



# Truce Test: The Huthis and Yemen's War of Narratives

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction .....	1
II. Who Are the Huthis? .....	4
A. Religious Roots .....	4
B. The Huthis at War.....	6
III. A War of Narratives.....	9
A. The Anti-Huthi Narrative: Pro-Iran, Pro-Imamate Extremists.....	9
B. The Huthi View of Themselves: Revolutionary Underdogs .....	12
IV. Huthi Rule .....	14
V. The Iran Dimension .....	18
VI. “What Do They Want?” .....	22
VII. An International Dilemma .....	25
VIII. A Way Forward? .....	28
IX. Conclusion .....	31
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Yemen.....	32
B. About the International Crisis Group .....	33
C. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2019 ...	34
D. Crisis Group Board of Trustees .....	36

# Principal Findings

**What's new?** A two-month truce and reconfiguration of executive powers in Yemen's internationally recognised government represent an opportunity, if not for peace, then at least for negotiations aimed at achieving it. But getting to talks will require overcoming a barrier many see as insurmountable: dialogue with the Huthi rebels.

**Why does it matter?** The Huthis remain an enigma to many outsiders but are instrumental to a negotiated solution. They have given few signs of late that they will make compromises necessary to end the war, but efforts to engage them stand a better chance than further isolation of convincing them to do so.

**What should be done?** Diplomats will need both carrots and sticks to bring the Huthis in from the cold. International stakeholders should establish a working group to make overtures to Sanaa and prepare for inclusive Yemeni-Yemeni talks to chart a way out of the conflict.

## *Executive Summary*

A whirlwind of events has opened a small window of opportunity, if not for peace, then for a shift from violent competition to political negotiations in Yemen. This moment is a litmus test for two hypotheses about the Huthi rebels who have controlled Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014. The first, advanced by their rivals, holds that the group is an extremist organisation in thrall to Iran that is incapable of engaging in good faith, let alone making the compromises needed to end the war. The second posits that the Huthis (aka Ansar Allah), presented with the right mix of incentives and a realistic peace proposal, will come to the table, even if only to give themselves a reprieve from fighting and economic privation. In any case, the fact is that the war will not end without the Huthis' acquiescence. With a nationwide truce in place, diplomats should reach out to the Huthis, seeking their approval of an extended truce and their participation in inclusive intra-Yemeni talks aimed at bringing seven years of terrible conflict to a close.

The UN announced it had mediated the truce on 1 April after shifts on the ground brought the military balance close to equilibrium for the first time in several years. Less than a week later, Saudi Arabia engineered the ouster of Yemen's internationally recognised president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who over the course of the conflict had turned from a deeply imperfect vessel of state legitimacy into an impediment to both prosecuting the war and finding pathways to peace. Hadi's replacement, a presidential council consisting partly of prominent leaders involved in fighting the Huthis, along with political elites close to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, presented the Huthis with both confirmation of Saudi influence over the government and a more credible negotiating counterpart, as the UN sought to translate the truce into dialogue about ending the war. Days after the council's appointment, the UN envoy, Hans Grundberg, travelled to Sanaa in an effort to extend the truce and lay the groundwork for political negotiations.

Earlier in 2022, the Huthis had made headlines by claiming responsibility for missile and drone attacks on the United Arab Emirates in response to gains made by UAE-backed anti-Huthi forces on the battlefield. The strikes were a reminder that, after more than 100,000 deaths, the war remains a threat both to millions of lives inside Yemen and to the Gulf region's stability. They also reignited a debate over the nature of the Huthi movement. The Huthis' rivals say they are a theocratic Iranian proxy that rules through fear and harbours expansionist ambitions. The Huthis paint themselves as revolutionaries and plucky underdogs in a Saudi-led war of aggression. They claim that they have been sincere in their efforts to end the war and have clearly stated their terms, but that until now their adversaries' counter-proposals have been unrealistic.

Neither narrative provides a full picture of the Huthis or life in areas they control. The Huthis tell a story of a revolution with democratic intent thwarted by Saudi-led airstrikes and siege warfare. But the Yemen war is a civil war first and foremost. The Huthis neglect to mention that many Yemenis are not on their side and that those fighting them on the ground are resisting their rule rather than acting as guns for hire. For their part, the Huthis' rivals say the group is hellbent on installing a caste-

based theocratic order, pointing to Huthi attacks on populated areas and police state tactics as examples of their extremism. But they downplay the war's human toll in Huthi-controlled areas and local leaders' excesses in areas under the government's nominal sway. Their backers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, focus on Huthi cross-border attacks, demanding that the U.S. assist them in ending the Huthi (and, they say, Iranian) threat to the Gulf security. But they seek impunity for the carnage their own bombardment has caused.

Recent Huthi gains – and losses – on the ground, their latest attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the truce and the push for a political settlement have brought renewed urgency to questions about who the Huthis are, what they want and how to bring them to the negotiating table. For some, the answer is to isolate and pressure them militarily and economically. For others, it is to find the right incentives to bring them in from the cold, for example, by meeting longstanding Huthi demands to lift restrictions on the Red Sea port of Hodeida and reopen Sanaa International Airport to commercial flights.

As part of the truce both of these conditions have now been met, on paper and in a limited form: the agreement allows two flights per week to land in Sanaa and eases the embargo on fuel shipments arriving in Hodeida. Whether that is enough to get the Huthis to the table is about to be put to the test. But first, its terms must be honoured – at the time of writing, almost a month into the truce, wrangling over passport control had prevented the inaugural flights from arriving. The Huthis, for their part, also need to make compromises to sustain and expand the truce: they need to restore road access to the city of Taiz that they have besieged for the past seven years.

Whatever happens next, efforts to end the war must grapple with four main considerations related to the Huthis. The first is the fact that, until early 2022, they appeared to be winning the war for Yemen's northern highlands and that they remain the dominant power in the country's most populous areas, including Sanaa. The second is that the risk of more Huthi strikes on Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and the menace to maritime trade around Yemen – will remain constant as long as the war continues. The third is that, even if the war is a multi-sided struggle that can only be brought to a close through a wider peace process, it cannot end without an understanding between Saudi Arabia and the Huthis, with the former deeming intolerable a settlement that would leave the group in absolute control, closely aligned with Iran and armed with medium- and long-range weapons.

The fourth and final factor is that the Huthis' domestic rivals reject the notion of living in a Huthi-dominated state and, in many cases, have vowed to fight on in the event of a settlement that does not address their fears. Even the most fervent of anti-Huthi Yemenis perceive that they may soon have no choice but to broker some kind of settlement with the Huthis that upholds the status quo, given that Riyadh is widely understood to be set on finding an exit from the conflict. Yet, absent a shift in Huthi military and political tactics, many in this camp predict, instead of a peace process, a prelude to a new phase of war in the event that some kind of interim settlement can be achieved.

An end to the war's current phase could be in sight, in other words but not necessarily an end to Yemen's civil strife. External actors will need to use both incentives and pressure to bring all parties to the bargaining table. But it is hard to see how the

Huthis, in particular, can be convinced to negotiate without a permanent end to what they see as the Saudi-led siege of the areas they control. With these restrictions now temporarily lightened as part of the truce, mediators need to mount a diplomatic surge on Sanaa to ensure that the group feels heard, as well as to tell them what the outside world expects from them.

It is important to calibrate the aims of this effort carefully. Diplomats will need to be realistic about the limits of the Huthis' capacity for compromise, particularly around power sharing and when it comes to their relationship with Iran. The immediate goal should not be a hastily assembled comprehensive deal and a rush to settling the war's most divisive issues, regional and international security concerns. Rather, it should be to make the Huthis part of a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue made up not just of regional players' favourite politicians, but of the broad range of social constituencies who can build peace.

**Sanaa/New York/Brussels, 29 April 2022**

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## I. Introduction

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Yemen's civil war has reached its most consequential inflection point in four years. On 1 April, the UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, said he had secured a truce between the Huthi rebels who control much of the country's north, including the capital Sanaa, and their rival, the internationally recognised government, led at the time by Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Hadi endorsed the truce after sustained pressure from the Saudi-led coalition that has backed his government with political and air cover since 2015. Less than a week later, again likely impelled by Riyadh, Hadi announced that he was ceding executive power to a new Presidential Leadership Council, the chair of which, Rashad al-Alimi, would be the new head of government and supreme commander of Yemen's armed forces. Shortly afterward, Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed closed a series of talks in Riyadh with a statement conceding the failure of military efforts to defeat the Huthis and pledging to sue for peace with them instead. Yemenis in the anti-Huthi camp see a Saudi hand behind the whole sequence of events.

A series of escalations preceded this renewed push for peace. By the autumn of 2021, the Huthis had consolidated a commanding battlefield position and appeared poised to seize the oil-rich governorate of Marib. Then, in January and February 2022, in response to military setbacks, the Huthis launched missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia and, for the first time in three years, the United Arab Emirates, accusing the latter of re-entering the Yemen fray after its announced withdrawal in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The Saudi-led coalition retaliated with intense air raids on Sanaa and other parts of the Huthi-controlled northern highlands, reportedly killing dozens of civilians and knocking out service from the country's main internet provider for several days.<sup>2</sup> Riyadh mooted bombing the Huthi-controlled Red Sea port of Hodeida as well, while Abu Dhabi petitioned the U.S. to restore the Huthis' designation as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, rescinded a year earlier. The Huthis threatened to hit additional sites in the UAE and lobbed more projectiles at Saudi oil, gas and other infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

Combined, these developments tipped the war into the closest thing to a mutually hurting stalemate in the past five years. Military breakthroughs for UAE-aligned forces in Shebwa and Marib governorates in January hampered the Huthis' two-year campaign to seize Marib and tipped the war back toward equilibrium after it had begun

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<sup>1</sup> "Houthi missiles target Saudi Arabia and UAE as escalation grows", Al Jazeera, 24 January 2022. In July 2019, the UAE announced that it was ending its participation in front-line combat. It has continued, however, to advise and assist its Yemeni allies.

<sup>2</sup> Celine Alkhalidi and Mostafa Salem, "Airstrikes kill 70 people and knock out internet in Yemen", CNN, 21 January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> "Yemen rebels threaten more attacks after firing missiles on UAE, Saudi Arabia", France 24, 24 January 2022.

to tilt toward the Huthis.<sup>4</sup> Cross-border escalations increased the risk of inflaming regional tensions, complicating both efforts to find a negotiated way out of the war and the stop-start discussions about restoration of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A Huthi strike causing civilian casualties in the UAE could have cemented international resolve to keep the movement isolated, re-energised Saudi-Emirati support for its foes and broadened opposition to a revived JCPOA. A U.S. re-designation of the Huthis as terrorists would have raised fresh barriers to mediation with the group, while deepening Yemen's economic woes and humanitarian plight.<sup>5</sup>

The formation of the new presidential council also created a new political paradigm. The Huthis mock the council as little more than a “reshuffling of mercenaries” backed by Saudi Arabia.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the council is widely understood to have been selected by Riyadh. The Huthis thus see merely another twist in a Saudi-led plot to control Yemen. The way the council was formed has robbed it of some of the international legitimacy afforded to Hadi, who was elected in a UN-overseen, single-candidate ballot in 2012. Many other Yemenis, meanwhile, fear that Riyadh will be able to force the council to bargain with the Huthis in a way it could not while Hadi was president. While questions linger over how it was put together, the council is more representative than the Hadi government was of the range of factions that control territory and battle the rebels on the ground. The Huthis likely recognise that the council's members are collectively far more popular among ordinary Yemenis than the isolated and widely derided Hadi, and thus a more formidable opponent and, potentially, a more credible negotiating partner.

Saudi, Yemeni and Western diplomats say the door is open to negotiations but question whether the Huthis will walk through it. In their eyes, the Huthis have missed other such chances. In 2021, for example, the Huthis might have gained from a more measured approach, as world powers appeared to be growing accustomed to the idea of long-term Huthi dominance in north-western Yemen. Instead, the group sought to strike a decisive blow by taking Marib. Such frustration, however, points to an unavoidable truth: the Huthis' buy-in – indeed, all the conflict parties' buy-in – remains fundamental to stopping the fighting. Yet the longer the war has gone on, the bigger the gap has become between the Huthis and their rivals, the more each group has fallen back upon polarising rhetoric and rejected accommodation, and the harder it has become to find middle ground. Should the truce expire and fighting resume as before, the gap will grow wider still.

As for the Huthis, they have, notwithstanding their recent losses, become more confident in their position – and more entrenched in their narrative of the war –

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<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°84, *After al-Bayda, the Beginning of the Endgame for Northern Yemen?*, 14 October 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See Crisis Group Commentary, “Yemen Should be a Factor in U.S. Yemen Policy”, 8 October 2020.

<sup>6</sup> In a 7 April tweet, Muhammad Abdelsalam, the group's main negotiator, wrote: “The path to peace is by stopping the aggression, lifting the siege and leaving the foreign forces from the country, and without that, a desperate attempt to reshuffle the ranks of the mercenaries to push them towards further escalation, and our Yemeni people are not concerned with illegal measures issued outside the borders of their homeland by an illegal party”. See tweet by Muhammad Abdelsalam, @abdusalamsalah, 9:05am, 7 April 2022.



during the last seven years of aerial bombardment, for the last six of which they lacked a direct transport route to the outside world. From 2020 until the 1 April truce, the appeal of winning the war for Yemen's north outmatched the group's desire even to ameliorate what it terms the siege of its areas. For years, the Huthis have blamed the lack of political progress on their rivals' unyielding nature, arguing that their pragmatic proposals for peace have been rebuffed or met with unrealistic demands for their surrender. They say they are subject to a scheme to subordinate Yemen to Saudi Arabia and, by extension, the West. This bias too will harden, should the truce fail to yield lasting benefits.

The clashing theories about the Huthis after the truce point to another truth: much of what is said about them generates more heat than light. Outsiders generally struggle to parse the questions of who the Huthis are and what they want, when so much of what is written about them focuses on their ideology and ties to Tehran.

This report aims to supply some better answers to these questions. It is based on research conducted in Yemen between 2014 and 2020, and remotely between 2020 and 2022, and includes interviews with around 60 people: Huthi leaders and supporters, Yemeni government officials, local politicians, journalists, academics and researchers, as well as representatives of Middle Eastern and Western governments. It analyses the rival camps' respective narratives about the group in light of ground realities. Lastly, it proposes ways for international policymakers seeking a sustainable end to the war to overcome the conundrum the Huthis present.

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## II. Who Are the Huthis?

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### A. Religious Roots

The Huthis are a religious, political and military movement widely described by other Yemenis and Western media with the generic term, “Huthi”, the family name of the movement’s founder, the late Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi, and his brother, Abdul-Malik, the group’s current leader. The Huthis refer to their movement as Ansar Allah, or Partisans of God. Hussein was a Zaydi Shiite cleric from a long line of religious scholars in Saada governorate in Yemen’s north.<sup>7</sup> Like his father and brothers, he was part of a group of Zaydi intellectuals, scholars and politicians who sought to defend Zaydi identity from what they perceived as encroachment of “Wahhabi” Sunni practices from Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> During a stint in parliament from 1993 to 1997, al-Huthi was part of a Zaydi revivalist movement focused on youth education. He then studied theology in Sudan.<sup>9</sup> Upon his return to Yemen in 1999, al-Huthi began to promote a doctrine focused on ending Western influence over the Islamic *umma*, or community, and restoring Islam to what he said was its pure, original form.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, his worldview, political agenda and religious program is known to his supporters as the “Quranic march”.

Revivalism like al-Huthi’s was common among the Sunni and Shiite Islamist movements that gained popularity in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> But other Yemenis saw dangerous undercurrents in al-Huthi’s teachings.<sup>12</sup> His principal innovation was to marry modern Islamist ideas with Zaydi jurisprudence. Zaydism is similar to mainstream Sunnism, particularly when compared to Twelver Shiism, in all but a few aspects. It teaches, for instance, that the *umma* must be led by a *sayyid* who is deemed part of the *ahl al-bayt*, meaning a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad via his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. All descendants of the Prophet’s Bani Hashim clan, known as Hashemites, have high status in Zaydism, though lower than the *ahl*

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<sup>7</sup> Zaydism is a branch of Shiism distinct from Jaafarism (also known as Twelver Shiism, found in contemporary Iran, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon). Its religious elites, who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad, ruled northern Yemen under a system known as the imamate until the 1962 revolution. Zaydis represent approximately one third of Yemen’s estimated 30 million citizens, the majority of whom are Shafei, one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. For additional background on Zaydism, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, “Yemen’s War-torn Rivalries for Religious Education”, in Frederic Wehrey (ed.), *Islamic Institution in Arab States: Mapping the Dynamics of Control, Co-optation and Contention* (Washington, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Husein al-Huthi, *Durus min Waḥi ‘Ashura* [Lessons of the Ashura Revelations] (Saada, 2002); and “The Houthi supervisory system”, The Assessment Capacities Project, 17 June 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Huthi, in line with many of his Islamist contemporaries, argued that Western policies toward the Middle East, and especially the invasion of Afghanistan and the “war on terror”, were primarily designed to advance Western, Jewish and Christian claims on the region. Al-Huthi advocated against absorbing Western ideas into Muslim culture and for restoring the *umma* through a return to the Quran’s core messages.

<sup>12</sup> Tik Root, “Yemen’s Houthi rebels defy years of war and repression”, BBC, 18 June 2013.

*al-bayt*.<sup>13</sup> Zaydism also promotes rebellion against “unjust rule”.<sup>14</sup> Al-Huthi, meanwhile, described the need for an *alam al-huda*, or guiding eminence, to give political and religious leadership (which he saw as indivisible) to Muslims.<sup>15</sup> He excoriated the Yemeni state’s ties to the “unjust” West.<sup>16</sup>

In Yemen, al-Huthi’s teachings sparked fears of Zaydi efforts to restore not just religio-cultural practices, but also social divides of the past.<sup>17</sup> His family were part of a religio-political aristocracy that backed the Zaydi imams’ rule in northern Yemen for a millennium, until the 1962 revolution.<sup>18</sup> *Sayyid* families like al-Huthi’s dominated civic and spiritual life up to that date.<sup>19</sup> The republican state that replaced the imamate taught that the *sayyids* ran a caste system, separating Hashemite “masters” from the “serfs” comprising the rest of society. It periodically warned of Hashemite plots to restore the old order under the guise of overthrowing tyranny. Many Zaydi families converted to Sunnism in what amounted to a political rejection of the old order as much as a religious transformation.<sup>20</sup>

Formerly influential *sayyid* families like the Huthis perceived that they, as a group, their religio-cultural practices and their regions suffered deliberate neglect during the republican era.<sup>21</sup> Many perceived that the state was promoting Salafist Sunni teachings that attacked Zaydism as impure, as part of efforts to dilute their influence.<sup>22</sup> After decades of relative harmony between Zaydis and Sunnis of the Shafei school of thought, intellectual sparring and physical clashes between zealous Salafists, including foreigners who had travelled to Yemen to study, and Zaydis became more common in the 1990s, particularly in Saada.<sup>23</sup> From the late 2000s onward, intra-regime rivalries and unrest in parts of Yemen led to growing dissatisfaction with the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who bolstered his position by working closely with the U.S. and other Western powers on projects related to the so-called war on terror. In this atmosphere, segments of Yemeni society found al-Huthi’s messages attractive.

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<sup>13</sup> Barak A. Salmoni, “Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon”, RAND Corporation, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Hamad H. Albloshi, “The Ideological Roots of the Huthi Movement in Yemen”, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Hussein al-Huthi, *Al-Sirakh fi Wajh al-Mustakbirin* [Outcry in the Face of the Oppressors] (Saada, 2002). See also Alexander Weissenburger, “Al-Mawaddah al-Khalidah? – The Huthi Movement and the Idea of the Rule of the Ahl al-Bayt in Yemen’s Tribal Society”, in Marieke Brandt (ed.), *Tribes in Yemen: An Anthology*; and Ahmed Abdeen, “Zaidiyyah: The Shia sect closest to the Sunnis”, Fanack, 3 December 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Huthi, *Al-Sirakh fi Wajh al-Mustakbirin*, op. cit.; and Nadwa al-Dawsari, “The Houthis and the limits of diplomacy”, Middle East Institute, 6 May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Timebomb*, op. cit. See also Abdulkareem Ghanem, “Addressing Social Fragmentation in Yemen”, Sanaa Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1 March 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Timebomb*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islah officials, tribal leader, Sanaa, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islah official, Sanaa, September 2014; Yemeni academic, Amman, January 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Timebomb*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Boucek, “War in Saada: From Local Insurrection to National Challenge”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2010.

Others suspected that al-Huthi's vision of a "Quranic march" was simply a thinly veiled effort to reinstate the imamate – with some openly accusing him of having this agenda. Many observers also perceived in al-Huthi's description of a spiritual guide a corollary to Iran's system of religious guardianship (*vilayet-e faqih*), even if al-Huthi called neither for an end to the republic nor restoration of the imamate. Nor did he explain what a "true" Islam might look like or give a full account of his notion of a guiding religious eminence.<sup>24</sup>

The matter remains ambiguous, sustaining such suspicions. In recent years, Huthi officials have offered a series of answers to questions about the guiding eminence's putative function, stressing claims that the position is entirely new and incomparable to past religious or political offices. They have repeatedly denied that they seek to instal a caste system based on descent from the Prophet.<sup>25</sup> But they have yet to clearly explain what role such a person (widely assumed by other Yemenis to be Abdul-Malik al-Huthi) would occupy in a post-war state.<sup>26</sup> For Western observers, the slogan Hussein al-Huthi coined in 2002, echoing a chant used by Iranian revolutionaries in the 1970s and 1980s – "God is great! Death to America, death to Israel! Curse the Jews! Victory to Islam!" – was sufficient proof that he held extreme views, was aligned with Tehran and was pushing his followers to adopt Twelver practices.<sup>27</sup>

## B. *The Huthis at War*

The Huthis' rise to power in 2014 is often depicted as something of an overnight success for the group. But for its members it capped a decade of struggle that began in the first of six wars with the Saleh regime in 2004. The army killed Hussein al-Huthi in the first of those wars and Abdul-Malik later assumed the helm of what became a rebellion against government forces in Saada and neighbouring governorates, along Saudi Arabia's southern border.<sup>28</sup> Support for the group grew as much in opposition to the Saleh regime's heavy-handed military response as it did in support of the Huthis' message, which mixed nationalist calls for defence of Yemeni culture with

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Huthi criticised the republican system but did not advocate for overthrowing it or specify what alternative form of government he might prefer. Nor did he claim the right to leadership for himself or call for reinstatement of the imamate. Huthi representatives today present the "guiding eminence" as a new model of spiritual leadership that defies classification but is not comparable to the Yemeni imams of old or the supreme leader in Iran.

<sup>25</sup> Abdulmalik al-Ijri, "Ansar Allah Group: Discourse and Movement (A Socio-Cultural Study)", 2021. Al-Ijri, one of the group's representatives in Muscat, describes the movement as something entirely new and not comparable with the imamate or other systems of religious governance, and denies that the group seeks to create a social caste system with *sayyids* at the top, citing the prominent roles played by several non-*sayyids* or Hashemites in the group. Of the figure of the eminent guide, he writes: "An eminent guide (the model person), according to the Houthis, does not take the traditional image of a cleric or an expert in the interpretation of texts or giving fatwas. Nor is his a purely spiritual rank such as the rank of a holy man in the Sufi tradition; nor does his rank give him legislative powers such as those of the twelve imams of the Jaafari tradition; and nor is his office an executive presidency like that of the imam in the Zaydi tradition".

<sup>26</sup> Al-Huthi, *Al-Sirakh fi Wajh al-Mustakbirin*, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Barak Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, "Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon", RAND Corporation, February 2010.

appeals to holy war.<sup>29</sup> Seeking regional and Western support, the regime argued that the Huthis were receiving financial, logistical and material support from Iran, a claim that Western governments greeted with scepticism, but that appeared credible to Saudi leaders.<sup>30</sup> Riyadh intervened in the sixth Saada war after alleging that Huthi fighters had mounted an incursion into Saudi Arabia.

In 2011, the Huthis participated in the popular uprising against Saleh's regime, while tightening their grip on Saada.<sup>31</sup> The group then took part in the 2012-2014 political transition that followed Saleh's ouster, including the broadly inclusive, UN-overseen National Dialogue Conference.<sup>32</sup> But the movement rejected some of the conference's outcomes, including a controversial decision that would have divided the state into six federal regions. After launching a series of protests, ostensibly over fuel subsidy reforms, the Huthis stormed into Sanaa in September 2014.<sup>33</sup> They did so in quiet concert with Saleh – who, sensing an opportunity, had re-entered the political scene – as well as a considerable portion of Yemen's armed forces and parts of the state bureaucracy aligned with the former president.

The Huthis first signed a deal with the interim president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, designed to prevent further fighting and allow for the transition's completion. But within months, after mutual recriminations over non-compliance with the deal's terms and a push by Hadi to ratify a new constitution as part of the transition, the group had placed Hadi and his cabinet under house arrest and moved to consolidate control of the rest of the country.<sup>34</sup> The alliance thus pulled off a partly successful, slow-burning coup.

Yemen soon fell into civil war (of which some Yemenis argue persuasively the Huthi takeover of Sanaa was the starting point). In February 2015, Hadi, who had announced his resignation a month earlier (later claiming he did so under duress), escaped imprisonment and fled to Aden, where he rescinded his resignation and called for outside intervention to prevent a Huthi-Saleh takeover of all Yemen.<sup>35</sup> The Huthis responded by dissolving parliament and founding a Supreme Revolutionary Council to oversee state operations; and they marched south, east and west alongside Saleh loyalists to seize Aden and much of the rest of the country. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia, citing Hadi's call, formed a military coalition to restore his government to power.<sup>36</sup> Some, but not all Saudi officials were convinced that the Huthis were a proxy for Iran, their long-time foe, and spoke of pushing back against Iranian expan-

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<sup>29</sup> "Saleh and al-Houthi alliance: circumstantial settlements and structural cracks", Al Jazeera, 20 November 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Peter Salisbury, "From outcasts to kingmakers", *Foreign Policy*, 10 October 2014.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> "How Yemen's capital Sanaa was seized by Houthi rebels", BBC, 27 September 2014.

<sup>34</sup> "Yemen's Western-backed president flees house arrest in Sana'a", *The Guardian*, 25 February 2015.

<sup>35</sup> "Yemen's Hadi flees to Aden and says he is still president", Reuters, 21 February 2015.

<sup>36</sup> "Houthi militia installs 'presidential council' to run Yemen", *Middle East Eye*, 13 February 2015. The Saudi-led coalition nominally included nine countries from the Middle East and Asia. In reality, the majority of its operations were led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

sionism.<sup>37</sup> The UN Security Council codified outside powers' support for Hadi and Riyadh in April 2015 through Resolution 2216, demanding that the Huthi-Saleh alliance surrender all the territory and arms it had seized, as well as allow Hadi to return to Sanaa.<sup>38</sup>

Seven years later, the Huthi-led de facto authorities remain ensconced in Sanaa, governing much of Yemen's north-western highlands and Red Sea coast, where more than twenty million people, roughly 70 per cent of the population, live. The Huthi-Saleh alliance, which seemed like a marriage of convenience from the start, worked to the Huthis' benefit more than Saleh's. The Huthis killed the ex-president after a schism in December 2017. Since then, the Huthis have developed a vice-like grip over state institutions, while shunting aside Saleh's pre-2011 ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), their ostensible partner in the Supreme Political Council, which they formed to supersede the Supreme Revolutionary Council in 2016. Saleh's former military, tribal and political allies, as well as GPC members, have either joined the Huthis' de facto authority, fled into exile or become part of the anti-Huthi camp inside Yemen.<sup>39</sup> Saleh's nephew, Tareq, who fought alongside the Huthis until 2017, now leads a UAE-backed armed faction on Yemen's Red Sea coast. He is part of the new presidential council.

Repeated UN mediation initiatives have failed to persuade either the Huthis, the Hadi government, Riyadh or the multitude of forces battling the Huthis on the ground to agree to a deal to end the war. Each side blames the other for the conflict's continuation, arguing that its adversaries make unrealistic demands that make compromise impossible.<sup>40</sup> The reality is that the pendulum of intransigence has swung between the two sides, depending on their relative positions on the ground. More than three years have now passed since the rival parties met face to face in Sweden, in December 2018, the longest stretch since the war began.

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<sup>37</sup> Saudi officials from late 2014 onward had begun to tell diplomats that they would not permit formation of a "Hizbollah on our southern border". Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Sanaa and Riyadh, September-October 2014 and March 2015.

<sup>38</sup> "UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015)", S/RES/2216 (2015), 14 April 2015.

<sup>39</sup> The Huthis did not need to start from scratch in running state institutions after entering Sanaa, because GPC figures from Saleh's time stayed in their positions. Over time, Huthi allies gained increasing prominence in the main institutions, gradually bringing staff under their control.

<sup>40</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°167, *Yemen: Is Peace Possible?*, 9 February 2016; N°216, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, 2 July 2020; Peter Salisbury and April Alley, "Peace is Possible in Yemen", *Foreign Affairs*, 11 November 2019; and Crisis Group Briefing, *After al-Bayda: the Beginning of an Endgame for North Yemen?*, op. cit.

### III. A War of Narratives

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Narratives of the war's roots are contested. All parties profess a defensive posture, accusing rivals of being the aggressors.

#### A. *The Anti-Huthi Narrative: Pro-Iran, Pro-Imamate Extremists*

Lined up against the Huthis are two broad factions, which largely make up the membership of the new Presidential Leadership Council. The first is a network of Saudi-backed groups loosely tied to Islah, Yemen's main pre-war Sunni Islamist political party, and parts of Saleh's GPC that took Hadi's side at the beginning of the war. The second is a collection of UAE-aligned forces, including but not limited to the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC); mainly Salafist-led forces, known as the Giants Brigades; the Republican Guards led by the Huthis' erstwhile ally, Tareq Saleh, the former president's nephew; and, as of 2022, emerging authorities in Shebwa governorate.

Each of these groups has reason to fear and castigate the Huthis.<sup>41</sup> Islah leaders paint them as enemies of the republic who seek to restore the imamate, while a number of Salafist leaders increasingly depict the conflict as a Sunni-Shiite sectarian struggle.<sup>42</sup> Like Islah, Tareq Saleh's group says the Huthis seek to end the republic his uncle oversaw, but people in his circle and the anti-Huthi GPC camp portray the differences between Islah and the Huthis as posing a choice between "the caliphate and the imamate".<sup>43</sup> STC leaders, meanwhile, view the Huthis as just one of many interchangeable northern groups seeking to "occupy" southern Yemen.<sup>44</sup>

Yet the core narrative about who the Huthis are and what they represent is quite uniform. Anti-Huthi Yemenis, Saudi Arabia and its regional allies, and many foreign powers involved in Yemen describe the Huthis' September 2014 power grab as an Iran-backed coup.<sup>45</sup> They frame the war as both a conflict between the Huthis and government forces and an internationally approved albeit Saudi-led intervention to restore Yemen's rightful sovereign authority to power in the face of Huthi aggression.<sup>46</sup> In support of this argument, they pointed until April 2022 to UN Security Council Resolution 2216, which affirms Hadi's legitimacy and calls on the Huthis and their allies to hand over the territory and arms they control to the Hadi government.<sup>47</sup> After Hadi's ouster, Yemeni officials have begun to argue that Hadi has been replaced in a

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<sup>41</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen*, op. cit.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Islah officials, Marib, Istanbul and by telephone, January 2020 and January 2022; Salafist leader, Aden, March 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, member of Saleh's Republican Guards, July 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, GPC official, Cairo, January 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Issa Nahari, "The Yemen war is more complicated than Biden thinks", *The Independent*, 25 March 2021. Increasingly anti-Huthi narratives elide Saleh's role in convincing tribal and military forces to help the Huthis enter the capital, in part due to efforts to rehabilitate Saleh's family and the GPC as a counterbalance to the Huthis.

<sup>46</sup> Sultan Barakat, "Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen: moral questions", Brookings Institution, 31 March 2015 (Arabic).

<sup>47</sup> Faisal Edroos, "Yemeni FM's remarks at Sweden peace talks trigger anger in Sanaa", Al Jazeera, 6 December 2018.

Yemeni-led process, endorsed by the ex-president and blessed by the country's major political parties. The Yemeni government has sought to have the UN Security Council recognise Rashad al-Alimi, the Political Leadership Council's chair, as Yemen's new head of state.

To date, Yemenis in the anti-Huthi camp, Saudi officials and some, but not all of Riyadh's Arab allies characterise the Huthis as extremists who believe Hashemites have a "divine right" to rule over everyone else.<sup>48</sup> The Huthis' rivals portray life in Sanaa today as unbearable due to highly repressive militias that police every facet of day-to-day activity. The Huthis, their opponents say, enforce conservative norms, such as gender separation in public spaces and bans on music and certain forms of dress, and stifle freedom of expression, often brutally. These critics say arbitrary beatings, arrests, torture, extortion and executions by Huthi forces are the norm in the territory the group controls, at times equating Huthi rule with that of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). They describe the Huthis' battlefield practices, which include use of mortars, missiles and landmines in civilian areas, as well as deployment of child soldiers, as crimes under international law and proof of the group's propensity for "terrorism".<sup>49</sup> The Huthis, they say, approach negotiations in bad faith, seeing them simply as an opportunity to regain strength at moments of military weakness.

Others focus on the Iran angle.<sup>50</sup> Most in the government camp, and now all Saudi officials, frame the Huthis primarily as an Iranian proxy, arguing that the group has little if any autonomy from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).<sup>51</sup> They say the Huthis are slowly absorbing Twelver Shiite doctrine and transforming Yemeni society into a facsimile of Iran's system of religious guardianship, with Abdul-Malik al-Huthi at the helm.<sup>52</sup> This second contention feeds into a broader narrative about

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<sup>48</sup> A politician from Marib governorate said, "Huthi ideology is war against the people in the pursuit of divine rule and the imamate. ... They think they are chosen by God. If there would be just a political disagreement between us and them, we could reach a solution. But that's not the case. The Huthis think that only the Prophet Muhammad's ancestors can rule". Crisis Group interview, tribal leader, Marib, January 2020. Some Yemeni scholars worry that such claims seek to perpetuate anti-Hashemite sentiment, as they present all Hashemites as exogenous to Yemen (Yemen's Hashemites arrived in two waves in the tenth and thirteenth centuries and are sometimes characterised as "Adnani", or northern Arabian Arabs, in contrast to Yemen's "Qahtani", southern Arabian Arabs), and as supporting the two-tier "master-serf" relationship with non-Hashemites described above.

<sup>49</sup> Saeed al-Batati, "Calls grow to restore Houthis to US list of terrorist groups", *Arab News*, 20 January 2022.

<sup>50</sup> "Iran-backed Houthis' attack on Abu Dhabi sends messages to Gulf region and the US", *The Arab Weekly*, 19 January 2022.

<sup>51</sup> "Houthi strikes and 'Iran's messages'", *Al-Hurra*, 1 February 2022.

<sup>52</sup> "Have the Houthis become Twelver Shiites?", *Arab Post*, 2 February 2022 (Arabic). Most Shiites in the world are Twelvers, that is to say, they believe that unified political and religious leadership of the *umma*, passed from the Prophet Muhammad to his son-in-law Imam Ali and then to a succession of eleven more imams (the Shia are *shiat Ali*, or "followers of Ali"). Twelver eschatology holds that the twelfth imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, went into occultation in the ninth century and will return to establish an Islamic state upholding peace and justice. Zaydis are Fivers rather than Twelvers: they believe Zayd ibn Ali was the fifth imam, rather than his half-brother Muhammad al-Baqir, as is the convention in Twelver practice. Zaydism teaches that the imams after the first three, Ali, Hassan and Hussain, were not infallible. It is less doctrinally critical of the first three caliphs whom the Sunni tradition considers to have taken charge of the *umma* after the Prophet's death, considering them misguided rather than sinful in their rejection of Ali's leadership. They do not share the more devel-



Iran and its allies in the so-called Axis of Resistance, which posits that Iran-aligned groups exist only because of Iranian support.<sup>53</sup>

Both threads of thought present the Huthis as dangerous fanatics whose rule is incompatible with modern statehood and regional stability. Because the Huthis do not believe in the co-equal existence of all people and repress all dissent, many in the anti-Huthi camp argue, their ideology precludes the possibility of an equitable political settlement in much the same way that National Socialism did in Nazi Germany, or the short-lived ISIS “caliphate” did after 2014. A popular argument is that it is impossible to negotiate with the Huthis, leaving no option but to pursue the group’s total surrender or at least to apply sufficient military pressure to force it into significant concessions, including the handover of arms and territory. Those who say the Huthis are an Iranian proxy present them purely as a non-state armed group that attacks civilians indiscriminately in pursuit of Tehran’s goals. By their logic, it follows that if the Huthis can be separated from Tehran, or (better still) Iran’s own wings can be clipped, the Huthis will collapse.

Such rhetoric may be, at least partly, designed to rally domestic and international support for the war effort to defeat the Huthis. Indeed, the shift in tone that accompanied the push toward a political settlement in April suggests that Riyadh, at least, believes that a workable *modus vivendi* may be possible. Yet the views outlined above are also received wisdom among many Yemenis, and as discussed below, the Huthis’ behaviour at times serves as a form of confirmation bias. For this reason, even if the parties can reach a political settlement, pervasive mutual mistrust will test its durability.

It does not help matters that the Huthis mainly refer to the Yemeni forces arrayed against them as either opportunists working for the Gulf monarchies or extremists allied with ISIS or al-Qaeda (who they say are on the Saudi payroll). They often threaten to turn the battlefield into a “graveyard of mercenaries”.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes, however, they display forbearance, exhorting “misguided” fighters on the other side to agree to truces, or even return to their fold in Sanaa. They also reach out to rivals via a reconciliation committee that makes a great show of welcoming defectors back to the capital.<sup>55</sup> Such tactics predate the war. While the group touts its successes in this regard, it rarely mentions that it has yet to convince swathes of the population of its good intentions. In Marib, the central city of Taiz and southern Yemen, among other places, the residents deeply distrust the Huthis.

The group’s struggles with rivals in Marib and Taiz are due in no small part to fresh memories of its brutality on the battlefield. The Huthis have shelled cities, particularly Taiz and the southern port of Aden, planted tens of thousands of landmines,

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oped theory of the imamate embraced by Twelvers. In the view of Zaydi scholars, these differences explain the more tolerant Zaydi approach to Sunnis, which Sunnis reciprocate, and the peaceful coexistence of Shafei Sunnis and Zaydi Shia in Yemen. See Salmoni, “Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon”, op. cit.

<sup>53</sup> “The Axis of Resistance: origin, development and unity of destiny”, *Al-Mayadeen*, 6 July 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>54</sup> “Yemen’s western coast to turn into cemetery for aggressors: Ansarullah”, Tasnim News Agency, 5 August 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019 and September 2021; Maribi tribal leaders, January 2020 and September 2021.

and fired mortars and ballistic missiles at what locals say are civilian gatherings in populated areas.<sup>56</sup> They have also allegedly recruited thousands of child soldiers (their rivals have also enlisted children, albeit in smaller numbers).<sup>57</sup>

### B. *The Huthi View of Themselves: Revolutionary Underdogs*

The Huthis' version of events is radically different. In their account, they are the plucky underdogs resisting the Saudi "total war" aimed at bombing and starving them into submission. They blame corrupt Western powers and a biased UN for giving the Saudi-led effort a veneer of legitimacy, not just with Resolution 2216, but also by repeatedly portraying Huthi peace proposals as fake and dispositive of intransigence.<sup>58</sup> Huthi officials say they launched a popular revolution against a venal government under Western control in September 2014.<sup>59</sup> They argue that in 2015, once they had installed a revolutionary government in Sanaa in cooperation with other political forces, and after Hadi had fled the country, Saudi Arabia launched a war of aggression, seeking to return the country to the vassal status it had endured before 2014.<sup>60</sup> The Huthis view themselves as having consistently sought peace, offering realistic proposals in keeping with realities on the ground.

In this version of events, the Huthis have prevailed in a defensive war despite international backing and political cover for a brutal military assault, accompanied by what they term the siege of their areas: the closure of Sanaa's airport and a trade blockade (which more accurately amounts to restrictions on trade, fuel in particular, entering Hodeida).<sup>61</sup> The Huthis and their supporters see efforts to present the war as merely a civil conflict as part of an international plot to subjugate Yemen. They continue to see the UN as complicit in this effort. "This is a war of outside aggression and the UN still calls it a civil war", a prominent Sanaa-based Huthi supporter said, adding that the only internal conflicts before 2015 were occurring between Yemeni elements being paid by different parts of the Saudi-led coalition.<sup>62</sup>

In the war's early days, some in the Huthi camp acknowledged that this narrative was not the whole story. They said the movement might have to make compromises to end the war, up to and including allowing Hadi to return to Sanaa as president for

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<sup>56</sup> "Yemen: Dozens killed in Houthis attack on Aden military parade", Al Jazeera, 1 August 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Sanaa residents and visitors to the city, December 2021 and January 2022.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, March 2020 and November 2021; and Huthi representatives, Muscat, September 2019, April 2020 and January, September and November 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Mohammed Ghobari, "Houthis block Yemen army chief, accuse president of corruption", Reuters, 16 December 2014.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, March 2020 and November 2021; and Huthi representatives, Muscat, September 2019, April 2020 and January, September and November 2021. See also "Abdul-Malik Al Houthi: We accept peace and refuse to surrender", RT, 18 December 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, March 2020 and November 2021; and Huthi representatives, Muscat, September 2019, April 2020 and January, September and November 2021. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°231, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, 20 January 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, September 2021.

an interim period, and that it might have to accept a smaller role in government once the conflict ended. But as the group has become more powerful and at the same time more isolated and inward-facing – the government and the Saudis cut off international flights to Sanaa in 2016 and few Huthi officials have left the country since, while diplomatic visits to Sanaa have slowed to a trickle – its members' private views of the war have come to fully match its public rhetoric.

When confronted with allegations of human rights abuses or misrule, Huthi representatives retort that theirs is a revolutionary state that seeks to build an open, pluralistic and just society in Yemen, with any missteps the result of pressures generated by external aggression.<sup>63</sup> Huthi officials argue that Ansar Allah, and its members' ideology, is separate from the state and that it would not seek to set state policy in the future if it is not part of the country's political leadership.<sup>64</sup> The Huthis are also keen, meanwhile, to contrast life in the areas under their control, which they paint as orderly and secure, to that in areas held by their rivals, which they say is chaotic because what they call the "hotel government" residing largely in Riyadh is remote, uncaring and incompetent.<sup>65</sup> Their increasingly authoritarian tendencies allow for this stability, supporters argue, and are a feature, not a bug, of their efforts to stabilise the country and uproot extremist groups like al-Qaeda.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, March 2020 and November 2021; and Huthi representatives, Muscat, September 2019, April 2020 and January, September and November 2021. In 2019, the de facto authorities – now under the rule of the Supreme Political Council established in 2016 alongside a Salvation Government, with both bodies including GPC members – published "National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State". In this document, the de facto authorities laid out a ten-year strategy for turning Yemen into a free, thriving, inclusive, democratic and republican state that external powers would accept. This state would have separation of powers and a constitution. It would be based on "the principles of Islam and the teachings of the Islamic Sharia". "National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State", Republic of Yemen, 25 March 2019.

<sup>64</sup> A Huthi representative said, "We need to separate between the ideology of Ansar Allah and of the state. The Yemeni state will not necessarily adopt the policies or the worldview of Ansar Allah. Our slogan is a popular slogan, not the slogan of institutions". Crisis Group telephone interview, April 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Huthi officials and supporters are quick to note the deterioration in security and living conditions in areas under the Hadi government's nominal control, particularly during periods of fighting between the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council and government forces – nominal allies against the Huthis – and the currency crisis. Between 2020 and 2022, the Yemeni riyal plummeted in value to less than 1,700 to the U.S. dollar in government-controlled areas, while it remained largely stable at 600 to the dollar in Huthi-held areas. See Crisis Group Report, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, September 2019. Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi-affiliated journalist, February 2022.

## IV. Huthi Rule

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Part of the challenge of understanding the Huthis is that the de facto authorities in Sanaa and the movement in its current form are more of a complex and shifting coalition sustained through a mix of ideology, incentives and threats than a monolithic entity with one unified agenda. The Huthis tightly control an alliance of northern political, military and tribal groups nominally overseen by the Supreme Political Council, but in reality by Abdul-Malik al-Huthi and an inner circle of confidantes. Most, though not all, of the alliance's constituent parts are drawn from Yemen's Zaydi-majority northern highlands, and most, though not all, senior Huthi officials are Hashemites.

Not all Huthi allies share the group's worldview. A key factor in driving Yemeni groups to join hands with the Huthis is nationalist sentiment, coupled with a sense that Hadi betrayed Yemen – even committed treason – when he invited the Saudis to intervene. Senior commanders and other officials in the coalition say they are not part of Ansar Allah, but rather are fighting a patriotic, defensive war alongside the Huthis.<sup>67</sup> Some are angry that Saudi and Hadi government officials attempt to minimise the suffering caused by seven years of economic blockade and airstrikes.<sup>68</sup>

But it is the Huthis who are the decision-makers. The Huthi movement's core is made up of adherents of Hussein al-Huthi's teachings and his brother Abdul-Malik's pronouncements, since becoming leader. Local observers describe concentric circles of influence within the movement, with Abdul-Malik at the middle, surrounded by the "2004 Huthis" who fought the Saleh regime in the first round of combat. Important, but less powerful, are those who joined the revolt during the five subsequent bouts of war. In the outermost ring, are those who lent the group political support during this period.<sup>69</sup>

There are tensions – and competing factions – within the movement, which often have less to do with distinct points of view on the conflict or Yemen's future than with particular personalities who seek greater power and influence within the Huthi system. Huthi representatives say such frictions are a feature of a system that bases itself on consensus rather than a sign of trouble. They claim that all matters of strategy are subject to robust debate among members of an advisory council consisting of political and military leaders with Abdul-Malik al-Huthi, who is the final arbiter of

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<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, military officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, August 2020 and September 2021.

<sup>68</sup> "Yemeni minister criticizes the role of Saudi Arabia and the UAE", Al Jazeera, 5 May 2019. They also argue that painting the de facto authorities as purely "Huthi" serves to sideline other political forces in Sanaa. Huthi officials and allies describe accusations that they seek to instal a dynastic theocracy, which often come from rivals backed by absolute monarchies in the Gulf, as a bizarre double standard. Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa, July 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interviews, 2014-2021. Local media reports say the main decision-making group within the movement is a jihadist council made up of key military and security leaders. See "Who are the Houthis? The hidden structures and key leaders who actually run the organisation", Almasdar Online, 14 March 2022.

any disputes.<sup>70</sup> Some in this group appear to believe in a maximalist set of goals, up to and including marching on Jerusalem to restore Muslim control of the city. Others are concerned simply with enhancing the group's power in Yemen.<sup>71</sup>

The Huthi-dominated Supreme Political Council issued a National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State in 2019 that prescribes a pluralistic and democratic society.<sup>72</sup> Yet Huthi rule is clearly autocratic. The group has fostered formal and informal structures in which their movement and its leader can claim to be just one constituency, while exerting considerable influence over a state whose bureaucracy they put in place and a society they have engineered in their image through a network of *mush-rifeen*, or supervisors, who have penetrated every aspect of daily life. Huthi leaders now run the education system and oversee re-education in Islamist ideas for civil servants and even tribal leaders.<sup>73</sup> Should the war end with the Huthis still in charge of the areas they now control, Abdul-Malik al-Huthi would not need to be president or even party leader in order to keep wielding such clout. Instead, in a power-sharing settlement, he could use his group's position in state institutions, the extension of the Saleh-era patronage system and the threat of rebellion against "unjust" rule to advance the group's agenda.

Mindful of such a scenario, many Yemenis rightly worry about how the Huthi-led Sanaa authorities would govern in peacetime, particularly in the event that they win the war and reign unopposed. They speculate that even the limited freedoms Sanaa residents have now will vanish. Yemenis who have closely interacted with the group over the course of the war largely share a common view of what will happen if the war continues. The Huthis are likely to become ever more militant and insular in their worldview, imposing stricter and stricter rules on society and becoming ever more paranoid about outside influence.<sup>74</sup> When in mid- to late 2021 the Huthis appeared to have the upper hand on the ground, even sympathetic local observers argued that the group would become more repressive if it were to prevail.<sup>75</sup>

As much as they complain of misrepresentation by their rivals, the Huthis rarely acknowledge that those fighting them might have legitimate fears or grievances of their own. The Huthi narrative of interstate conflict elides the fact that people in large parts of Yemen have taken up arms to keep them out. Arguably, the group has reached the political boundaries of the lands they can reasonably expect to rule (where Zaydi highland ways meet the Shafei customs of middle Yemen, in al-Jawf and Marib to the east, al-Bayda, Ibb and Taiz in central Yemen, and along the Red Sea coast).

All that said, the Huthis' rule is not uniform. Outside the capital, they appear to have adapted their methods to local circumstances and social norms. This approach

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<sup>70</sup> Abdul-Malik al-Huthi makes all the major decisions, creating a bottleneck made worse by his seclusion for security reasons, which sometimes slows communication with him, and by the sheer range of issues with which the authorities are dealing.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, current and former Huthi officials and supporters as well as observers, July 2014-February 2022.

<sup>72</sup> "National Vision for the Modern Yemeni State", op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> "Yemen: The Huthi supervisory system", op. cit.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interviews, 2021-2022.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

is close to that of the Saleh regime after the ex-president rose to power in 1978.<sup>76</sup> In areas where the Huthis' support was already strong, such as Saada, parts of Hajja, rural Sanaa and Dhammar, they have indeed been able to impose their own conservative mores. But in areas they have taken over since 2020, they have focused instead on working with and restructuring tribal leadership, and even demonstrating improved economic governance.<sup>77</sup>

Anti-Huthi media focus on the group's attitude toward women, which they describe as retrograde and comparable to that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Visitors to Huthi-controlled lands broadly agree, though they paint a more nuanced picture of Huthi practices regarding gender in Sanaa, the country's historically more cosmopolitan capital. The Huthis have cracked down on mingling of the sexes, imposed conservative rules for women's dress and banned women from travel without a *mahram*, or male escort. In select parts of the capital, albeit fewer than before the war, men and women can mix in cafés and shopping malls, but not as freely as they used to.<sup>78</sup> The Huthis have allowed many women-owned businesses to keep operating, in keeping with their general promotion of entrepreneurship. Moreover, the war itself has pushed women out of public life throughout Yemen, not just in Huthi-held areas. But the trajectory is clearly toward an increasingly constricted role for women in society. Women's rights activists and civil society leaders are deeply worried that the Huthis will further restrict women's rights if they stay in power.<sup>79</sup>

In general, the Huthis' record of social and political tolerance is poor. Groups aligned with Islah, other political parties and various Salafist tendencies function inside Huthi-controlled territory, but under tight observation and with no real say in governance.<sup>80</sup> Minorities, like the country's Baha'i population, have seen state persecution, already prevalent before the Huthi takeover, intensify.<sup>81</sup> Yemen's Jewish community, always small but once vibrant, has dwindled to as few as four people, with

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<sup>76</sup> At least one academic has called this approach "neopatrimonialism". Sarah Phillips, "Yemen: Developmental Dysfunction and Division in a Crisis State", Developmental Leadership Programme, February 2011.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Ibb and Dhammar residents, July-August 2021; former Hajja resident and Hawban (Taiz) resident, January 2022.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa residents, Sanaa and by telephone, January 2020, September and November 2021 and January 2022. Crisis Group telephone interviews, former residents who had recently visited Sanaa, September and November 2021, and January 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, current and former Sanaa residents, Amman and Dubai, August 2021 and January 2022. A Sanaa-based women's rights activist said, "I worry about the role of women in public life. Women were trying before 2014, before 2011 even, to change [social norms]. We have lost the battle everywhere. Right now, they [the Huthis] are busy with the war, but if they were not busy, I wonder how they would behave toward women". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, January 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Summing up the social dimensions of Huthi rule, a former Sanaa resident who has visited the city regularly over the course of the war said, "I lived in Riyadh in the 1990s and, to be honest, it wasn't much more closed and conservative than Sanaa is now. As a foreign man, you rarely saw a woman and the religious police forced you to the mosque when they saw you on the street at prayer times. There was no political conversation". Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2022. The same person added that, while Riyadh has become much more cosmopolitan over the past two decades, Sanaa has become increasingly conservative since 2014.

<sup>81</sup> See "Another year of impunity in Yemen", Reliefweb, 5 January 2021.

the Huthis' rivals blaming the group's anti-Semitic rhetoric for the exodus.<sup>82</sup> While mistreatment of these minorities derives from a wider set of social problems, the Huthis clearly promote anti-Semitism, as evidenced by the teachings of Hussein al-Huthi.<sup>83</sup> Huthi leaders moderated some of their language during the transitional period but have become more blatant in their discrimination against Jews since then, even if they frame their use of language as a critique of Zionism and Israel.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Gabe Friedman, "Yemen's Jewish population, once over 50,000, drops to below 10", *Haaretz*, 1 April 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Albloshi, "The Ideological Roots of the Huthi Movement in Yemen", op. cit.

<sup>84</sup> In a March 2022 interview with Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television channel, for example, a senior Huthi official said, "I think what happened to Ukraine is the result of the evil-doing of the Jews. This is proof that when a Jew is the leader of a country it results in war. ... If the president of Ukraine was someone else rather than that Jew, perhaps they would not have ended up in war". "Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi of the Yemeni-Houthi leadership: Ukraine is at war because it is led by a Jew; we are worried that the goal of the war is to exhaust Russia", MEMRI, 14 March 2022.

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## V. The Iran Dimension

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The Huthis reject others' characterisation of them as an Iranian proxy and claim to receive only political support from Tehran.<sup>85</sup> Yet members also proudly describe Ansar Allah as an increasingly significant player in the Axis of Resistance that stands up to perceived Israeli and U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, an alliance of Iran, Syria, Hizbollah and, at times, Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation) paramilitary groups and the (Sunni Islamist) Palestinian movement Hamas that controls Gaza.<sup>86</sup> Iranian officials similarly say they back the Huthis politically, but publicly deny providing military or material aid to the Huthis' de facto authority in Sanaa – although in private they have come closer to acknowledging their role.<sup>87</sup>

Some Huthi insiders acknowledge growing Iranian and Axis of Resistance influence, particularly on a core of key Huthi military leaders, who in turn often sway Abdul-Malik al-Huthi's thinking, and especially also with respect to the group's regional ambitions.<sup>88</sup> But they dismiss the idea that this influence amounts to an Iranian takeover, pointing to several instances when the group ignored Iranian cautions in order to make military or political advances.<sup>89</sup> The notion of asserting reach outside Yemen is likewise controversial in the movement. In September 2019, the Huthis claimed responsibility for a missile and drone attack, likely authored by Iran or Iraq-based Iranian-backed forces on oil and gas facilities in Saudi Arabia.<sup>90</sup> The claim is said to have led to intense debates within the top leadership over the wisdom of taking credit for another country's actions.<sup>91</sup> Huthi insiders have pointed to their January attacks on the UAE, which Iranian officials have told Abu Dhabi their government did not sanction, as proof of their independence from Tehran.<sup>92</sup>

Yet a growing body of evidence points to the deepening ties between the Huthis and the Axis of Resistance, especially Iran. The Huthis now have diplomatic representation in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran (emissaries are also based in Muscat, Oman), where they enjoy close relations with Iranian officials and Iran-aligned groups in the various countries' political systems.<sup>93</sup> In 2020, Tehran announced that it had sent an ambassador to Sanaa, who regional media outlets and the U.S. government claimed

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<sup>85</sup> A Huthi official said, "We have relations with Iran. This is normal. We hope to have relations with all countries. The conflict has been driven by outsiders – foreigners – and by attempts to satisfy those outside of Yemen. But Yemen is not at any time part of Iran. People use information from the internet to build things up and there is a huge exaggeration about Iranian support in Yemen". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, July 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019, March 2020 and November 2021; and Huthi representatives, Muscat, September 2019, April 2020 and January, September and November 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Iranian official, Tehran, 16 April 2020.

<sup>88</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019. See also Vincent Durac, "Yemen's Houthis – and why they're not simply a proxy of Iran", *The Conversation*, 19 September 2019.

<sup>90</sup> Humayra Pamuk, "Exclusive: U.S. probe of Saudi oil attack shows it came from north – report", Reuters, 19 December 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Ben Hubbard, Palko Karasz and Stanley Reed, "Two major Saudi oil installations hit by drone strike, and U.S. blames Iran", *The New York Times*, 15 September 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi-aligned politician, Sanaa, January 2022.

<sup>93</sup> "Houthi diplomatic battle to achieve 'legitimacy'", *The New Arab*, 22 October 2020 (Arabic).



was an IRGC commander.<sup>94</sup> Local media reports claim to have evidence that Iranian and Lebanese Hizbollah commanders are working in Yemen.<sup>95</sup> When the ambassador, Hasan Irlu, died from what Iranian and Huthi-aligned media said was a COVID-19-associated illness, he was reportedly replaced by the top IRGC official in Yemen.<sup>96</sup>

It is also self-evident that the Huthis enjoy significant Iranian material and technological support. While, at the start of the war, Huthi fighters largely used weapons from the Yemeni state's stockpiles, including ballistic missiles, mortars, automatic rifles and landmines, they are now regularly pictured carrying Iranian-made small arms. The group also says it has built its own workshops, producing long-range missiles, as well as drones that can travel distances of up to 1,300km.<sup>97</sup> Western and regional officials and arms control experts assert that new Huthi weapons systems, including attack drones and long-range missiles, are based on Iranian designs and could not have been developed domestically.<sup>98</sup> Material and know-how from Iran needed to construct long-range drones and missiles, which the Huthis now use frequently, are an important part of their leverage with Saudi Arabia and its international allies. Regional and international intelligence officials further claim that Huthi fighters travel outside the country for training with Iran-backed groups, which is corroborated by sources in Iraq.<sup>99</sup>

For the Huthis' Yemeni and regional rivals, all this evidence amounts to incontrovertible proof that the Huthis are an Iranian creature that still takes direction from Tehran.<sup>100</sup> Saudi officials reject the accusation that the Saudi-led intervention has driven the Huthis closer to Iran and the Axis of Resistance.<sup>101</sup> To argue that Tehran

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<sup>94</sup> "US announces terror sanctions against Iran's 'ambassador' to Houthis in Yemen", *Arab News*, 9 December 2020.

<sup>95</sup> When asked to supply the evidence, anti-Huthi Yemenis point to online news items that make claims that are hard to substantiate. They also mention a video disseminated in 2020 that purports to show a Lebanese Hizbollah commander discussing the group's support for the Huthis (Huthi allies claim the video is falsified). Lastly, they cite statements of appreciation for the Huthis from Iranian and Hizbollah leaders.

<sup>96</sup> Bashir al-Bakir, "The departure of the Iranian ambassador in Sanaa: The beginning of the transformation in the Yemeni war", *The New Arab*, 28 December 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, "Letter dated 25 January 2022 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the Security Council", 25 January 2022.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western officials, 2018-2022; Emirati officials, Abu Dhabi, 9 March 2022. A Western arms control expert, formerly an investigator with the UN Panel of Experts, said, "When you look at weapons development, it's pretty extraordinary. To go from non-state to state-like actors with weapons that threaten a neighbouring state in three years is quite impressive. There is clear Iranian support, but the actual depth of influence is hard to parse. But obviously the longer the war lasts, the more embedded the Huthis become, not just with Iran but also with wider networks of the Axis of Resistance". Crisis Group interview, London, January 2022.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, 2018 and 2019; Baghdad, September 2019. See also "Maat Group: Houthi confessions of being trained by Hezbollah", video, YouTube, 1 March 2018 (Arabic).

<sup>100</sup> The Huthis are "100 per cent" controlled by Iran, a Saudi official said. Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Saudi officials, January 2021 and February 2022. Many Yemenis in the anti-Huthi camp see the increasingly overt relationship, not as something that has evolved, but as a constant from the 2000s onward. They view any effort to suggest that Iranian support has grown incrementally as deliberately minimising Iran's long-term role. They likewise dismiss the notion that additional factors, like Saleh's support for the Huthis in 2014, might have helped the

has been behind the Huthis all along, they point to occasions in 2016, 2019 and 2020-2022, when they say the Huthis spurned de-escalation and peace initiatives on Iranian instructions.<sup>102</sup>

From their side, Huthi insiders find it frustrating when external reports attribute their attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to Iran's regional agenda, in part because they see this notion as designed to minimise Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's roles, and to cast the Huthis and Iran as the primary belligerents responsible for the conflict's atrocities. "Do they know we are at war?", a Huthi leader quoted Abdul-Malik al-Huthi as saying in response to a Western diplomat's explanation that many outsiders perceive attacks on Saudi Arabia as Iran-sponsored.<sup>103</sup> Huthi officials further reject the idea that Iranian pressure will convince them to change their strategic approach and are often angered by diplomats' meetings with Iranian officials to discuss initiatives to end the war.<sup>104</sup>

Iran clearly also benefits from the relationship. Increasingly embedded in the Axis of Resistance, the movement clearly serves Tehran's interests both as a symbol of struggle against Western incursions and as a strategic asset, regardless of the level of autonomy from Iran the group enjoys. The Huthis control an important chunk of territory and pose a consistent threat to Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, the UAE. Observers in Iran say what likely started as a speculative bet on the Huthis has turned into a beneficial relationship.<sup>105</sup>

Yet Iran's influence also has limits. While depriving the Huthis of Iranian support would, over time, significantly weaken their international leverage, it would not drive them out of Sanaa or compel them to sue for peace. The Huthi authorities and military forces have absorbed Saleh-era state structures, institutions and staff, and earn considerable revenues from taxation and distribution of goods like fuel, albeit likely not enough to support long-term governance.<sup>106</sup> While Tehran can help the Huthis accelerate their attacks, and at times convince them to ease up, it probably cannot

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group's power grow. Crisis Group interviews, anti-Huthi GPC and Islah supporters, Cairo and Amman, January 2022. From their side, Huthi officials cast cross-border attacks as being driven largely by a domestic rather than a regional political calculus. Often, Huthi officials said, missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and other targets are a response to airstrikes or other attacks on tribal territory or property held by Huthi-aligned rivals, who would see the movement as weak if it did not reciprocate. But biased international media, they said, present these attacks as Iranian-directed in order to undermine the group's legitimacy in Yemen and across the region. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa, July 2019; Huthi representative, Muscat, January 2021. Indeed, some Huthi supporters argue that the group is a co-equal to Iran in the Axis of Resistance and that Abdul-Malik al-Huthi may emerge as the network's leader if the group can expand its regional footprint. Crisis Group telephone interviews, Huthi supporters, July and September 2021; former Huthi supporter, September 2021.

<sup>102</sup> Hebshi Alshammari and Mohammed al-Kinani, "Houthi rejection of Saudi peace plan is based on 'flawed notion'", *Arab News*, 29 March 2021.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi official, Sanaa, July 2019.

<sup>104</sup> When, in 2021, reports emerged of Saudi-Iranian dialogue – including news that Riyadh had asked Tehran to help end the cross-border attacks from Yemen – a Huthi supporter responded with contempt, arguing that Iran had no sway over the movement. Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2021.

<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Iranian journalist, February 2022.

<sup>106</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, op. cit.

throw on the brakes, forcing the group to stand down. Iranian officials are careful to highlight their limited ability to secure concessions or changes in behaviour from the Huthis every chance they get. “We can’t force them to do something they don’t want to do”, said one. “They have their own grievances and objectives on the ground”.<sup>107</sup> Nor would a complete halt in Iranian support for the Huthis – which in any case appears highly unlikely given their strategic value – mean their immediate or near-term collapse.

That said, the relationship’s ambiguity will always lead observers to perceive overlap between Huthi and Iranian objectives so that, in their minds, the Yemen conflict is tied up inextricably with wider Middle Eastern tensions. Two cases in point were the January and February attacks on the UAE. For many Western officials, the question of Iranian command and control vis-à-vis the Huthis is moot. “Without Iran there would have been no attacks on Abu Dhabi, because the Huthis would not have the technological capabilities to launch the attacks”, a senior U.S. official said. “So, Iran cannot hide behind ambiguity and claim it is not to blame”.<sup>108</sup> An Emirati official said, meanwhile, “While we continue discussions with Iran, we know that the weapons used by the Huthis come from Tehran”.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iranian official, London, 11 November 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, January 2022.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, 9 March 2022.

## VI. “What Do They Want?”

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The Huthis express constant frustration at being portrayed as barriers to peace.<sup>110</sup> Since at least 2019, their leaders have proposed a broad plan to end the war, which they present as a peace deal. The initiative comprises a ceasefire, the withdrawal of foreign troops from Yemen, and a transitional period of dialogue and a peace agreement followed by reconstruction. Huthi officials mooted the plan in 2019, made it public in 2020 and then transmitted it to Riyadh by letter via Omani officials in 2021.<sup>111</sup> In about 2020, they added two pre-conditions to any ceasefire or dialogue: reopening Sanaa International Airport and ending restrictions on Hodeida port.

While diplomats are pleased to hear that the Huthis want a ceasefire and dialogue, they have doubts about what these terms mean in practice. The Huthis, as described above, see the war and the intra-Yemeni power struggle as two separate if interlinked issues. They seek to end the war (with Saudi Arabia) and what they term the siege of their areas, before resolving what they describe as an internal crisis sparked by the Saudi intervention.<sup>112</sup> For this reason, by a ceasefire the Huthis do not mean an end to ground fighting but a halt to Saudi airstrikes and a withdrawal of foreign forces from Yemen, in exchange for an end to their cross-border attacks. They believe that their authorities, or a neutral outside party, like Oman, should lead transitional talks among Yemeni factions designed to bring the parties into harmony with the Sanaa authorities, in particular in “rejection of the aggression and in support of Yemen’s independence and sovereignty”.<sup>113</sup> The Huthis also believe that Saudi Arabia, as the principal belligerent in their view, should underwrite the cost of reconstruction in post-war Yemen.

These ideas have long been non-starters for their rivals. For the Saudis, they would entail conceding victory to the Huthis for no political gain. For the Yemeni government, they would, in effect, mean ceding power to the Huthis. For anti-Huthi forces inside and outside Yemen, lastly, they would imply that the odds of a Huthi-dominated Yemen would increase significantly.

Yet the Huthis have thus far seen no value in the counter-proposals on offer. Saudi Arabia has in the past said it is willing to consider a large political role for the Huthis, but only if the latter first sever all ties with Iran and provide guarantees on border security, including a buffer zone that cuts into Yemeni territory. The Huthis argue that both measures would violate Yemeni sovereignty.<sup>114</sup> Before the formation of the presidential council, the Hadi government demanded that the group lay down its arms and cede territories it has taken during the war, although many in the govern-

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<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Sanaa and by telephone, July 2019; Huthi representatives, Muscat, November 2021 and January 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, Huthi officials, November 2020; Huthi representatives, October 2021; and Omani official, October 2021. See also “Payment of compensation ... the latest Huthi conditions to stop the war”, *The New Arab*, 30 September 2021 (Arabic).

<sup>112</sup> “Coalition truce in Yemen ... Huthis accuse Saudi Arabia of manoeuvring to continue the war”, Al Jazeera, 9 April 2020.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi official, January 2022.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, April 2021; and Crisis Group telephone interviews, Western diplomats, 2021-2022; Saudi official, March 2021.

ment camp said they would contemplate much deeper compromises than this stance suggested.<sup>115</sup> Huthi officials are deeply irritated that the Saudis and their favoured Yemeni politicians are treated as peacemakers despite having made overtures that the Huthis view as “unrealistic” and, indeed, appear largely disconnected from the balance of force on the ground.<sup>116</sup>

It is not clear if the UN-brokered truce, itself a reflection of the mutually hurting stalemate that emerged in early 2022, Hadi's ouster and the formation of the presidential council are clear signals that the Huthis, or the new government, think now is the right time to negotiate an end to the war. The truce included provisions for a limited number of fuel shipments to enter Huthi-controlled Hodeida and two direct commercial flights a week to Sanaa from Cairo and Amman. In other words, it is a limited form of the “lifting of the siege” that the Huthis demand. Saudi and Yemeni officials say they will now make a sincere effort to broker a political settlement with the Huthis and that the ball is in their court, while the Huthis say they are open to “realistic” offers.<sup>117</sup> But already the government and the Huthis have struggled to find the common ground needed to reopen the airport, despite the near-universal popularity of this aspect of the truce among Yemenis.<sup>118</sup> More important than rhetoric is the Huthis' apparent softening toward the UN and other mediators. Huthi representatives held a series of meetings with UN and regional officials in March and April, and in late April, the group permitted Grundberg to travel to Sanaa before meeting with a delegation of Omani officials.<sup>119</sup>

For this reason, the coming months likely represent a litmus test of the Huthis' – and the Saudis' and the new presidential council's – intentions. Diplomats agree that the Hadi government made no workable proposal for peace. But many accuse the Huthis of being insincere in their initiatives, making maximalist demands that they know their rivals will reject out of hand.<sup>120</sup> Mediators who have worked directly with the Huthis note that they are skilled negotiators, capable of responding to, and engaging on, substantive detail when they so choose.<sup>121</sup> When the Huthis stonewall, these mediators suspect their motives. The Huthis' proposals also ignore their rivals' concerns and do little to instil confidence that they would be prepared to share power. Some diplomats say the Huthis have become increasingly transactional in their relations with the outside world, blocking the last two UN envoys to Yemen from entering the country when they did not deliver on key Huthi demands, including releasing fuel shipments prevented from arriving in Hodeida.<sup>122</sup>

Outsiders often find it hard even to meet Huthi representatives. Yemeni, as well as UN and other foreign mediators note that the Huthis are authorising fewer and fewer officials to discuss political questions with outsiders outside of largely symbolic

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<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni government official, Riyadh, September 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, April 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Muscat, April 2022.

<sup>118</sup> “First commercial flight out of Sanaa in six years postponed”, Al Jazeera, 24 April 2022.

<sup>119</sup> Samy Magdy, “UN envoy arrives in Yemen's capital for talks with rebels”, AP, 11 April 2022.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, September, October and November 2021.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group telephone interviews, mediators with experience working with the Huthis, January and February 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, February 2022.

formal meetings.<sup>123</sup> Just two officials, one in Muscat and the other in Sanaa, handle most such interactions. This practice has insulated the group's other members from outside views of the conflict and made diplomacy with the group more difficult. It is not clear what the group's objective might be in thus limiting access to its members. In 2021, when the Huthis appeared to be close to seizing Marib, some diplomats felt the group was confident that it would not need to negotiate to achieve its goals.<sup>124</sup>

Huthi-controlled areas are also increasingly isolated, leading some Yemenis to argue that the group is building an almost hermetically sealed police state in which their narrative of resistance to outside aggression reigns supreme. The Huthis operate a "walled garden" economy, security networks and governance that function well, in part because they are separated from the rest of the country by front lines and difficult transport routes.<sup>125</sup> "Closing Sanaa airport may prove to be one of the biggest mistakes the coalition and the government ever made", a Yemeni researcher who has travelled frequently to Sanaa said. "It means that other voices and other ideas struggle to make themselves heard at qat chews in Sanaa, and the Huthis end up hearing only their own voices".<sup>126</sup> The airport's reopening during the truce may bring the Huthis into closer contact with the outside world, though it is too early to tell if it will have positive or lasting effects.

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, 2021-2022.

<sup>124</sup> Crisis Group interviews, 2021-2022.

<sup>125</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, op. cit.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interview, Yemeni researcher, Amman, January 2021.

## VII. An International Dilemma

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International and Yemeni mediators have sought for years to find a workable set of arrangements for stopping the fighting in Yemen. For some time, achieving this end has required reconciling four key factors, all of which require Huthi acquiescence. The first is the fact that until early 2022 the Huthis appeared to be winning the war for Yemen's northern highlands. The second is that, as long as the war continues, regional security and trade will be under threat, particularly with respect to prospective Huthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE and maritime traffic in sea lanes around the Arabian Peninsula. The third is that, as long as the status quo endures, the war cannot end without an understanding between Saudi Arabia and the Huthis, with the former deeming intolerable a settlement that would leave the Huthis in absolute control, closely aligned with Iran and armed with medium- and long-range weapons.<sup>127</sup> The fourth factor, finally, is that the Huthis' Yemeni rivals – who it should be remembered are the ones fighting the Huthis on the ground – cannot accept the idea of life in a Huthi-dominated state.

Faced with this knot of challenges, foreign officials perceive few good policy options. They have increasingly sought a “least bad” solution that establishes a *modus vivendi*, first between the Huthis and Yemen's neighbours, principally Saudi Arabia, and secondly between the Huthis and their domestic rivals, primarily the internationally recognised government (and of course between the Huthis and other outside powers). Yet, until the 1 April truce, even this limited objective proved unattainable and if the truce ends in a return to the status quo ante, it could become even harder to reach. Until 2020, the challenge was often that Riyadh and the Hadi government were making maximalist demands – in effect, the Huthis' surrender – that ignored realities on the ground. But once the Huthis began bearing down on Marib governorate in 2020, it was their turn to present maximalist demands – in effect, a complete withdrawal by Saudi Arabia and its local and regional allies from Yemen, with no guarantees in place for Riyadh's or rival Yemeni groups' long-term security, apart from vague nods toward cooperation and dialogue.

Foreign officials find it increasingly frustrating that, in their view, the Huthis would stand to benefit greatly from engagement and compromise, but forego any opportunity to pursue such a path. By late 2021, there was growing albeit grudging international acceptance that the group would dominate northern Yemen for years to come. But, in some officials' views, the Huthis have hurt their own prospects by constantly behaving in ways that lead to an outcry abroad, chilling diplomacy, for example, by launching missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE or a ground offensive.<sup>128</sup> They complain that the Huthis have chosen to close themselves off from the world, for

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<sup>127</sup> The Saudi position has softened considerably over the course of the war. Officials in Riyadh no longer believe the Huthis can be uprooted entirely, but they also cannot countenance the idea that the Huthis would have complete control of northern Yemen. Crisis Group telephone interview, Saudi official, January 2022.

<sup>128</sup> A Western official who previously advocated for greater dialogue with the Huthis said, “Basically, if they had played things smarter, they would have had pretty much everything they want. But every time we reach out to them and we think we are getting somewhere, they fire missiles at Riyadh. And then it becomes much harder to do anything more”. Crisis Group interview, October 2021.

example by refusing to permit the last two UN envoys to travel to Sanaa regularly and arresting local U.S. embassy staff.<sup>129</sup> The Huthis, a U.S. official said, “are isolating themselves”.<sup>130</sup> As described above, the Huthis reject such claims as propaganda designed to paint a misleading picture of the war.

Until 2021, diplomats had hoped that “carrots” – confidence-building measures in the form of reopening and lifting restrictions on trade entering the Huthi-controlled Sanaa airport and Hodeida port – might convince the group to engage in a ceasefire and political talks. But they grew sceptical of such an approach’s utility. Between 2019 and April 2022, the Huthi position on these measures shifted: where, at first, they were pre-conditions to a truce and talks, then they became pre-conditions to talks about a truce and talks.<sup>131</sup> The group’s rivals, and some officials and commentators in Western capitals, say this development bolsters their long-time argument: the Huthis will bargain in good faith only when their opponents wield “sticks” – high levels of military and political pressure. Some say the group must be completely defeated in battle before it will compromise.<sup>132</sup> For this reason, many Yemeni observers see the truce as a prelude to more fighting and the Huthi opponents among them hope that mediators’ push for talks will fail so that the Presidential Leadership Council can attempt a unified military campaign.<sup>133</sup>

This frustration explains why, for instance, the U.S. seriously thought about – and may again consider – reinstating the Foreign Terrorist Organization designation of the group in early 2022, despite fears about the humanitarian impact, and why UN Security Council members agreed to a resolution labelling the Huthis a “terrorist group” in February.<sup>134</sup> Officials in Washington felt they needed to signal their displeasure with the group and build leverage with them. But the re-designation conversation also demonstrates the limits of outsiders’ influence over the group: it appears that all they can do is impose that designation, which would amount to harsh collective punishment of the twenty million-plus people living in Huthi areas, with little hope of changing the group’s behaviour.<sup>135</sup> As Crisis Group has detailed elsewhere, other economic measures designed to hurt the Huthis have largely rebounded on Yemen’s civilian population.<sup>136</sup>

The UN truce and the formation of the presidential council represent a major test of Huthi rhetoric. By the truce’s terms, the Huthis should receive, albeit in a limited form, what they have asked for in the past to make a ceasefire work. While they may deride the presidential council, the Huthis must recognise that it is more credible among ordinary Yemenis than Hadi was. Further, if the council’s members work together – a big if, given the historical differences among them – they could pose a significant military threat to the Huthis in the future. The Huthis are also clearly

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<sup>129</sup> “The United States Condemns the Houthi Detention of Yemeni Staff of the U.S. Embassy in Sana’a and Breach of Embassy Compound”, U.S. State Department, 19 November 2021.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, February 2021.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Huthi officials, Muscat and Sanaa, 2019-2021.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni government officials, Cairo and Riyadh, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, anti-Huthi Yemeni politician, April 2021.

<sup>134</sup> See Peter Salisbury, “Ending war in Yemen requires talk, not labels”, *Foreign Policy*, 1 March 2022.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group Statement, “The U.S. Should Reverse Its Huthi Terror Designation”, 13 January 2021.

<sup>136</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen’s Economic Conflict*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Statement, “The U.S. Should Reverse Its Huthi Terror Designation”, op. cit.



signalling greater openness to negotiation, likely because they have struggled to take Marib and are more financially constrained than they would perhaps admit. In mid-April, Grundberg travelled to Sanaa to meet the Huthi leadership for the first time since becoming envoy. There, he pushed them to prolong the truce and enter dialogue with their rivals. Yet one trip by one man is unlikely to tip the balance of the war toward peace.

## VIII. A Way Forward?

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Like most wars, Yemen's conflict has fuelled competing narratives of grievance. Each party seeks to depict its own story as principled and to smear others as partisan. The Huthis focus on Saudi and Emirati airstrikes and what they term the siege of their areas, and the Hadi government's complicity in both strikes and siege. But they ignore many Yemenis' legitimate fears of Huthi rule. Saudi Arabia and the UAE highlight Huthi cross-border attacks, while anti-Huthi Yemenis point to Huthi attacks on villages and cities, as well as the actions of the Huthis' police state. They have often claimed that the Huthis are so extreme that no one can negotiate with the group. Yet this rhetoric gives the impression that the only conceivable outcome of the war is a total victory over the Huthis, something that seven years of fighting, bombardment and economic conflict have not come close to achieving. The new presidential council appears to publicly acknowledge this last point. Others continue to argue that the answer is severing Iranian support for the Huthis, without clearly articulating what that would mean in practice.

Amid all the destruction in Yemen, there is plenty of blame to go around. All parties have prosecuted the war with near impunity. The UN Human Rights Council's decision in September 2021, under pressure from Riyadh, to disband the Group of Eminent Experts it formed in 2017 to monitor alleged war crimes has hardly helped.<sup>137</sup> The Huthis see such actions as vindicating their claims that the UN is "hijacked" by Saudi interests; many Yemenis on all sides feel that whoever rules over them is unlikely to be held to account. Mediation thus requires addressing both the interests and the emotions of the conflict parties and Yemeni citizens in a way that fosters trust. The question for the principal mediator in Yemen, the UN, is how to do that. To de-escalate the conflict, the UN will need to address Huthi, other Yemeni, Saudi, Emirati and international fears regarding their respective rivals' intentions sufficiently that they would consider compromises.

Three things can be done. The first is ending the Huthis' isolation, at least in part. Diplomats working on the Yemen file need to make a serious effort to engage the group, well beyond short, irregular trips to the capital. In the wake of the Huthis' attacks on the UAE, some commentators in Washington and the Gulf have argued for heavier political pressure on the Huthis and more ostracism.<sup>138</sup> Yet it is not clear how much more external parties can punish the Huthis and what constructive purpose that tactic would serve. Isolation has created a "filter bubble" in Sanaa in which Huthi officials and followers repeat their own rhetoric unexamined. The group has now survived eighteen years without much contact with the outside world and it is not clear why it could not stay hunkered down in perpetuity, especially given the support it receives from Iran and other Axis of Resistance players.

Foreign officials should travel to Sanaa, meet with as wide a range of interlocutors as possible, listen to what the Huthis have to say and explain outsiders' perspectives on the conflict to them, without endorsing any one side's narrative. These should be

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<sup>137</sup> "Statement by Group of Experts on Yemen on HRC rejection of resolution to renew their mandate", UN Human Rights Council, 8 October 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Gerald M. Feierstein, "Yemen: Ending the War, Building a Sustainable Peace", Middle East Institute, 20 January 2022.

officials whom all sides respect and see as neutral. Crisis Group has long called for founding an international working group on Yemen to form a united front with a division of labour under UN auspices. Forming this working group and composing a consistent set of messages for transmission to the Huthis on ending the war and building peace should be priorities.

Efforts to end Sanaa's isolation would be bolstered by opening the city's airport to at least some commercial international flights, as the truce calls for, and keeping it open, allowing Yemenis to come in and out of the capital carrying news of the outside world, and allowing informal mediators to meet with senior Huthi officials. Although the truce stipulates the airport be reopened, the agreement is limited to two flights per week and is timebound. Further, no flights had actually arrived in Sanaa at the time of publication. An announced first flight out of Sanaa, scheduled for 24 April, did not take off because of a dispute between the Huthis and the government over passports issued by the Huthis in Sanaa. It was no surprise. Years of stalled negotiations have shown that this task will not be easy, in part because of running disputes between the Huthis and their opponents over where flights should connect to and who should oversee airport security and passport control.

Second is trust-building among Yemenis. The UN should keep trying to convene inclusive Yemeni-Yemeni consultations, regardless of the conflict's status. Many Yemeni groups, including the Huthis (with caveats), now say they want such dialogue, and UN member states and the new envoy himself appear to favour it as well. Shuttle negotiations have not worked and it is clear that Yemenis' fears will not be allayed until they are able to talk freely among themselves. No rule says the envoy cannot start bringing senior officials together outside Yemen in an effort to close the gaps between the parties, even if a ceasefire and formal talks seem far away. Such discussions would need to include Huthi representatives and take place in a neutral country.

It is also clear that regional dialogue could improve the prospects of peace in Yemen. De-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and between Iran and the UAE, would likely help these countries develop confidence that their local allies can and should meet to talk. Iranian talks with the UAE went on despite the Huthi attacks on the country in January and February, with the two countries careful to protect their dialogue. "We want to talk to Iran, so we'll continue, despite the attacks", said an Emirati official.<sup>139</sup> Saudi-Iranian talks, which centre largely on Yemen, are slow-moving. In the last round in September 2021, the two sides reportedly agreed to a roadmap toward resolution of the Yemen conflict, which they reportedly discussed at an apparently productive meeting on 21 April in Iraq.<sup>140</sup> Riyadh has pushed for guarantees from Tehran that it will stop arming the Huthis, contain their cross-border attacks and curb their advances in Yemen. Iran, as noted above, says it can ask the Huthis for concessions but cannot compel them to say yes.<sup>141</sup> Tehran could certainly encourage the Huthis to come to the negotiating table, but it will not be able to guarantee how they will conduct themselves in talks.

Outside powers should be clear-eyed about the outer limits of such interactions. The Huthis are highly unlikely to suddenly shift from their alliance with the Axis of

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<sup>139</sup> Crisis Group interview, Emirati official, Abu Dhabi, 9 March 2022.

<sup>140</sup> "Scoop: After 7-month hiatus, Iran-Saudi Arabia talks set to resume in Iraq", Amwaj, 19 April 2022.

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iranian official, London, 11 November 2021.

Resistance toward deeper cooperation with Western powers in the coming months or years. Nor is it clear – and will not become so, absent concerted efforts to bring them into a wider Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue – whether they are ready to compromise to the extent necessary to reassure their rivals. As for how the Huthis rule, they may temper their more hardline instincts in order to gain social approval, but it is impossible to predict how a group that, for much its existence, has been at war would behave once it became the dominant governing faction in peacetime.

As for the Huthis themselves, the group has long claimed that it seeks peace with other Yemenis, regional powers and the world. With the war at something approaching military equilibrium, their rivals unifying and the economy in freefall, it would be to their benefit to prove that point and, at a minimum, buy themselves some breathing room. But no outreach will work if they refuse to receive diplomats in Sanaa or to allow them to meet with a wide array of important social and political figures in the capital. Once the airport is open, it will be time for the Huthis to open themselves up to the world and show they are serious about peace. Similarly, at some point, the Huthis will have to recognise that other Yemenis' perspectives on the war have value and that fears of their rule cannot be overcome via rote rejections of rivals' claims. One way of doing so would be to move swiftly to shore up the final pillar of the UN truce – joint efforts to reopen the main roads connecting Taiz city with the rest of Yemen, which the Huthis have cut off since 2015.

But ameliorative measures will only go so far toward reducing the mistrust among Yemenis. One way to begin addressing this issue is to make UN-led mediation efforts more inclusive. Crisis Group has long advocated for a more inclusive UN-led process in Yemen, one which includes not just established and emerging political elites, but youth, women, civil society and other nongovernmental organisations. Encouragingly, Grundberg, the new envoy, has signalled his commitment to expanded negotiations and has launched a process of consultations. The excitement of the moment notwithstanding, he should follow through on these longer-term projects, while at the same time redoubling efforts to bring in the Huthis.

## **IX. Conclusion**

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The current juncture represents a chance to at least halt the fighting in Yemen. Stopping the shooting will require a leap of faith and understanding. The Huthis, like all parties to the Yemen war, present themselves as victims of circumstance. Contrary to what their rivals say, there is some truth to this tale. The group's core went through several rounds of war between 2004 and 2010 in which the state abducted and tortured its members, while also pummeling civilian areas in the northern highlands. Yet, as the Saada wars proceeded, and later as the present war escalated, the group began resorting to these very same tactics. Today, it presides over a police state of the kind it claimed to stand against. Saudi Arabia similarly has played up Huthi misdeeds, while seeking to whitewash its own brutal actions. The truce notwithstanding, the war is likely to drag on until all parties acknowledge at least some of each other's grievances and accept the necessity of compromise. Until that day, Yemen's catastrophe will keep deepening.

**Sanaa/New York/Brussels, 29 April 2022**

Appendix A: Map of Yemen



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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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 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**April 2022**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2019

### Special Reports and Briefings

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

*A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

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*Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy*, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

*The Gaza Strip and COVID-19: Preparing for the Worst*, Middle East Briefing N°75, 1 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Gaza's New Coronavirus Fears*, Middle East Briefing N°78, 9 September 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Beyond Business as Usual in Israel-Palestine*, Middle East Report N°225, 10 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*The Israeli Government's Old-New Palestine Strategy*, Middle East Briefing N°86, 28 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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*Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

*The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid*, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

*Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East*, Middle East Report N°204, 31 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

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*Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum*, Middle East Report N°209, 25 November 2019 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

*Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East*, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib*, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit*, Middle East Report N°214, 8 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq: Fixing Security in Kirkuk*, Middle East Report N°215, 15 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Exiles in Their Own Country: Dealing with Displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq*, Middle East Briefing N°79, 19 October 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*How Europe Can Help Lebanon Overcome Its Economic Implosion*, Middle East Report N°219, 30 October 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Avoiding Further Polarisation in Lebanon*, Middle East Briefing N°81, 10 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

*Iraq's Tishreen Uprising: From Barricades to Ballot Box*, Middle East Report N°223, 26 July 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Managing Lebanon's Compounding Crises*, Middle East Report N°228, 28 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria: Shoring Up Raqqa's Shaky Recovery*, Middle East Report N°229, 18 November 2021 (also available in Arabic).

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*Decentralisation in Tunisia: Consolidating Democracy without Weakening the State*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°198, 26 March 2019 (only available in French).

*Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°200, 25 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).



*Post-Bouteflika Algeria: Growing Protests, Signs of Repression*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°68, 26 April 2019 (also available in French and Arabic).

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*Stopping the War for Tripoli*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°69, 23 May 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°73, 4 March 2020 (also available in French).

*Algeria: Bringing Hirak in from the Cold?* Middle East and North Africa Report N°217, 27 July 2020 (also available in Arabic and French).

*Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°80, 4 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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*Libya Turns the Page*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°222, 21 May 2021 (also available in Arabic).

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*Saïed's Tunisia: Promoting Dialogue and Fixing the Economy to Ease Tensions*, Middle East and North Africa Report N°232, 6 April 2022 (only available in French).

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*On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three*, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

*Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, Middle East Report N°203, 18 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

*Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment*, Middle East Report N°205, 1 August 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

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*Iran: The Riddle of Raisi*, Middle East Report N°224, 5 August 2021 (also available in Arabic).

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*After al-Bayda, the Beginning of the Endgame for Northern Yemen?*, Middle East Briefing N°84, 14 October 2021 (also available in Arabic).

*The Iran Nuclear Deal at Six: Now or Never*, Middle East Report N°230, 17 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

*Brokering a Ceasefire in Yemen's Economic Conflict*, Middle East Report N°231, 20 January 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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