Breaking the Cycle of Failed Negotiations in Yemen

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May 2017

SUMMARY

- Yemen's conflict is complex and multi-faceted. On the surface, it is a power struggle among the political elite, but it is also driven by long-term frustration with the ruling elite's corruption at the expense and marginalization of the majority of the Yemeni population. These grievances drove the 2011 youth uprising, have helped fuel the ongoing war, and must be addressed to bring lasting peace.

- More than two years of UN-led negotiations to end Yemen's war have failed. This failure is a result of an elite dominated process between opposing sides unwilling to settle their differences and concede power. To end the conflict and create a lasting peace, these talks must include representatives from all aggrieved regions and parties.

- Peace talks should also include negotiations on the division of Yemen into federal regions that establish a fair balance of power and resources and address key regional grievances that have helped fuel conflict.

- Reaching political agreement will take time. It is critical in the interim to work with government institutions at the local level to provide a basic level of governance and stability. Strengthening local government will help defuse some tension, build trust in national political negotiation processes, give local actors a sense of ownership and responsibility, and help restore faith in nonviolent political processes.

INTRODUCTION

The war in Yemen has killed at least 10,000 people and injured 43,000, including 3,200 children. It has displaced millions from their homes and destroyed important civilian infrastructure, including thousands of medical and educational facilities. United Nations agencies recently warned that more than 17 million people—over 60 percent of Yemen's population—are at immediate risk of famine. After more than two years of fighting, the warring parties have achieved no lasting territorial gains or any clear political advantage. The two forces driving this war are those aligned with the Houthis and former President Ali Abdallah Saleh,

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and those forces allied with the government of President Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi. Each side enjoys external support. Hadi’s forces have the military support of a coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and backed by the United States, while the Houthi-Saleh forces are backed by Iran.

To end the stalemate, the Trump administration has suggested that it will increase the U.S. weapons support to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition to defeat the Houthi-Saleh forces, push back against Iran’s influence in Yemen, and restore Hadi’s government to power. Recent media reports indicate that the administration is considering the provision of additional military support to help United Arab Emirates forces lead an effort to retake the key seaport of Hodeida, the main humanitarian aid receiving port functioning in Yemen, from Houthi control.

While many agree the war must end, this paper argues this will only be achievable through a political solution. It is encouraging that U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis recently said while in Saudi Arabia “our main objective is to reach negotiations sponsored by the United Nations to find a political solution as soon as possible,” but this paper argues that the United Nations–led negotiations are flawed and will not succeed unless they are broadened to address additional underlying issues that initially gave rise to the unrest.

BACKGROUND TO THE WAR

In February 2011, Yemeni youth took to the streets to demand political change from President Ali Abdallah Saleh’s corrupt authoritarian rule. Political tension escalated when key military and political leaders from Saleh’s government defected to back the youth uprising. Concerned with the government’s collapse, international actors including Gulf countries and the United States, stepped in to try to resolve the situation. After months of negotiations and shuttle diplomacy between Saleh and opposition parties, an ambitious yet ultimately flawed deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), known as the GCC Initiative, was signed by Saleh and the Islah-led opposition coalition known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) on November 23, 2011. The Initiative outlined a two-year political transition process in which Saleh was to relinquish power to his vice president Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi, and a new power sharing government divided between Saleh’s ruling party the General People’s Congress (GPC) and the JMP was formed. Hadi was then elected President in uncontested elections on February 21, 2012. A formal dialogue process known as the National Dialogue Conference (NDC)

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2 In early February 2017, former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn described the Houthis as one of Iran’s proxy terrorist groups. The Trump administration recently approved major weapons packages to Saudi Arabia previously suspended under the Obama administration because of high civilian casualties already caused by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition air strikes in Yemen. Discussions within the Trump administration include supporting a proposal by the United Arab Emirates, a member of the coalition, to retake the key Red Sea port of Hodeida from the Houthis. See Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, “Trump administration weighs deeper involvement in Yemen war,” The Washington Post, March 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-weighs-deeper-involvement-in-yemen-war/2017/03/26/b81eecd8-0e49-11e7-9d5a-a83e627dc120_story.html?utm_term=d34b88b43513


was to convene and identify the drivers of the 2011 uprising, determine a political roadmap for Yemen, and draft a new constitution for popular approval via a referendum. While each of these steps were put into motion under the GCC Initiative, the National Dialogue led to agreement on a new federal system but disagreement on the specific division of the federal regions. A proposal put forward by a presidentially appointed committee further escalated tensions with the details of its proposed division of Yemen into six federal regions. The Hirak movement for southern independence and the Houthis both rejected the proposal, as they saw it as undermining their own distinct interests and national vision. Other constituencies welcomed the proposal, including the JMP opposition coalition and participants from central and eastern Yemen.

Meanwhile, growing frustration with the pace of the transition and the new government led to fierce competition between the former ruling party (GPC) and the main opposition party (JMP). In September 2014, political tension turned into armed conflict when the Houthis (who had been steadily expanding their territorial control in Hajja and Amran north of Sanaa) joined forces with Saleh (who had been allowed to remain in Yemen and still controlled much of Yemen’s armed forces) and seized control of Sanaa. They put President Hadi and his cabinet under house arrest, which eventually resulted in Hadi’s resignation and

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escape to Aden. The violence escalated when Houthi and Saleh forces pushed into the eastern and central governorates of Baydha, Mareb, and Taiz, and the southern governorates of Aden, Lahj, Abyan and Dhalee.

On March 25, 2015, Hadi was again forced to flee after his palace in Aden was attacked by Saleh-controlled Yemeni air force jets. The next day, with Hadi now in Riyadh, a Saudi Arabia-led military coalition, backed by the United States and the United Kingdom, began a bombing campaign. The stated goal was to stop the Houthi-Saleh expansion, retake Aden, reinstate Hadi, and counter Iran’s influence through its support to the Houthis.

By summer 2015, and with help from the Saudi-led coalition, Hadi and local forces retook the southern governorates of Aden, Abyan, Dhalee, Lahj, and most of the eastern governorate of Mareb. But the Houthi-Saleh coalition remained in control of Sanaa and most parts of northern Yemen, while Taiz, Baydha, and the Serwah district east of Mareb have remained heavily contested. Taiz, whose residents spearheaded the 2011 uprising against Saleh, has been the scene of intense fighting, heavy bombing, and a brutal siege by the Houthis since mid-2015.

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7 Saleh loyalists controlled the armed forces: Republican Guard and Special Forces (the president’s son and one-time purported heir Ahmed), the Central Security Forces (nephew Yahya Mohammad Saleh), the National Security Bureau (nephew Ammar Mohammad Saleh), the Air Force (half-brother Mohammad Saleh al-Ahmar), and the Presidential Guard (his nephew Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh). Most of these forces were major recipients of US military support. For more see Lucas Winter, “Restructuring Yemen’s Military Leadership,” Foreign Military Studies Office, 2012, http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Restructuring-Yemen-Military.pdf. Houthis began expanding beyond their northern stronghold of Sada in 2008, picking up in intensity in 2011. Author’s interviews with tribal leaders and tribesmen from Al-Jawf and Mareb, 2009-2017, reveal that Houthis had Saleh’s supported throughout their expansion. The author has worked in tribal areas of Mareb and Aljawf since 2005.

8 Coalition members include Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sudan, Qatar, Jordan, and Morocco.

Yemen's southwest coast from the Houthis in early 2017.

**A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONFLICT**

It is important to remember that Yemen's conflict is not primarily a fight between two halves of the country, represented by Hadi’s forces on one side and the Houthis-Saleh alliance on the other. Nor is it a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, although these external forces are important and certainly contribute to the conflict. In reality, the war is far more complex and involves three main local dimensions.

**Historical Animus and a Power Struggle among the Northern Elite**

Historically, various groups originating in northern Yemen have ruled over other Yemenis. For more than one thousand years, the northern Zaydi imams, referred to as Sayyids and who trace their legitimacy through the Prophet Mohammed’s bloodline, ruled Yemen. Zaydism is a branch of Shi’a Islam and Zaydis make up about 35 percent of the Yemeni population, mainly found in the northern governorates of Sanaa, Amran, Dhamar, and Saada. Under the imams, Zaydi tribes mostly dominated middle and lower Yemen including Taiz, Baydha, Ibb, and Hodeida. The imams paid northern tribes lavishly from the plunder of wars against regions in central and southern Yemen. As a result of this history, today’s Houthis, whose leadership and senior members are Sayyids, are regarded by many non-Zaydi Yemenis as an unwelcome extension of this Imam rule.

In 1978, Ali Abdallah Saleh became president of what was then known as the Yemen Arab Republic (or North Yemen). When Saleh came to power, he consolidated his control over Yemeni territory through appointing his relatives and members of his Hashid tribe into key positions in the military and government bureaucracy. Tribesmen from Zaydi northern tribes were given greater access to government jobs, enlistment in the military, and government graft. Under Saleh, the country was run through an informal power-sharing arrangement: Saleh controlled the State; General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, a close confidante and distant relative of Saleh’s, controlled the largest share of the army; and Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, leader of the Hashid tribe and founder of the Islah party, used his influence among the tribes and with Saudi Arabia to secure support for the Saleh regime. A famously crafty politician, Saleh

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10 The Northern region includes the governorates of Sanaa, Amran, Dhamar, and Saada.


13 Author interviews with local leaders and activists, and social media monitoring of local activists and leaders from Mareb, Baydha, Taiz, South Yemen between October 2014 and April 2017. In early 2012, Houthi leaders including current leader Abdulmalek Al-Houthi, signed an agreement between “Zaydi sons” in which they claimed that *Aal Albait* (people of the House) which translates into descendants of the Prophet, have a divine right to rule the Islamic *Ommah* (nation) see Sami Ghalib, “Noskhah men alwatheeqah_al-itifaq bain abna’a al-zaydiyah wa fi gomlathom almojahidooh alhothyoon” [Copy of Document_Agreement between “sons of Zaydism” including “Houthis Jihadists”], Sami Ghalib Blog. September 23, 2015, http://samighalib.blogspot.com/2015/09/blog-post_18.html?m=1

strategically pitted tribes and political groups against each other and developed a patronage network of local political and religious leaders across Yemen through co-option.  

The power struggle among the ruling northern elite began in the early 2000’s when Saleh took further steps to consolidate power into his immediate family’s hands. This angered his key allies, Ali Mohsin and Sheikh Abdullah and his sons, who as a result lost influence in the government and suspected Saleh of preparing his son to become the “heir” at their expense. Saleh also sought to weaken the influence and power of Ali Mohsin, a figure described by former U.S. ambassador to Yemen Thomas Krajeski as “Saleh’s iron fist”, by keeping him occupied fighting the Houthis in six wars in Saada from 2004 to 2010. During the 2011 protests, Ali Mohsin officially defected from Saleh’s government along with Sheikh Abdullah’s sons, and backed the uprising’s push to remove Saleh from power. As a result, Ali Mohsin and Sheikh Abdullah’s sons enjoyed tremendous influence in Hadi’s government throughout the political transition process, and today control much of the Saudi Arabia-led coalition’s military support in the fight against Saleh and the Houthis. The Houthis welcomed the alliance with Saleh mostly because it offered them a more clear path to power, but also because it provided the opportunity to avenge the six wars waged against them under Saleh, in which both Ali Mohsin and Sheikh

### Chart 2. Timeline of Modern Yemeni History, 1970-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>July 1978: Ali Abdullah Saleh becomes President</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>May 1990: Yemen unification</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>May 1994: North-South civil war</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2004: Six years of war against Houthis begin</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Hirak formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Joint Members Party coalition formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2011: Yemen's future hinges on its two most powerful men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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16 Abdullah Ben Hussein Al-Ahmar passed away in 2007. His sons remain politically active and influential.

17 For more see Sudarsan Raghavan, “Yemen’s future hinges on its two most powerful men,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/yemens-future-hinges-on-its-two-most-powerful-men/2011/03/29/AFLxOnCC_story.html?utm_term=.27c9787ed9489. Last February, Hadi revealed that Saleh supported the Houthis during the six wars to exhaust Ali Mohsin. This was also confirmed by a senior officer in the First Armored Division, the military unit under Ali Mohsin, who said during the six wars with the Houthis, Saleh ordered military officers loyal to him to withdraw from military basis in the north to make it easy for the Houthis to capture them. See “Alaqeed Zo’ail yakshif fadha’iih Saleh khilal horoob Sa’dah” [Colonel Zo’a’il reveals Saleh’s scandals during the Saada six wars] *Alraï Press*, September 23, 2016, http://www.alraipress.com/news30782.html. Author interviews with tribal leaders and locals in Mareb and Shabwa, 2008-April 2017 also reveals that Saleh aided the Houthis in their fight against local tribes and Islah in Al-Jawf and Mareb beginning in 2008; See also TV interview with Ali Shutaif, prominent sheikh from Aljawf, on Yemen TV, April 18, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mv7mGQ4Beg&feature=youtu.be
Abdullah’s sons were deeply involved.\(^\text{18}\)

Although Hadi is originally from Abyan, in the south of Yemen, he served as Saleh’s vice president from 1994-2012. Western media often depicts the civil war as a struggle between the Hadi government and the Houthis-Saleh alliance, in a manner that implies that the majority of Yemenis back one side or the other. In reality, these opposing sides only represent the politics and divisions within the northern Yemeni elite fighting against one another for power, resources, and control of the country.

\textbf{Marginalization and Domination of Yemeni Shafi’i Areas by the Northern Elite}

A second dimension of the war is the struggle of Yemenis in Shafi’i areas against the northern elite, who are mostly Zaydi. Shafi’i (Sunni) Muslims make up the majority of the Yemeni population, about 65 percent,\(^\text{19}\) and live mainly in the south, middle, west and east of the country.\(^\text{20}\) Yemen’s oil, gas, fertile land, and coastline are located in Shafi’i areas, whereas Zaydi areas are landlocked in the north and resource-poor. Shafi’is have

\(^\text{18}\) Sheikh Abdullah’s sons mobilized tribesmen to fight the Houthis during the six wars. In June 2011, Al-Ahamr’s eldest son, Sadeq (and sheikh of the tribe since his father’s death in 2007), described their involvement as a mistake. See Fuad Al-Alawi, “Al-sheikh Sadeq Al-Ahmar: mosharakat alqaba’il fi alharb dhid alhotheiyyen kan khata’a khata’a” [Sheikh Sadeq Al-Ahmar: Tribes participation in the war against the Houthi was a mistake], \textit{Almasdaronline}, June 18, 2011, http://almasdaronline.com/article/20809


\(^\text{20}\) Melissa Rossi, \textit{What Every American Should Know about the Middle East} (The Penguin Group, December, 2008), 237-256.
historically resented northern rule and felt that their wealth and resources lined the pockets of northern Zaydi elite, while their own areas remain politically marginalized and deprived of basic services. The expansion of Houthi-Saleh forces, whose leadership and supporters are largely northern Zaydis, into the Shafi‘i areas of Baydha, Taiz, and Mareb, exacerbated this resentment while it also revived memories of the brutal wars the Zaydi Imams historically undertook in these areas. While the warring sides use sectarian language as propaganda and the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran has fueled the sectarian narrative, the Zaydi-Shafi‘i divide is mainly geographic and the conflict is driven far more by politics and resources than by religion.21

In response to the Houthi-Saleh incursion, thousands of locals from Baydha, Taiz, and Mareb have picked up arms in resistance. These forces have aligned themselves with Hadi because under his stewardship, the six-region federation plan was put forward, which they support and believe will grant them more local control and end the dominance of the traditional northern elites. Even though local forces and the population in these areas view Hadi as weak and corrupt, they believe it is necessary to back him until the Houthis and Saleh are defeated and the six-region project is implemented. They adamantly do not want a restoration of Hadi’s government to national power without political reforms.22 They also have deep distrust in the old guard, northern elite that are now part of Hadi’s government. For example, many people in Mareb, Baydha and Taiz believe that Ali Mohsin, now Hadi’s Vice President, and Yemen Chief of Staff General Mohammed Magdashi, intentionally withheld their military support to resistance forces against the Houthis, in order to prevent the local forces from feeling empowered and politically independent of the northern elite.23

In Mareb, there are increasing complaints of Ali Mohsin and Magdashi manipulating local appointments in favor of loyalists who come from northern areas at the expense of local candidates.24

The Southern Issue

A third dimension of the conflict is southerners’ intensifying grievances against northern rule. North and South Yemen were separate countries until unification in 1990. The unification arrangement gave the north control over national and local decision-making. Ongoing negotiations to establish a federal system and allow the south some autonomy failed and in 1994 southern leaders announced secession. After a brief civil war, the northern army prevailed and most southern leaders fled the country, while northern leaders and their patronage networks took control of local government and resources. In 2007, a loosely organized political group known as the Southern Movement (Hirak) emerged to address southern grievances through peaceful protest. President Saleh’s security forces responded with violence, the movement’s demands escalated, and by 2009 Hirak’s position evolved into supporting a secessionist movement and has remained so since.25 The current war has dramatically intensified southern grievances and their demands for independence.

When Houthi-Saleh forces marched south
in March 2015, months of brutal fighting led to a high civilian death toll and widespread destruction, reminiscent of the 1994 civil war when Saleh’s forces invaded Aden to prevent a secession attempt. Out of necessity, southern forces have now aligned themselves with Hadi because he is backed by the Saudi-led coalition that is paying local salaries, providing key services, and delivering humanitarian aid. The coalition does not however support southern secession. When the Houthis were pushed out of the south in July 2015, most of the local forces were enlisted into the new military and security forces. Although these forces are technically under the control of Hadi’s government, in reality they operate widely independent of it. For most southern forces, the priority is secession and in their eyes Hadi’s government represents the north. Despite being from Abyan in the south, Hadi has done little to earn southerners’ trust during his presidency. He has continued to build a patronage network for himself that has competed with and sometimes sought to undermine southern leaders. Hadi’s appointment of Ali Mohsin to vice president, a man deeply resented in the south for his leading military role in the 1994 civil war, reinforced the southerners’ distrust of Hadi. His recent decision to dismiss the governor of Aden, who is a prominent Hirak leader, has created further backlash and mass rallies in Aden in support of Hirak. On May 4th, in an official statement of what Hirak called the ‘Aden historical declaration,’ they described

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25 Author interviews with local leaders and activists and monitoring of social media posts by local activists and leaders from South Yemen between March 2014 and April 2017.
27 Author interviews with local leaders and activists and monitoring of social media posts by local activists and leaders from South Yemen between March 2014 and April 2017.
28 Interviews with several southern activists and Hirak leaders, April 2016-January 2017. A southern leader told the author that Hadi’s decisions are guided by his deep belief that only three men can rule Yemen: Saleh, Ali Mohsin and the late Sheikh Abdullah ben Hussein Al-Ahmar.
Hadi’s decision made on the anniversary of the beginning of the 1994 war against the south, as ‘provocative and one that reflects the offensive psychology of the 1994 war partners.’

**FLAWED INTERNATIONALLY-BACKED NEGOTIATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED?**

The international community has been continually involved in political negotiations over Yemen’s future since the 2011 uprising. The United Nations has played a key role and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) endorsed the 2011 GCC Initiative. The UN Secretary General appointed Jamal Benomar as Special Adviser to Yemen, and he worked closely with the GCC, the United States, and western diplomats to pressure Yemeni political actors to accept the GCC deal and oversee the two-year transition process. When the political actors finally agreed to the GCC Initiative in mid-2011, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis took to the streets to protest the terms of what they considered a deeply flawed deal that sidelined their demands for political reform, and kept in place the corrupt leaders they originally rose up against. The GCC Initiative also granted Saleh immunity and preserved his influence over most of the armed forces, which allowed him to disrupt the transition process and then, in alliance with the Houthis, overthrow the government and drag the country into civil war. As a result, many local leaders and activists believe the GCC brokered agreement planted the seeds of today’s civil war. To many Yemeni actors, the GCC process and the NDC that emerged from it were fundamentally flawed because they focused on resolving the conflict between traditional political elites from the northern part of the country and ignored key grievances from other critical actors and groups.

Since the Houthis’ takeover of Sanaa in September 2014, the United Nations, through Benomar and his successor Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, has been trying to mediate a ceasefire and a political settlement to help put an end to the war. There have been three unsuccessful rounds of UN-led negotiations between delegations representing the Houthi-Saleh alliance and Hadi’s government. The last session took place in Kuwait from April to August 2016. In October 2016, the

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30 The key players in the international community in Yemen since 2011: GCC countries, United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and the United Nations.


34 Author interviews with local leaders and activists and monitoring of social media posts by local activists and leaders from Mareb, Bayda, Taiz, South Yemen between October 2014-April 2017


United Nations devised a new roadmap for negotiations that includes the creation of a military and security committee to supervise withdrawal, the handover of weapons in Sanaa, Taiz, and Hodeidah, and an interim political arrangement including appointing a new vice president and the formation of a unity government. But both parties to the Kuwait talks rejected the roadmap, disagreeing mainly over the sequencing of steps. Hadi’s government will not negotiate a political arrangement until Houthis negotiate their withdrawal from the areas they occupy. Houthis will not negotiate their withdrawal from cities until a political arrangement is negotiated with Hadi’s government.

It is also widely believed that neither side is genuinely interested in ending the conflict. According to the most recent UN Security Council experts report on Yemen, the Houthi-Saleh alliance controls Sanaa taxation and finances. They have taken advantage of the conflict to develop a wide range of income streams through smuggling and other illicit activities. For the Houthis, the war is “a luxury they can afford” according to a Yemeni economist. On the other side, Hadi knows that a peace deal might require his removal and removal of the patronage he has built around himself over the past few years.

The key problem in the UN-led mediation as currently structured is that it is again only dealing with the Houthi-Saleh alliance on one side and Hadi’s government on the other. Both sides only represent the interests of northern political elites. The other two critical dimensions of the conflict, namely the demands of Shafi’i areas for more equitable governance and the threat of southern secession, have been neglected.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **The United States should not support the proposed United Arab Emirates-led military campaign to retake the port of Hodeida from the Houthis.** The Trump administration recently approved major sales and delivery of weapons to Saudi Arabia that were previously suspended by the Obama administration due to the high human toll resulting from coalition air strikes in Yemen. Ongoing discussions within the Trump administration include potential support for a proposal by the United Arab Emirates, a member of the coalition, to retake the key Red Sea port of Hodeida from the Houthis. This port is used for the delivery of badly needed humanitarian aid. Aid organizations warn that a disruption to the aid delivery could put many at risk of starvation. Continued military campaigns will not solve the conflict, only a political solution will.

2. **The United States and its allies must use their political capital to strengthen and broaden the United Nations-led negotiations to include other key actors beyond the main warring parties currently represented in the talks.** It was recently announced that the United Nations envoy will initiate a new round of talks scheduled to resume in May 2017. To end the conflict, the UN-led negotiations...
must include all of the main aggrieved parties and negotiate a peace deal beyond the two warring sides; it is important to remember that most of Yemen is currently outside of their control. Representatives from Hirak as well as from Taiz, Mareb, and Baydha must be included. Any peace agreement that does not address their regional grievances will not be accepted and will ultimately fail. The United Nations should reach out to include Aidaroos al-Zubaidi, a prominent Hirak leader recently selected to form a political body representing Hirak, as well as include a representative from the Hadramout Inclusive Council. Hirak may push for secession during the negotiations or may be willing to remain a part of Yemen at least for an interim period, if they feel that the political arrangement will give them genuine governing autonomy.

Hadi’s government must also work to include the voice of local leaders in Mareb, Taiz, and Baydha in his delegation. Leaders like the Nasserite party figure Abdullah Numan in Taiz are well respected by different armed factions in the governorate and would help to secure a more durable buy-in and support of any peace negotiation and interim power-sharing government.

3. Support further negotiations in which all sides participate regarding the division of Yemen into federal regions. In the meanwhile, an interim federal government should be formed through a power-sharing arrangement among all key political parties, including Hadi’s government and its allies, the General People’s Congress, the Houthis, and Hirak. Forces currently allied with Hadi in Mareb, Baydha, Taiz and the South are not fighting on his behalf, but rather against the Houthis and Saleh. These forces will reject a return of Hadi rule without reforms. Hadramout’s local authority and political leaders have already declared it as a separate region. Tension between Hadi and Hirak in the South has also resulted in the rejection of Hadi’s leadership and the expulsion of Hadi and his entire cabinet from Aden. Any central government formed out of an agreement among only the northern elite will not be viewed as legitimate by the majority of the population. Each governorate can be treated as a federal state until agreement on the number of federal regions and their borders is reached.

4. Don’t wait for the formation of a national government to stabilize Yemen. While peace negotiations and political agreements remain ongoing, local governance must be supported. Reaching political agreement will take time. It is critical to help local populations in the interim period create a functioning level of governance and stability. Under the current circumstances, working with

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41 Almasdar Online, “I’laan Aden al-Tareekhi yofawedh al-Zubaidi bi I’laan qiyadah siyasiyah bi’daratoh letamtheel Alganoob” [Aden Historic Declaration authorizes al-Zubaidi to announce political leadership under his stewardship to manage and represent the south], May 4, 2017, http://www.almasdaronline.com/article/90915. Zubaid has called for a political body to represent the south back in September 2016 to help Southerners organize to better participate in current and future political negotiations.

42 Hadramout Inclusive Conference (HIC) is a political movement that represents most political factions including Hirak in Hadramout, the oil-rich and largest governorate in the country. On April 22, the HIC announced Hadramout as an independent federal region in a large conference in which over 3000 Hadrami leaders participated. HIC had been convening meetings and conferences to agree on the future of the governorate for months. See Al-Masdar Online, “Almasdaronline yanshor nas bayan mo’tamar hadramout aljama’a” [Al-Masdar Online publishes text of the final statement of the Hadramout inclusive conference], April 22, 2017, http://almasdaronline.com/article/90606

43 Supporting local governments does not mean starting in a vacuum but rather building on Yemen’s decentralization system that has been in effect since 2001. This system gives wide powers to local authorities but didn’t function because it was hijacked by the corrupt political elite in Sanaa.
local governments is the only viable option to prevent further deterioration and build sustainable peace. Strengthening local government will help defuse some tension, build trust in national political negotiation processes, give local actors a sense of ownership and responsibility, and restore faith in nonviolent political processes.