolonged fighting there would disrupt this essential lifeline.
Thirdly, Marib is also a small but important source of fuel, which is often in short supply in Yemen. If Marib falls, government officials say, they will pre-emptively destroy state-owned oil and gas production and processing facilities there to prevent the Huthis from taking them. The ripple effects could be significant. A refinery at these facilities accounts for almost all domestic fuel production, supplying around 8 per cent of the country’s gasoline, diesel and other forms of fuel (Yemen imports about 90 per cent of its fuel) and almost 90 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas, an essential source of energy in most Yemeni households. The cost of oil and gas has already shot up over the course of the war due to currency fluctuations and supply interruptions, in turn raising the price of basic goods like potable water (which most Yemenis must pay for, due to its scarcity, and which is extracted from below ground mainly using diesel pumps) and food (which is trucked across the country). If the Marib facilities are disabled or destroyed in fighting, the prices of fuel and LPG, and thus food and water, can only keep going up.

The resulting fuel shortages will be even more keenly felt because of continued barriers imposed on imports to the Huthi-held port of Hodeida by the Hadi government and the Saudi-led coalition that controls Yemen’s airspace and waterways. As part of a dispute over the Huthis’ use of revenues collected at Hodeida and wider government efforts to exert control over import flows, fuel imports through Hodeida have been significantly delayed in recent months.

### Chain Reaction

Not only would a battle for Marib likely be lengthy and destructive, but it would also increase the risk of violence spreading or intensifying elsewhere in Yemen. Already, Tareq Saleh, the commander of anti-Huthi forces on Yemen’s Red Sea coast, has called on the Hadi government to withdraw from the UN-brokered 2018 Stockholm Agreement, which put an end to fighting around Hodeida. Saleh wants to prosecute the war on all major fronts, so as to stretch the Huthis more thinly. Such a move would divide the attention of international actors, who would have to work to hold together the ceasefire in Hodeida as they try to wrestle with the crisis in Marib. The renewed fighting around Hodeida would magnify Yemen’s humanitarian calamity still further.

Moreover, if the Huthis prevail in Marib, they are likely to pursue broader territorial gains, perhaps in Shebwa, to which pro-government forces are most likely to withdraw. Yet in trying to control Marib and expand into
adjacent tribal territories where residents are strongly opposed to their presence, the Huthis are also likely to find themselves battling several local insurgencies.

The influx of pro-government forces into Shebwa would also likely trigger tensions between local allies of President Hadi and the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC). Already controlling the southern governorates of Lahj, al-Dhale and Aden, the STC aspires to expand its reach across the territories of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen: between 1967 and 1990, this independent state encompassed Shebwa as well as government-held Abyan, which sits between Shebwa and STC-controlled Aden. Some STC leaders even see cutting a deal with the Huthis that would enhance prospects for renewed southern independence – a move that would spell disaster for Hadi – as preferable to staying in the uneasy unity government they formed with the president in December 2020. Such sentiment would likely grow were the government to fall in Marib and seek to shore up its position in the south.

A view of Marib city from the top of the newly-built Louvre Hotel, January 2020. CRISISGROUP/Peter Salisbury

Ceasefire Challenge

Until recently, Saudi and Yemeni officials had been hopeful that they might turn the war’s tide in their favour by convincing the U.S. to step up its military, logistical and diplomatic backing. But increased military intervention by the U.S. or other outside powers was unlikely even under the Trump administration, given views of the Yemen war among both Democrats and Republicans in Congress and given U.S. assessments of the
manpower and military resources that would be required to win it.

In his first weeks in office, President Joe Biden has made it clear that such support is out of the question for his administration. In early February, he announced a complete halt to offensive support for the war and a temporary freeze of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Saudis’ chief partner in the coalition that formed in 2015 to back Hadi. U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken rescinded the designation of the Huthis as a terrorist group, which the Trump administration had announced in its dying days, citing the listing’s expected humanitarian harm.

“The U.S. is now unequivocal in declaring that the war can end only through a negotiated settlement.”

The U.S. is now unequivocal in declaring that the war can end only through a negotiated settlement. To this end, Biden has appointed a special envoy, veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking, to support UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths’ mediation efforts. U.S. and UN officials see little choice but to rejuvenate those efforts, which aim to facilitate a ceasefire as well as economic measures such as the easing of import restrictions to build a modicum of confidence between the Hadi government and Huthis, before turning to a resumption of national political talks. But finding a middle ground between the Huthis and the government, and generating Saudi buy-in, remain huge challenges.

A core obstacle for Griffiths and Lenderking will be overcoming the mismatch between the Huthis’ negotiating position and the Hadi government’s stance. The UN spent much of 2020 trying to negotiate a truce and return to politics, an effort prompted by the Huthis’ takeover of al-Hazm, the capital of al-Jawf governorate, to the west of Marib, and its initial push toward Marib city. Both sides claim to have accepted the UN initiative’s terms and accuse their rivals of blocking progress, but both have reasons to delay.

For their part, the Huthis appear to perceive that they are in a win-win situation. If they take Marib, they will have won a strategic prize, in effect ending the war for the north, fatally weakening the Hadi government in outsiders’ eyes and bolstering the quasi-state they have been building by
tapping into Marib’s oil and gas wealth. If, instead, they decide to halt their move on Marib, they will expect to conclude a deal whereby Saudi Arabia ends what they term the “siege” on their areas – the closure of Sanaa’s airport to commercial flights and the limits on cargo entering Hodeida port – and “aggression” in the form of airstrikes. The latter paved the way for the anti-Huthi coalition’s Hodeida offensive and lately have been the main barrier to the rebels overrunning Marib. The Huthis appear to be seeking the best possible version of a ceasefire deal for their side, namely one that halts all airstrikes and completely lifts restrictions on the ports and airports under their control.

For its part, the Hadi government is in a bind. Officials say they see the Huthi offensive on Marib as an effort to, in the words of one, “eliminate the government from the [political] equation” in Yemen by seizing its last stronghold in the north. They favour stepped-up international support for a military pushback against the Huthis or for a truce to be time-bound to test the Huthis’ sincerity. The government fears that the Huthis see a ceasefire as a manoeuvre to end Saudi airstrikes for long enough to launch a definitive push into Marib. It further views the Huthis’ bid to reopen Sanaa airport and allow the free flow of imports into Hodeida as a tactic to cement their status as de facto rulers of Yemen’s north and rob the government of what little leverage it has in negotiations. These officials also worry that rushed political negotiations to end the war at any cost would produce a deal reflecting the current power balance, which is weighted toward the Huthis.

“Against this backdrop, a ceasefire is likely the best option for both Riyadh and Hadi.”

But thus far Saudi close air support combined with fierce local territorial defence has only been enough to slow, not halt, Huthi advances. Against this backdrop, a ceasefire is likely the best option for both Riyadh and Hadi.

How International Actors Can Help

International pressure has worked before to help prevent a calamitous offensive in Yemen. In 2018, the Security Council, the EU and numerous other international players came together, unanimous in their opposition to an all-out military assault on Hodeida because of fears about the disastrous impact of urban combat on the city. The main worry was that Hodeida and nearby ports would become inoperable, cutting off food supplies to an estimated 18 million people in the north.
The situation in 2018 was different, however, in some important respects. Outside powers had more leverage than they do today. Then, the UAE was driving the military campaign on behalf of the Saudi-led coalition. Once international opposition to the offensive reached fever pitch, the U.S. used its clout with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to press them to halt the fighting and agree to a deal to demilitarise Hodeida. The UN in turn seized the moment to secure a last-minute ceasefire and settlement.

Today, it is the Huthis who have the upper hand. They receive support from Iran, which hosts their ambassador in Tehran as Yemen’s official diplomatic representative, and has sent its own ambassador to Sanaa. Although Tehran says it wants to help end the war, no one is sure whether it would heed UN entreaties to bring its influence to bear on the Huthis or whether it even has sufficient influence to convince the rebels to halt their advance. Moreover, Tehran may or may not be sincere in saying it wants to end a war that has embroiled two of its geostrategic rivals, Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

For all the challenges it will entail, a renewed diplomatic push focused on stopping the battle for Marib is both essential because of the humanitarian stakes and urgent because the chances of stopping the war diminish if the Huthis succeed in entering the city. If that happens, it will likely trigger protracted urban warfare and new fighting elsewhere in the country.

“U.S. should persuade Riyadh and the Hadi government to make concessions that can pave the way for a ceasefire with the Huthis.”

Having committed itself to working toward a diplomatic solution, the U.S. should persuade Riyadh and the Hadi government to make concessions that can pave the way for a ceasefire with the Huthis. That means at least a temporary lifting of some restrictions on Hodeida port and the resumption of at least some commercial flights to Sanaa airport, with a joint oversight mechanism over both to mollify the government and signal to the Huthis that the deal does not just cement their status as de facto rulers of the north.

Neither the Saudis nor Hadi’s camp are likely to be pleased but Washington can rightly point out that these measures are a price worth paying to prevent the loss of their last toehold in northern Yemen and the risks that could ensue in Shubwa for the anti-Huthi alliance. It will also help for the U.S. and UN to make clear that these steps are reversible and would not amount to transferring national sovereignty to the Huthis in the eyes of...
amount to transferring national sovereignty to the Huthis in the eyes of Washington or the wider world.

At the same time, Washington and as many partners as it can gather to its side should impress on the Huthis that if they press ahead to take Marib they will face targeted sanctions aimed at disabling the economic networks that have sustained their war effort and enriched their top leaders. The U.S. has already warned it may be imposing new sanctions. When he announced the revocation of the movement’s terrorist designation on 12 February, Secretary of State Blinken noted that he was doing so for purely humanitarian reasons and, pointing to existing U.S. sanctions on Huthi leaders, said the U.S. was “identifying additional targets for designation”. For its part, Tehran, which in discussions with Griffiths earlier in February offered “to support any effective role played by the UN in settling the crisis”, should urge its Huthi allies not to escalate.

In working to broker a ceasefire and figure out what comes next, the U.S., the UN and their partners could learn useful lessons from the Hodeida experience in 2018. While the Stockholm Agreement ended the fighting around the port city, its text was imprecise. The parties were left free to advance their own interpretations of its meaning, particularly as to who would secure the port and how revenues would be managed, causing implementation to stall and falter. The agreement produced only a limited, geographically bound ceasefire. It could not stop the wider war or facilitate a quick resumption of political talks, as the UN had hoped. Attention quickly drifted elsewhere once the threat of a fight receded, and the requisite international focus on demanding the parties to follow through on their commitments dissipated.

Efforts to stop the Marib offensive should not repeat these mistakes. Especially since neither the government nor the Huthis has any interest in a limited ceasefire, the objective must be a nationwide rather than a local truce. Should the U.S., the UN and their partners succeed in brokering a ceasefire, the next step will be to work intensively to make the truce sustainable and bring the parties together to forge interim political and security arrangements that allow the economy to normalise, pending what are likely to be lengthy political negotiations over the country’s future.

To achieve these objectives, coordinated international action will be required. First, Washington, with its renewed commitment to ending the conflict, and which holds the UN Security Council presidency in March, should press the Council to make clear that the Huthis’ offensive against Marib must end, warning of consequences such as targeted sanctions if it proceeds. Secondly, even if some Council members prevent it from taking such action, the U.S. should take the lead in bringing together as many of the five permanent members as will participate, the EU and others to form
the five permanent members as will participate, the EU and others to form a working or contact group that will coordinate support for Special Envoy Griffiths, as they did in the past. The new group could consist of the P5, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (most importantly, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), and the European Union. This group should collaborate with Griffiths, and with Yemen’s many political and armed factions, to broker a nationwide ceasefire, to apply pressure on the parties to sustain it, and to manage knotty issues like the airport and port revenues. Beyond that, members of the group with influence over the parties will need to coax them back to the table for talks about interim arrangements and, ultimately, inclusive political negotiations that offer a sustainable peace.

It will be a tall order to quell the assault on Marib and reorient Yemen toward a more peaceful path. But the task cannot wait. If outside powers fail to act to stop the fighting now, it will make any subsequent effort much more difficult, as Yemen falls ever deeper into the abyss.