

YEMEN: THE HUTHIS

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	3
II.	Meet the Huthis.....	7
	A. Explaining Huthi Political and Territorial Gains.....	7
	1. State retrenchment.....	7
	2. Security and justice provision.....	8
	3. Anti-regime narrative.....	8
	4. The enemy of my enemy	9
	5. The Zaydi base.....	10
	6. Coercion, force and intimidation	11
	B. Will the Real Huthis Please Stand Up?	12
III.	Political Implications	16
	A. The Balance of Power in the North	16
	B. The Transition Writ Large	16
IV.	Conclusion	19
APPENDIX		
	Map of Yemen.....	22

Yemen: The Huthis^{1*}

I. Introduction

The Huthis, a Zaydi group in Yemen's north, had limited appeal and influence outside their northern strongholds prior to the 2011 uprising.² With roots in Zaydi revivalism, the movement initially sought to protect religious and cultural traditions from perceived Salafi/Wahabbi encroachment and Western interference in the Muslim world.³ Then, under the leadership of Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi, and galvanised by the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, they shifted from religious/cultural to political activism.⁴ In 2004, a failed attempt to arrest Hussein al-Huthi sparked six rounds of brutal confrontation with the Yemeni government. Hostilities officially ended with a February 2010 ceasefire, but grievances remained.⁵

The conflict centred in Saada governorate, the main Huthi redoubt, and had its roots in the decline of the Hashemite⁶ social stratum following the 1962 revolution against the Zaydi imamate, failed state management of religious pluralism, chronic underdevelopment, susceptibility to regional power struggles and the emergence of new religious actors, including Salafis. In this complex environment, the fighting took on variously and at times simultaneously sectarian, tribal and political overtones and was shaped by the re-

¹ * Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralism de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

² 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 Mohammed, ruled North Yemen under a system known as the imamate until the 1962 revolution. Zaydis represent approximately one-third of Yemen's estimated 25 million citizens, the majority of whom are Shafei, one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Zaydis are based in the northern highlands, with their main strongholds in Saada, Hajja and Dammar governorates as well as the capital, Sanaa. For additional background on Zaydism, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, 27 May 2009.

³ "Wahhabism – itself a controversial term – emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in what would become Saudi Arabia. It is based on a strict interpretation of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence that emphasises the unity of God (*tawhid*) and rejects the Hashemites' claim to power. Salafism is a Sunni movement that seeks to revive 'original' Islam, drawing on the so-called pious ancestors (*[al-]salaf al-salih*). It emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and is characterised in religious matters by a desire to transcend the four traditional Sunni schools of jurisprudence (Shafeism, Hanafism, Hanbalism and Malikism) and politically by a distrust of party politics and a stigmatism of Shiite Islam". Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit., p. 6, fn. 28.

⁴ According to a Huthi NDC member, Ali al-Bukhaiti: "The precursor to the Huthi movement, the Believing Youth, was originally focused on correct religious practice. Hussein Badr al-Din shifted the focus to politics. Hussein argued that Zaydism is a revolutionary ideology that advocates removing an unjust ruler. For him, the main challenge in the Muslim world was not religious differences among Muslims but rather submission to foreign powers, especially the U.S. It was under Hussein that the movement began to use the slogan, 'God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!'. Some of the original founders of the Believing Youth disagreed with Hussein's political focus". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 29 October 2013.

⁵ For an account of the first five rounds of fighting, see Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit. For a detailed account of all six rounds, see Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon*, RAND, 2010.

⁶ Hashemites are descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. The Huthis are a Hashemite family. Not all Yemeni Hashemites are Zaydi, some are Sunni. Unless otherwise specified, in this report the term Hashemite will refer only to its Zaydi members.

gional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁷ Until recently, the Huthis had no clear political agenda and had little sway outside of their strongholds of Saada governorate and the Haraf Sufyan area in northern Amran governorate.

Since the Arab uprisings began, the movement has evolved as rapidly as the political context. In 2011, when the Huthis joined protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh, they formed ties with anti-regime activists throughout the country. Capitalising on the power vacuum left by divided old regime elites, they have expanded their territorial control and worked to broaden their popular appeal, define a political program and claim a place in national decision-making. The movement arguably has emerged from the uprising as the biggest winner.

During the transition, the Huthis have joined the political process without abandoning the revolutionary camp. They participated in the UN-backed National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which earned them domestic and international legitimacy and enabled them to develop a reform agenda.⁸ In the Saada issue working group, one of nine thematic NDC groups, they agreed to principles for resolving the conflict in the north, including the disarmament of all non-state actors.

At the same time, they have rejected on principle the November 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative that granted Saleh immunity from prosecution and established a governing coalition – known as the “consensus government” (*hukumat al-wifaaq*)⁹ – split equally between Saleh’s General People’s Congress (GPC) and the former opposition bloc, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP).¹⁰ Their continued opposition to the consensus government resonates with large parts of the population frustrated by the slow pace of change, entrenched corruption and the lack of security.

While Huthi political representatives participate in the transition, their fighters have retained heavy weapons and significantly expanded territorial control.¹¹ In 2011, they became the de facto governing authority in Saada, appointing a governor, collecting taxes, overseeing the work of the local government and administering justice. By 2012, the short-lived anti-Saleh alliance between Huthis and their historical adversaries – Islah, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars – frayed.¹² Tensions flared sporadically between supporters of both camps in Jawf, Amran, Ibb, Dammar and Sanaa governorates. Violence intensified as the 18 September 2013 deadline for concluding NDC negotiations approached, with all sides trying to skew the conclusions and, more importantly, implementation in their favour.

⁷ The roots of the Saada conflict and the fighting dynamics are detailed in Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit.

⁸ The Huthis comprised 35 of the conference’s 565 delegates.

⁹ The consensus government is a product of a 2011 negotiation between the GPC and JMP. Other stakeholders, including the Huthis, did not participate in this negotiation. Opposition to the consensus government is not limited to the Huthis. In May 2014, in light of deteriorated security and economic conditions, parliamentarians from across the political spectrum called for a cabinet reshuffle. “Yemen MPs demand cabinet reshuffle”, *Yemen Fox*, 1 June 2014.

¹⁰ The JMP is a coalition of five opposition parties: the Sunni Islamist party, Islah; the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP); the Nasserist Popular Unionist Party; al-Haqq party; and the Union of Popular Forces (UPF). Islah is the most powerful and the only one with a strong national base. The YSP was the ruling party of former South Yemen, which unified with the north in 1990. Al-Haqq and the UPF are small, predominantly Zaydi parties. Since the 2011 uprising, relations among member parties have been strained by political competition and differing opinions within the NDC. Originally created in 2002 to coordinate opposition against Saleh’s ruling GPC, the future of the JMP is unclear in the post-uprising landscape.

¹¹ Now the Huthis control large parts of the north including all of Saada governorate and significant parts of Jawf, Hajja, Amran and Sanaa. They also have political strongholds in the capital in the old city and in the Jiraf areas, where their headquarters is located.

¹² Currently Islah, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmar family leadership, all Sunni Muslims, are ideological and political opponents of the Huthis. That said, both Islah and the Ahmar family are internally diverse, with differing perspectives on the Huthi threat. Between 2004 and 2010, the Ahmars were only intermittently involved in fighting through the Hashid tribal confederation, in which they have substantial influence. Islah never entered the six rounds of conflict and was at times critical of the war. Ali Mohsen, the powerful commander of the north-west military region where Saada is located, was charged with prosecuting all six rounds.

Occasional, isolated clashes morphed into widespread conflict in October 2013 when fighting broke out between Huthi and Salafi fighters around Dar al-Hadith, a religious institute in Dammaj, Saada governorate.¹³ The Huthis accused Salafis of recruiting foreigner fighters and preparing for combat; for their part, Salafis claimed unprovoked aggression against peaceful religious students.¹⁴ The quickly spreading conflict consolidated two internally diverse coalitions: the Huthis and aligned tribesmen, many associated with Saleh's GPC, against Salafi fighters, the Ahmar family, and combatants politically aligned with Islah and Ali Mohsen.

By January 2014, battles raged across the north: from the border of Saudi Arabia in Kitaf, Saada;¹⁵ through the Amran, Hajja and Jawf governorates;¹⁶ to the gates of Sanaa in the Arhab region. The Huthis emerged as clear winners. In January, after enduring a punishing blockade on the Dar al-Hadith Institute, Salafis agreed to evacuate their centre and temporarily relocate to Sanaa. Huthis also won the battle for Kitaf, completing their control over Saada governorate.¹⁷ Their gains in Amran were politically most significant. On 3 February, they defeated Ahmar fighters in their home village of Khamir, burning an Ahmar family home, acquiring significant weapons stockpiles and forcing Ahmar fighters to retreat to Sanaa.¹⁸

With the notable exception of the 310th military brigade in Amran, which is politically aligned with Ali Mohsen and supported the anti-Huthi coalition, the state was largely absent. Despite calls from Islah and the Ahmar for the central government to halt the violence, President Hadi avoided a military intervention that almost certainly would have complicated and prolonged the fighting, with at best uncertain results.¹⁹

¹³ In October 2011, Huthis and Salafis clashed in Dammaj. At that time, Hussein al-Ahmar, one of the ten sons of the late Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hussein al-Ahmar, was involved in mediation to end hostilities. As part of the ceasefire agreement, Hussein placed tribal fighters between the two warring factions. Crisis Group interviews, military officer, Hashid sheikh, Sanaa, November 2013; al-Ahmar supporter, Sanaa, January 2014.

¹⁴ Dammaj was the spark for a wider conflict, but tensions were already high in Amran where Huthis had been cautiously expanding their support base southward into Ahmar strongholds through religious preaching and political activities as early as 2010. Huthi supporters claim that, in an effort to prevent Huthi expansion, Hussein al-Ahmar issued a warning to Hashid tribesmen that they could be killed and their property taken for supporting Huthi activities. Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, February 2014. See also "Hussein al-Ahmar urged the elimination of the Huthis and his tribes pledged shedding the blood of anyone who tries to associate with them", al-Masdar online, 5 October 2010. In August 2013, tensions reached new heights when Huthi supporters attacked an Ahmar family home, burning it to the ground. In response, Hussein removed his tribesmen from their buffering positions in Dammaj, opening space for the conflict to reignite. Crisis Group interview, military officer, Sanaa, November 2013; Hashid sheikh, Sanaa, January 2014.

¹⁵ In Kitaf, Huthi fighters clashed with Salafis, including some al-Qaeda affiliates. The Salafis in Dammaj and Kitaf claim to be ideologically opposed to al-Qaeda. However, in Kitaf, a local sheikh familiar with the fighting says that individual al-Qaeda members, with ties to the local area, joined the fight on the side of the Salafis. Crisis Group interview, Kitaf sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014.

¹⁶ In Hajja and Jawf, as well as in Arhab, fighting pitted Huthis against Islah-affiliated tribesmen. In Amran governorate, Ahmar fighters, with help from the Ali Mohsen-aligned 310th army brigade, clashed with Huthi fighters and sympathisers, many of whom were from Amran/Hashid.

¹⁷ According to Huthi supporters, the most important battle in Saada was Kitaf, not Dammaj. "Dammaj was not the Salafis' winning horse. Kitaf was their strongest place and they placed their bet on being able to win [militarily] there. Fighters in Kitaf were heavily armed, much more than Dammaj. Ansar Allah decided to hit the head of the snake in Kitaf so that they could eventually have peace in Dammaj. Once the Salafis lost Kitaf, the group in Dammaj asked for mediation only three days later". Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, April 2014. A civil society activist who visited Kitaf after the fighting verified these claims: "Kitaf was like a military camp. The religious institute there is very isolated with large weapons storage facilities. The Huthis claim that they found large weapons stockpiles and money, as well as documents verifying al-Qaeda activities, including assassination lists. Even if the Huthis are exaggerating their claims, it was clear from our visit that the students in this area were not just studying the Quran". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

¹⁸ In Jawf and Arhab, a stalemate ensued, with Islah-affiliated tribesmen holding the line.

¹⁹ Hadi's supporters claim that he has learned the lessons of the past, namely that the Huthi challenge cannot be resolved militarily. They also point out that the president has gained politically from Huthi advances insofar as they have weakened northern power centres that had limited presidential authority. That said, further fighting that threatened Sanaa would al-

Instead, he focused on completing the NDC, which ended on 21 January 2014, while deploying mediation committees to negotiate local ceasefires. By mid-February, a patchwork of ceasefires – notably in Dammaj, Arhab and Amran – stemmed the violence, albeit with frequent violations.²⁰

In April 2014, the president sent a delegation to Abd-al-Malik to address on-going violence and to discuss implementing NDC outcomes, including disarmament and reintegration of Huthi fighters. The delegation also presented additional requests not covered by the NDC, including that the Huthis form a political party.²¹ Abd-al-Malik's response was generally positive, though there is still no agreement on specifics.²²

But renewed violence, especially in Amran, is threatening to overturn nascent talks. In May, fighting between the Huthis and the 310th brigade, supported by Islah- and Ahmar-aligned tribesmen, killed dozens.²³ Then in June, in a significant escalation, the Yemeni Air Force bombed Huthi positions.²⁴ Negotiators, including the defence minister, succeeded in brokering a new ceasefire agreement on 4 June between the security services and the Huthis in Amran, though combatants are preparing for renewed clashes.²⁵

most certainly revise his calculation. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, presidential adviser, Sanaa, February 2014; JMP member, Sanaa, April 2014. There is also the risk that if the military enters the fray, it could fracture if fragments support one belligerent over others. Crisis Group interview, military adviser, Sanaa, February 2014.

²⁰ In March, when new fighting reached less than 20km outside Sanaa, the military intervened by establishing checkpoints and, reportedly, Hadi sent a message to Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi demanding that he stop Huthi expansion toward the capital. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, Islah member, presidential adviser, Sanaa, April 2014.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, presidential adviser, Huthi representative, individual familiar with negotiations, Sanaa, April 2014.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Looming war in the North as Huthis are hardening their tone", *Yemen Post*, 1 June 2014.

²⁴ "Yemen Violence: Clashes in the North Claim at Least 120 Lives", *Reuters*, 3 June 2014; "Yemeni Airstrike ends ceasefire in flare-up of Huthi rebellion", *Reuters*, 3 June 2014.

²⁵ A delegation of security chiefs and Huthi representatives, with the help of the UN, agreed to a 6-point ceasefire plan on 4 June: 1. An immediate ceasefire will commence mid-day in all conflict areas in Amran; 2. No party will mobilise reinforcements; 3. Neutral military observers will be deployed to the area to oversee the ceasefire and implementation by all sides; 4. The Huthis will withdraw from the central prison in Amran [which they captured during the fighting, releasing hundreds of prisoners] and allow military police to take control; 5. Parties will unblock the main access road between Amran and Sanaa and the military police will take responsibility for security along the road; and 6. The defence minister will oversee a committee – comprised of four top military-security officials, three Huthis, three Islah leaders and a UN representative – charged with implementing the agreement. Crisis Group interview, individual familiar with the negotiations, June 2014.

II. Meet the Huthis

Once a small rebel group, the Huthis are now a movement in transition, gaining new kinds of support and sympathy. It maintains a religious/ideological core that considers Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi its spiritual leader, reveres the teachings of his brother Hussein al-Huthi (killed in combat in 2004) and is animated by anti-Western sentiment. Yet historical circumstance and especially resentment toward Saleh-era power centres have opened new opportunities, allowing the group to dramatically broaden its political and tribal alliances. As the Huthis have expanded their political clout and enhanced their military power, their success has attracted a variety of opportunists and pragmatists, some seeking to shape the movement and others wanting to align with a winner. Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), the term Huthis use to describe themselves, is best conceived as a political umbrella for diverse and even competing currents.

Reasons for the Huthis' dramatic expansion are intensely debated. They claim that they are gaining because of the power of their ideas. Yemenis, they say, are tired of the corruption and abuses of the past and understand that Ansar Allah stands for freedom and justice.²⁶ Opponents tell a very different story, insisting that Huthi gains are primarily a product of force and coercion, backed by Iranian money and military training.²⁷ But the Huthis' post-2011 expansion is more complicated than either of these narratives suggests.

A. *Explaining Huthi Political and Territorial Gains*

1. State retrenchment

The most obvious factor in Huthi territorial gains is the significant weakening of state authority following the 2011 uprising. Never strong and always subject to negotiation with local power brokers, the power of the central government dramatically contracted when the military split between Saleh and Ali Mohsen and has not returned to pre-uprising levels.²⁸ With both sides focused on controlling the capital, the Huthis, along with other non-state actors, filled the void. In Saada, the Huthis consolidated their grip over most of the governorate, including Saada city, which they had not controlled previously. The same occurred, to a lesser extent, in the adjoining governorate of Jawf, where Huthis and Islah-affiliated tribesmen acquired weapons from military bases.²⁹

Under President Hadi, state retrenchment has continued. The GPC-JMP government has focused more on dividing state spoils than on strengthening security or service provision. A prominent Hashid sheikh portrayed Huthi gains as a function of their military might and state weakness: "When the big sharks were fighting, the government became weak and the army and security services were torn apart. During this time, Huthis took land and people by force".³⁰ The relative importance of coercion is debatable, but with elites fragmented and the state eroding, there has been little to stand in the Huthis' way.³¹

²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, female Huthi supporters, Sanaa, November 2013; Ali al-Bukhaiti, Huthi NDC representative, Sanaa, 29 October, 2013; Sheikh Saleh Wajaman, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, 17 February 2014; Hussein al-Izi, Huthi NDC representative, Sanaa, 18 February 2014.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Islah member, Sanaa, October 2013; Hashid sheikh, group of Islah and Salafi affiliates from Saada, Sanaa, November 2013; Hashid sheikh, Sanaa, January 2014; Yemeni academic, political Salafi, Islah members, group of tribesmen from Saada and Haraf Sufyan, Sanaa, February 2014.

²⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°139, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, 4 April 2013.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, military officer, Sanaa, November 2013.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, January 2014.

³¹ According to a GPC-affiliated sheikh: "When the NDC started, the Huthis joined, but continued their activities on the ground to spread their influence. During the same time, Islah and the Ahmars were too busy dividing up the spoils of the state to notice what was happening on the ground in the north". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

2. Security and justice provision

The Huthis also have gained political support because they are providing security and justice in areas long frustrated by the state's inability or unwillingness to do so. A tribesman from Jawf said:

The Huthis have been able to spread in Jawf because of the injustice that exists there. Huthis provide security where none existed before. They work honestly with the people and focus on fulfilling the people's needs, like ending revenge killings. The Huthis also implement the judgements of local courts. In the north of Yemen, the most important thing is to solve problems between people, like revenge killings, and to provide security. These are the two things that people want most and the Huthis are providing it.³²

Opponents charge that Huthi justice is unfair, that the movement is intolerant and attacks and imprisons its enemies.³³ Local and international NGOs have confirmed cases of illegal detention and attacks against opponents.³⁴ Still, in an atmosphere of insecurity and without a state to mete out justice, Huthis have attracted supporters who value the group's ability to provide these basic services.³⁵

3. Anti-regime narrative

The Huthis have assumed the mantle of the revolution and tapped into the widespread frustration with the corruption, favouritism and injustice of the old regime. In the northern highlands, anti-regime sentiment often manifests itself in opposition to the Huthis' rivals, the Ahmars, and, more generally, to the powerful sheikhs and political class who benefited under the Saleh regime.³⁶ In the wake of the uprising, dissatisfaction has continued to mount given the slow pace of change, continuing corruption and deteriorating economic and security situation under the consensus government. A Huthi supporter explained:

Ansar Allah is a Yemeni movement for freedom and dignity. The Yemeni people are against the entire corrupt old regime, not just one person [Saleh]. But thus far the GCC initiative has preserved the same pattern of corruption. The transition has been a time of dividing the spoils between traditional forces [GPC, JMP and their allies].³⁷

The Huthis control much of the north now, but given their repeated clashes with the old regime, their self-professed status as outsiders rings true for many Yemenis: "The Huthis went to the squares and spoke for the oppressed. The traditional parties joined the revolution too, but now they are in the government and corruption has just shifted to their hands. Huthis are not part of this; they are not corrupt".³⁸

Their aggressive anti-regime positions have led to a number of unlikely political alliances, including cooperation with liberal-leaning youth and civil society activists demanding a new government. They also aligned with southern movement activists whose goal is to upend the political system through north-south federalism or even southern independence.³⁹ In the NDC, the two groups formed a coalition, voting to-

³² Crisis Group interview, tribesman from Jawf, Sanaa, February 2014.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, tribesmen from Saada and Haraf Sufyan, Sanaa, February 2014.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, local and international NGOs, Sanaa, February 2014.

³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, tribesmen from Jawf, Huthi supporter from Saada, Sanaa, February 2014.

³⁶ A sheikh explained that with the tribes of Bakil and Hashid feeling oppressed by the traditional elites, "they have grabbed the Huthis as a life raft". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Saleh Wajaman, Sanaa, 14 February 2014.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Huthi tribal supporter, Sanaa, February 2014.

³⁹ The southern movement NDC delegation advocated a two-part, north-south federalism followed by a referendum on southern independence. For more information on the southern movement and their NDC positions, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°114, *Yemen's Southern Question: Avoiding a Breakdown*, 25 September 2013.

gether in the southern and the Saada issue working groups to increase their political weight against the dominant political parties, Islah and the GPC.

4. The enemy of my enemy

Beyond their anti-establishment appeal, the Huthis have benefited from the political backlash against Islah and the Ahmars. Many GPC affiliates, and particularly Saleh supporters, view Islah – which is associated with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood – as their proximate political enemy. They are convinced that Islah is using its position in the consensus government – especially in the interior ministry, which it controls – to stack the security services and bureaucracy with its supporters in order to manipulate future elections and eventually exclude the GPC altogether from power. This fear has pulled, for the time being at least, some GPC members into the Huthi camp.⁴⁰ In certain cases, GPC tribal affiliates have aligned with the Huthis in their battles in the north; others have agreed to remain neutral.⁴¹ Saleh himself is widely suspected of supporting the Huthis politically and even militarily⁴² – although both deny the allegation.⁴³

A similar dynamic has taken place within the Hashid, one of the two main northern tribal confederations.⁴⁴ There, longstanding frustration with the Ahmar family, the predominant sheikhs of Hashid, has worked to the Huthis' advantage. The group has won new allies in Amran governorate (a Hashid stronghold and the home governorate of the Ahmars) or, in other cases, secured neutrality from Hashid sheikhs, stripping the Ahmars of potential defenders.⁴⁵ A prominent sheikh from Bakil – one of the two main tribal confederations in northern Yemen, Hashid being the other one – argued that Ahmar losses stemmed primarily from their own shortcomings: "The Huthis were merely the catalyst".⁴⁶

Islah and the Ahmars have suffered on the regional level as well, with significant consequences for the local balance of power. Saudi Arabia, once supportive of both groups,⁴⁷ grew wary of them in part because

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, sheikh from Amran, GPC member, GPC sheikh, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, GPC sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, GPC member, Hashid sheikh, political Salafi, Sanaa, February 2014; civil society activist, presidential adviser, Islah member, Sanaa, April 2014.

⁴³ According to Hussein al-Izi, a Huthi NDC representative, "there is no relationship between Saleh and Ansar Allah. Saleh's rule has ended. Maybe in the future Ansar Allah can have a relationship with the GPC, but not with Saleh personally – this is impossible". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 18 February 2014. Saleh supporters also deny that the former president is directly supporting the Huthis, although they readily admit that he is benefiting from their gains over Islah and the Ahmars. Crisis Group interview, Saleh supporter, Sanaa, November 2013.

⁴⁴ There are two main tribal confederations in northern Yemen: Hashid and Bakil. Bakil is larger and more decentralised, with a number of sheikhs competing for preeminence. Under the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, who passed away in 2007, Hashid was more hierarchical. Huthi tribal support was concentrated in the Bakil and the smaller Khawlan bin Amr tribal confederations, both of which were widely perceived by Yemenis as less favoured than Hashid under the Saleh regime. Now, capitalising on a backlash against the Ahmars and backing from GPC-affiliated sheikhs, the Huthis are winning deep support in Hashid. For a detailed discussion of the Huthis' relationship with tribal groupings in and around Saada, see "Chapter Two: The Sociocultural Ecology of the Huthi Conflict: Tribalism and Religion" in Barak A. Salmoni, Bryce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen*, op. cit.

⁴⁵ Prior to the fighting, the Huthis made informal non-aggression pacts with sheikhs. In February 2014, Abd-al-Malik assured Amran's residents that the Huthis' fight was with the Ahmars, not with Amran citizens. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Sanaa, February 2014. Then, after the fighting, Abd-al-Malik issued a general amnesty, with the exception of his adversary's leaders, such as Hussein al-Ahmar. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporters, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁴⁷ Saudi Arabia worked closely with the late Sheikh Abdullah Bin Hussein al-Ahmar. Sheikh Abdullah, a liaison with Yemen's tribal confederations, was a founding member of Islah in 1990. Relations between the Ahmars and Saudi Arabia began to sour after Abdullah's passing in 2007 as his ten sons proved unable to maintain the same degree of influence and coherence of leadership within the Hashid confederation. The Kingdom's ties to Islah are complex and primarily guided by friendly relations with individual Islah members. Saudi, Islah and prominent Ahmar family members are ideological opponents of the Huthis and have, at times, worked together to spread mainstream Sunni or even Salafi ideas in traditionally Zaydi areas.

of their participation in the uprising, which the Saudis saw as a potential threat to their rule, and their continued close ties with Qatar, with which the Kingdom has had strained ties.⁴⁸ As a result, the Kingdom has adopted a more ambiguous posture. Following the Saudi-backed overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, Islah and the Ahmars have become acutely aware of their vulnerabilities on both the domestic and regional levels.⁴⁹

Islah's sense of its own weakness seems to have played a role in the Huthis' gains. Officially, Islah has remained outside the fray, while repeatedly calling on the government to halt the fighting.⁵⁰ An activist close to the party suggested that regional dynamics played a role in its choice: "Many individuals in Hashid are Islah, but they did not fight. They did not enter the conflict because they know that the Huthis want a war with Islah and that if this war starts, the Huthis could even get support from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi".⁵¹ While unlikely that the Kingdom or the Emirates, which routinely express fear of Huthi expansion,⁵² would throw their weight behind the group, concern about the possibility indicates Islah's domestic vulnerability in the new regional environment.

So too was it with the Ahmars, who lack Saudi backing. In what was perceived by many Yemenis as an attempt to curry Saudi favour, Hussein al-Ahmar, the Ahmar brother leading the fight against the Huthis, in October 2013 aligned with Salafis in Dammaj, who have a history of support from Saudi individuals and religious institutions.⁵³ Hussein financed and mobilised Salafi fighters throughout Yemen,⁵⁴ yet given lingering Saudi suspicions of the Ahmars, he was unable to win the clear Saudi support. Worse for Hussein, his alliance with Salafis further antagonised already disgruntled Hashid sheikhs who resented his dependence on Salafi fighters as opposed to his tribe.⁵⁵

Saudi Arabia kept its distance from all parties in the recent rounds of fighting, but the effect of its neutrality was not neutral.⁵⁶ Depriving its former allies of support gave the Huthis an advantage.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, prominent Islah member, Islah member, Hashid sheikh, Bakil sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Islah members, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵⁰ An Islah member explains that the party decided not to fight: "The Huthis want to pull Islah into the fight because they want a sectarian war. But Islah does not want a sectarian struggle in Yemen. The tribes affiliated with Islah that are fighting were not pushed to do so by Islah. They are fighting to defend themselves". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomats, May 2014.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, Saleh supporter, Sanaa, November 2013; Yemeni journalist, Sanaa, February 2014. A Saleh supporter described the course of events: "The fighting in Dammaj [in October] started in Hashid several months before when the Huthis destroyed an Ahmar home in Amran. At that point, the Ahmars tried to gain Saudi support for the fighting, but the Saudis refused because of Hamid al-Ahmar's [an Islah member and businessman, one of the ten Ahmar brothers] pro-Qatari and anti-Saudi positions. Then, the Ahmars tried to bring the tribes of Hashid to fight with them, but the tribes were not enthusiastic because of what happened in 2011. In the uprising, the tribes who had supported the Ahmars were promised payment, but many were not paid. In this situation, the Ahmars knew they could not win through the Hashid tribes, so they aligned with the Salafis in Dammaj. The Ahmars thought that if the Salafis entered the fight, then the Saudis would support the Salafis. In this war, the Salafis were sacrificed for the Ahmars' goals". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, November 2013.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Ahmar supporter, military commander, Sanaa, November 2014; Hashid sheikh, prominent Bakil sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni journalist, prominent GPC member, Hashid tribesman supportive of the Ahmars, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵⁶ Saudi Arabia briefly entered the fight against the Huthis in 2009. They were unable to turn the tide against the rebels. In March 2014, Riyadh officially labelled both the Huthis and the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist organisations. "Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group", Reuters, 7 March 2014.

⁵⁷ An Islah member summarised the Saudi position: "The Saudis have always had complicated and sometimes contradictory policies in Yemen. The Saudis are still supporting some tribes in the fight against the Huthis. But, at the same time, they are using the Huthis against the Muslim Brotherhood". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

5. The Zaydi base

The Huthis consider themselves a national movement and claim support throughout Yemen. They indeed have gained some support outside of the far north, but their recent political and territorial expansion has been greatest in the Zaydi highlands.⁵⁸ Ali al-Bukhaiti, a Huthi NDC representative, explained the group's gains within its natural constituency: "It is easy for Ansar Allah to spread in traditionally Zaydi areas because our religious ideas appeal to the population. The culture of Zaydism is longstanding and deep".⁵⁹

With the Huthis no longer outlawed since the uprising, more Hashemites and other Zaydis are now willing to express support or sympathy with the movement.⁶⁰ The most visible evidence is the ubiquitous Huthi slogans and flags that adorn homes and streets in Huthi-dominated parts of Sanaa and the surrounding countryside. This support stems at least as much from cultural affinity and political opportunism as religious dogma. A Zaydi scholar familiar with the movement explained:

The Huthis have support from Hashemites who do not believe in the group's religious ideas, but who sympathise with them because of ethnic affiliation. The movement also enjoys support from a wider subset of Zaydis, who, like the Hashemites, do not believe in all of the ideas or actions of the Huthis. But they sympathise because Huthis are Zaydi and because, as a group, Zaydis feel marginalised by the state and Islah.⁶¹

Yet greater power is a double-edged sword. As the Huthis become stronger, their self-portrayal as defenders of an embattled Zaydi community may lose credibility. Already, some prominent Zaydi scholars and activists are turning against them because of their violence against critics.⁶² The fear that Huthis are moving toward the Twelver Shiite tradition – and by extension toward Iran – is also a domestic political liability. Huthi representatives maintain they are Zaydi, not Twelver,⁶³ but the group's political sympathies with Tehran, its slogans (God is great! Death to America! Death to Israel! Curse Upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!), its celebration of Ashura and allegations of material support from Iran and Hizbollah are raising doubts about their true loyalties.⁶⁴ A Zaydi sheikh sympathetic to the Huthis warns, "if the Huthis turn their back on Zaydism, they will die in Yemen. If they announce that they are Twelver, all of the Zaydis will turn against them. But if they hold to Zaydi ideas, the road will be long for them".⁶⁵

6. Coercion, force and intimidation

Intimidation and coercion have played a role in Huthi expansion. Even though the group claims to be peaceful, resorting to violence only in self-defence,⁶⁶ its members are heavily armed, with a military wing hardened over nearly ten years of conflict. Huthi fighters who hold sway on the ground – most of whom are not yet turned 40 and have grown up knowing only war – are more capable, and comfortable, in battle

⁵⁸ The Huthis enjoy a smattering of support in Shafei/Sunni areas like Taiz and Aden, but their core base remains the Zaydi highlands. Crisis Group interviews, prominent civil servant, Sanaa, November 2013; GPC member, civil society activist, YSP member, Islah member, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 29 October 2014.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, April 2014.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Zaydi scholar, civil society activist, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi NDC representatives, Sanaa, November 2014; Huthi supporter, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶⁴ On Ashura, the tenth day of the Islamic calendar month of Muharram, Shiite Muslims mourn the death of Hussein Bin Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's grandson, at the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Zaydis in Yemen rarely commemorate Ashura, but it is becoming more popular among Huthi followers.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, sheikh from Jawf, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Sheikh Saleh Wajaman, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, 17 February 2014; Ali al-Bukhaiti, Huthi NDC representative, Sanaa, 4 February 2014.

than politics.⁶⁷ While the movement's political representatives were speaking the liberal language of peacemaking and reconciliation in the NDC, its militias, in coordination with tribal allies, were fighting fiercely. Their truculence, apparent to anyone venturing out of Sanaa to the north, is antithetical to the image the group presented in the dialogue.⁶⁸

As the Huthis have advanced, some locals have joined them for fear of retribution, while others have fled their homes and taken refuge in Sanaa. Reports abound of threats, intimidation, imprisonment and even torture.⁶⁹ While difficult to verify, it is clear that brute force and intimidation have played a significant role in Huthi territorial and political gains.

B. *Will the Real Huthis Please Stand Up?*

The Huthis are not a monolith. Their rapid expansion has further diversified the movement,⁷⁰ combining religious, tribal and even leftist currents into an anti-establishment bloc.⁷¹ While the group is unified in its anti-corruption and anti-old regime posture, exactly what it wants and how it will act within Yemen's political system – as a political party, a social movement, an armed militia or some combination thereof – is under negotiation and depends largely on how the current conflict and transition are managed.

Competing currents are especially apparent regarding the group's political agenda. Since the uprising, the movement has developed a political wing that includes a handful of leftist and liberal thinkers⁷² who, in the context of the NDC, helped the movement, for the first time, articulate a national political vision. Its positions are remarkably liberal and often align with those of women, youth and civil society representatives.⁷³ They advocate a civil, rather than religious state, based on freedom of belief, political pluralism and balance of power.⁷⁴ They also support federalism, even accepting the north-south federal proposal of their southern movement allies.

In the Saada working group, Huthis supported a series of steps to address years of conflict, including guarantees for religious freedom, release of political prisoners, development initiatives, national reconcili-

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, civil society activists, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶⁸ Anecdotal evidence of human rights abuses and repression in Huthi-controlled areas is abundant. An independent civil society activist claimed that many Saada residents are afraid to speak out against the Huthis for fear of retribution. The individual confirmed several instances of illegal detention by the Huthis, who run their own prisons. Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, February 2014. Individuals who have visited Huthi-controlled territory confirm that they have banned music, with the exception of their fighting songs, and that there is a clear divide between the openness of Huthi representatives in Sanaa and their militia on the ground. Crisis Group interviews, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, political refugees from Saada associated with Islah and the Salafis, Hashid sheikh, Sanaa, November 2013; political refugees from Saada and Haraf Sufyan, Hashid sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁷⁰ The Huthi movement has never been a monolith. During the six rounds of confrontation with the government, it benefited from layers of tribal support, sympathies of northern citizens who suffered from the government's military campaign, and many Hashemites/Zaydis throughout the country who, originally not associated with the Huthis, came to sympathise with the movement after government persecution for alleged affiliation. Crisis Group interview, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, February 2014. See also Crisis Group Report, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb*, op. cit. Post 2011, the group's tribal and political alliances have expanded further.

⁷¹ Hussein al-Izi, a Huthi NDC representative, explained the group's internal diversity: "The experience of suffering and injustice has made many people sympathetic to Ansar Allah. Also people realise that we represent freedom. Because of this, individuals from different political persuasions have joined our movement: we have a religious, a tribal and a leftist component because we are part of a diverse society". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 18 February 2014.

⁷² Crisis Group interviews, independent observer familiar with the movement, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁷³ Huthis supported the right of women to hold any public office, including the presidency. They also advocated for sharia (Islamic Law) to be a source, but not the only source, of legislation. Their positions contrasted with the stance of their main NDC political opponents, Islah and Rashad, the Salafi party, who advocated against a woman's right to become president and for Islamic Law to be the only source of legislation. Crisis Group interviews, Ali al-Bukhaiti, Huthi NDC representative, Sanaa, 17 February 2014; Ahmed Sharaf al-Din, Huthi NDC representative, Sanaa, 11 November 2013.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

ation steps and the return of all internally displaced persons, among others.⁷⁵ They also agreed that the state should take control of all medium and heavy weapons, but insisted disarmament be implemented simultaneously by all non-state actors.⁷⁶

Accused by critics of wanting to upend the 1962 revolution and return Yemen to a theocracy, the Huthis' official NDC position supports democracy and, in effect, separation of religion and state. The decision to support a civil state was not taken lightly. The movement's conservative component disagreed, but in internal discussions, it did not carry the day.⁷⁷ The late Ahmed Sharaf al-Din, a Huthi NDC representative who was assassinated on his way to the final plenary, said that the most important part of their vision is building a civil state: "If the state is controlled by one party then this party will use religious institutions for its narrow interests. This is what has happened in the past and what we do not want in the future. We want to remove religious speech and the mosques from state control".⁷⁸

Sceptics have reason for concern, as it is far from clear that the issue was fully resolved during the NDC. The Huthis' official political vision is new and untested. On the ground, their actions at times contrast sharply with the pluralistic, tolerant views they advanced in the dialogue. It is unclear how committed their seasoned field commanders are to NDC promises, or how much control the group's political leadership has over them.⁷⁹ Also, recent assassinations of movement representatives like Abd-al-Karim Jadban, in the opening days of the NDC, and Ahmed Sharaf al-Din, in its closing days, may undermine the moderate voices that figured prominently in the NDC debates. Recent military gains could give hardliners a further advantage, shifting the tide of decision making in their favour.

The Huthis' detractors view the group's NDC positions as disingenuous, obscuring their real agenda to rule by force.⁸⁰ According to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, "the outcomes of the dialogue – building a civil state – are dangerous for the Huthis, so they want it to fail. This is why they are fighting in the north now. Their real goal is to have a state that is ruled by the Imam".⁸¹ Mohsen and others are also convinced that the Huthis, in coalition with the southern movement, plans to divide Yemen: "The deal is that the Huthis will rule the north and the southern movement will rule the south".⁸² According to this logic, the Huthis want to shed the south, which is Shafei/Sunni, to skew the north's sectarian ratio in their direction and facilitate their secret Shiite agenda. A Yemeni academic put it bluntly:

⁷⁵ "Final Report for the Second Semester of the Working Groups, for the period July 13-September 18, 2013", Working Group on the Saada Issue, 9 November 2013, on file with Crisis Group.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, February 2014.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 11 November 2013. Similarly, Ali al-Bukhaiti, a Huthi NDC representative, explained: "We understand that the majority of Yemenis are not Zaydi and that religious ideas cannot be forced on them. We are dealing with reality. Elections and a civil state are sufficient for us because we believe that religious groups will have greater freedom under a civil rather than a religious state. Many say that this is not really our goal, but it is". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 29 October 2013.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society activist, Sanaa, February 2014; journalist, Sanaa, April 2014; foreign diplomat, May 2014.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hashid sheikh, military officer, Islah members, political refugees from Saada, Sanaa, November 2014; Zaydi scholar, political refugees from Haraf Sufyan and Saada, Yemeni academic, Islah member, GPC member, political Salafi, Sanaa, February 2014. A Hashid sheikh described his vision of the Huthis' goals: "The Huthis want to rule. This is their goal. Why else would they be fighting in all of these places? The easiest way to the chair [seat of power] in Yemen is through guns, not democracy". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, January 2014. According to sheikh from Haraf Sufyan, "the Huthis want to be like Hizbollah in Lebanon. They want to be stronger than the state. Saada is now the same as south Lebanon; the Huthis control everything there. Now, they want a reason to keep their weapons and to continue to weaken the state". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 7 November 2013.

⁸² Ibid.

The Huthis are an ethnically based [Hashemite], armed movement that strives to bring back the rule they lost after the 1962 revolution. The new element of the movement is the hidden Iranian agenda. They want to bring back the rule of the Hashemites, but not through Zaydi principles. They say they are Zaydi, but their hidden agenda is a Twelver coup.⁸³

Criticism of the Huthis is not limited to one political party or group. Sceptics from across the spectrum – GPC, Islah, independents, etc. – are concerned that the movement is by nature discriminatory against non-Hashemites and hostile to the idea of republican government.⁸⁴ There is also broad concern that the group, regardless of its ideological ambitions, is building a state within a state in the north that is capable of strong-arming the central government.⁸⁵ Still, detractors differ as to the threat it poses. Some view the Huthis as an existential challenge to the state that must be faced with force. For others, the group is a historical anomaly, a relic of the past that temporarily has strengthened but ultimately will lose when faced with political competition.⁸⁶ Today the Islah/Ali Mohsen/Ahmar group is most vocal in their criticism. Many in the GPC share their views, but nevertheless have aligned with the Huthis to weaken their political adversaries.

Huthi commitment to a civil state, pluralism and democracy will be tested over time, and the balance of opinion within the movement on these ideas likely will be influenced by its inclusion, or lack thereof, in the political process. Even as the group debates these ideas, its more immediate demands and ambitions are clearer, if not always well articulated.

First, it is seeking a new government and a share in national decision-making,⁸⁷ though it remains unclear how much power sharing they would consider sufficient or even desirable. Concerned about being sidelined and again attacked by adversaries benefiting from their control of the state apparatus, the Huthis are demanding a role in all government institutions, including the security services;⁸⁸ they consider the current government a failed array of old regime forces incapable of implementing NDC agreements.⁸⁹ Their priority appears to be changing the prime minister, along with an unspecified number of ministers, rather than, for instance, only reshuffling cabinet portfolios.⁹⁰ While they are determined to at-

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Islah member, Sanaa, October 2014; Saleh supporters, Islah members, Salafis, Sanaa, November 2014; GPC member, Islah member, YSP member, civil society activist, prominent journalist, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ According to Abdulkarim al-Eyrani, a presidential adviser and GPC member, “the Huthis are not really reinventing themselves. They are living with the legacy of the past [the Hashemites’ privileged position under the imamate] and only trying to coexist in the present. Their current politics is still too much guided by a past that is not compatible with modern Yemen”. Crisis Group interview, 14 April 2014.

⁸⁷ According to Ali Saif Hassan, an independent analyst, “the Huthis are ready to be principle political players. They do not want to control everything, but they do want to be a dominant power centre”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 30 October 2013.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi NDC representatives, Sanaa, November 2014; Huthi supporters, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁸⁹ Prior to the conclusion of the NDC in January 2014, the Huthis were calling for a complete change of government, with a new cabinet that included all national forces participating in the dialogue. They claim to accept all NDC outcomes with two exceptions: the six-part federal division, which they claim was not part of the NDC because it was produced by a separate presidentially appointed committee that did not, according to them, follow the guidance of the NDC working groups when defining the regions; and the “guarantees document” – which, inter alia, specified the executive institutions responsible for implementing NDC outcomes. Specifically, the Huthis object to extending the mandate of institutions like the parliament and the consensus government, which they view as failed and unrepresentative. Crisis Group interviews, Huthi supporters, Sanaa, February 2014. There is some dispute over whether the Huthis accepted the guarantees document or not. Diplomats familiar with the NDC negotiations as well as GPC and Islah representatives say that Ansar Allah representative Ahmed Sharaf al-Din had agreed to the document and was going to sign it the morning that he was killed. Huthi representatives deny this claim. Crisis Group interviews, GPC, Islah and Huthi representatives, Sanaa, February 2014; foreign diplomat, May 2014.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hussein al-Izi, Sanaa, 18 February 2014. Al-Izi explained that Ansar Allah would prefer a government that includes all national political forces, but at a minimum, the prime minister must change and a government capable of implementing dialogue outcomes must be appointed. Huthi representatives claim that changing the government is a re-

tenuate the hold of Islah and the GPC, it is less clear under what conditions they would accept cabinet portfolios, a move that would render them accountable for government performance.

Secondly, the Huthi movement seems determined to carve out a local sphere of influence that is economically and politically viable. The fighting in the far north is, in no small part, related to political control and influence over the future federal unit of Azal, which includes Saada, Amran, Sanaa and Dammar governorates. In this region, the Huthis have spread militarily and they are insisting on the right to propagate their religious views and to pursue peaceful political activities,⁹¹ although it is not clear that they would guarantee the same privilege to others.⁹² One of the impediments to a sustainable ceasefire in Amran, for example, has been the Huthi demand to hold political rallies and to disseminate their ideas, including displaying their slogans; Ahmar supporters have refused.⁹³ Huthis are also asking for the replacement of controversial local military and political figures, such as the 310th brigade commander and the Amran governor.⁹⁴

At the same time, they are dissatisfied with the current division of federal boundaries and are pushing, both politically and militarily, to revise them. They accept federalism on principle, but reject the six-part federal scheme on the grounds that it is not based on proper standards.⁹⁵ As a result, they say, it fails to resolve the southern issue – by splitting the south into two regions – and divides the country between haves and have-nots, both of which will ultimately harm national identity.⁹⁶ Perhaps more to the point, the Azal region – in which their northern strongholds are included – has no outlet to the sea, little water, few natural resources and a large population. Not surprisingly, the Huthis argue that the governorates of Hajja, which has a port, and Jawf, which has natural resources, are more culturally and geographically contiguous with Saada – and thus should be included in the Azal region – rather than the populous and landlocked governorate of Dammar to the capital's south.⁹⁷

quirement of the NDC guarantees document, but the document's language leaves much room for interpretation. According to the document, "The President of the Republic exercises his constitutional powers to achieve change in the government by ensuring competence, integrity and national partnership, as well as other executive agencies at the central level and the governorates to ensure national partnership and efficiency". "Guarantees for the Implementation of the outcomes of the comprehensive National Dialogue Conference", on file with Crisis Group.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, independent politician familiar with negotiations, Huthi representative, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁹² Critics claim that the Huthis do not provide the same allowances for political opponents in Saada governorate. There, they say, dissent is not tolerated and groups cannot organise anti-Huthi political rallies. Crisis Group interviews, Islah and Salafi affiliates from Saada, Sanaa, November 2013; tribesmen from Saada and Haraf Sufyan, political Salafi, civil society activists, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi representative, Ahmar supporters, individual familiar with negotiations, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Huthi NDC representatives and supporters, Sanaa, February 2014.

⁹⁵ Hussein al-Izi explained, "Ansar Allah disagrees with the method used to determine the six regions. First, the presidentially appointed regions committee did not adequately examine all of the possible options outlined by the dialogue: two parts, six parts, and other options in-between. Second, the committee did not dedicate the proper time to studying options. Third, the geographic divisions were determined by political and sectarian exigencies. They neglected, for example, economic and development criteria. The results will harm Yemeni national identity. As such, Ansar Allah is asking to revisit the issue". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 18 February 2014.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Huthi supporter, Sanaa, February 2014.

III. Political Implications

A. *The Balance of Power in the North*

It is difficult to overstate the shift in the balance of power in the north. The once powerful Ahmar family has lost significant authority within Hashid, their tribal base. As a tribal grouping, Hashid too has lost political clout; it is now relatively decentralised, in effect leaderless. Islah and Ali Mohsen have lost political ground as well, although to a lesser extent. Tactically standing aside, they allowed the Ahmars to absorb the brunt of the military losses, but in relative terms vis-a-vis the Huthis, they too are weaker today than they were a year ago. The Salafis of Dammaj and Kitaf are also vulnerable, as their ability to proselytise has been curtailed under the Huthis.

By contrast, Saleh and his allies in the GPC, at least for now, are gaining. Their biggest rivals – the Ahmars, Islah and Ali Mohsen – have been undermined. Also, Saleh benefits from the chaos and the government's inability to halt violence as citizens, to an increasing extent, appreciate the relative stability during his rule. In an indication of the reactionary spirit, pictures of Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Saleh, often beside Egyptian General Abdelfattah al-Sisi, have become common in the capital.

Yet Huthi gains are as fragile as they are significant. Having scored a series of victories, they are in some ways now more vulnerable than before. The Huthi conquest of parts of Amran, the most significant territorial gain outside their traditional strongholds, was relatively uncontested and even welcomed by a wide variety of Ahmar adversaries. But today the Huthis are brushing up against redlines, the crossing of which almost certainly will turn neutral parties or even supporters against them. In particular, if they push on to the capital they will face a united front of Hadi, Ali Mohsen, Islah and even Saleh's GPC, who would coalesce around the common threat. They also would lose tacit support among liberal-leaning youth, women and civil society activists, many of whom have cheered their gains against the old regime forces, especially the Ahmars.⁹⁸

Recent political and military gains also expose the group to increased risk of miscalculation. Huthi field commanders and supporters, emboldened by recent victories, may mistake achievements, resulting in no small part from shared opposition to common adversaries, for genuine popular support, prompting them to expand further.⁹⁹ This may be happening in Amran where Huthi advances toward the provincial capital, Amran city, have been met with stiff resistance, particularly from the 310th army brigade and Ahmar- and Islah-affiliated tribesmen. Also requiring a delicate balance will be maintaining influence in areas recently conquered. In Amran, as opposed to Saada, the Huthi support base is weaker; their control is largely dependent on non-aggression pacts and temporary alliances with sheikhs. The Huthis must tread lightly lest they face a local backlash.

B. *The Transition Writ Large*

With President Hadi pinched between the state's two traditional power centres – the Saleh/GPC and the Ali Mohsen/Islah/Ahmar camps – Huthi gains could provide him a greater margin of manoeuvre in advancing the country's faltering transition.¹⁰⁰ With Saleh's camp weakened and Huthi gains constraining

⁹⁸ According to Abd-al-Ghani al-Eryani, a civil society activist, "what the Huthis have done thus far is good on a number of levels. It is weakening the Ahmars. It has also weakened Hashid. The fighting is also exposing the Huthis as a potential threat. If they continue to expand toward Sanaa, Yemenis will turn against them". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 8 February 2014.

⁹⁹ Abd-al-Ghani al-Eryani explains, "The Huthis may misinterpret their expansion for genuine grassroots support. If they do, this will be their Achilles heel". Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 30 April 2014.

¹⁰⁰ In the first two years of his tenure, Hadi moved to curtail Saleh's authority, leaving him somewhat dependent on the former leader's rivals. Hadi then focused on attenuating the authority of those rivals, for instance by removing Ali Mohsen from the military and appointing him to a much less influential position of military-security presidential adviser in April 2013. For

the rival Ali Mohsen/Islah/Ahmar coalition, the president theoretically has greater political space to include stakeholders outside the GPC-JMP circle.¹⁰¹ Hadi is also seen to have a popular mandate to confront the Huthis themselves, particularly over their heavy weapons, which, following their recent victories, worry an increasingly broad, national constituency.¹⁰²

But the implications of Huthi gains are by no means entirely positive for Hadi and the transition. Fighting has widened the gap between the rhetoric of national reform in the capital and the reality of dwindling state authority on the ground. With confidence in the transition eroding, the allure of violent confrontation to achieve political ends is increasing. Broken ceasefires and heightened belligerence are compounding grievances and multiplying vendettas, complicating the fleshing out and implementation of the NDC conclusions.

Renewed, widespread violence could significantly stall or undermine nascent agreements, as will a continuation of the status quo, albeit at a slower pace. At present, the conflict appears to be settling into a vicious cycle of punctuated violence followed by periods of fragile peace, in which combatants plan for new confrontation in a slow war of attrition. The Huthis have been emboldened by recent victories and may expand yet further in Amran, Sanaa, Hajja and Jawf – actions that will prompt renewed resistance from weakened, but not defeated foes. Their opponents, on high alert, are urging state intervention to roll back Huthi gains; they may be tempted to reignite the fighting in order to pull the state into the conflict. Unchecked escalation could prompt large parts of the army to choose sides, imperilling national institutions. Already this is happening in Amran, where fighting has drawn in the Air Force, and threatens to pull Hadi and the military writ large into the fray.

Further government military intervention almost certainly would complicate and expand the conflict, an outcome Hadi, and the country, can ill-afford. In April 2014, the military launched a campaign in the south against an emboldened al-Qaeda (AQ), provoking retaliatory attacks in the capital and on oil and electricity infrastructure. The fight against AQ is stoking sectarianism and raising tensions in the north. It gives the Huthis another justification for keeping their weapons – self-defence¹⁰³ – while their adversaries argue that if the state sees fit to fight AQ, it should do the same with the Huthis, whom they portray as a terrorist militia.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the state is on the verge of fiscal collapse and may be unable to pay salaries within months in the absence of direct budgetary support or an unpopular decision to lift expensive diesel subsidies.¹⁰⁵ The combination of renewed fighting in the north, a continued campaign against AQ and a fiscal crisis may be more than the government can bear.

Events in the north are also tied to combustible political dynamics in the south. A significant portion of the southern population remains committed to independence. This group, which refused participation in the NDC, is waiting for an opportunity to advance its agenda. In the absence of international or regional support, and given deep internal fragmentation among separatist leaders, independence does not appear to be in the offing.¹⁰⁶ But significant fighting in the north that draws in the army could prompt a reassessment, increasing the chances of a more aggressive separatist bid. At a minimum, some southern activists

more on the political power balance during the first year of transition, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°125, *Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition*, 3 July 2012 and Crisis Group Report, *Yemen's Military-Security Reform*, op. cit.

¹⁰¹ Already, Hadi has replaced an Islahi interior minister in February 2014 with an Islahi alternative that is seemingly less controversial and more capable than his predecessor. The president has yet to appoint representatives of other political forces, including the Huthis or the southern movement.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, Bakil sheikh, GPC members, Yemeni academic, prominent journalist, prominent GPC member, presidential adviser, civil society activists, YSP member, Zaydi scholar, Sanaa, February 2014; prominent GPC member, Zaydi scholar, YSP member, presidential adviser, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, JMP member, presidential adviser, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, independent Yemeni analyst, May 2014.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹⁰⁶ For background information on the southern movement, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°114, *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, 20 October 2011 and Crisis Group Report, *Yemen's Southern Question*, op. cit.

hope that conflict in the north will undermine implementation of the six-part federalism scheme, enabling them to replace the current two-part southern division with a unitary southern state.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, southern movement leader, March 2014. Under the proposed six-region federal model, former South Yemen is divided into two parts: one in the east that includes the current governorates of Hadramout, Mahra, Shebwa and Socotra, and one in the west that includes Aden, Dalia, Lahj and Abyan governorates.

IV. Conclusion

The conclusion of the NDC notwithstanding, the path to a sustainable peace, for the north as for the entire country, remains unclear. The roadmap produced by the dialogue lacks clear timelines as well as implementation and oversight mechanisms. Equally important, the dialogue's results are quite general, enabling stakeholders to interpret them in different ways or, at the very least, to prioritise different aspects. Today, arguably the biggest challenge in the north is cementing the ceasefires and transforming a military confrontation into a political negotiation to solidify a peace plan based on NDC principles. Both sides claim to want to do so, but have sharply contrasting visions on how to achieve this.

As skirmishes threaten to escalate, the immediate priority is a general ceasefire. The president should consider leading negotiations to build upon and supplement fragile local agreements. Efforts thus far have focused on specific locations and local belligerents, a necessary but insufficient starting point, as the various fronts are both discrete and related. To be effective, comprehensive ceasefire negotiations would need to include senior representatives of five key stakeholders: the Huthis, the GPC, Islah, the Ahmars, Ali Mohsen and Salafis. None has complete control over their tribal/local allies, but each has significant influence and together they could prevent another bout of major violence. Priority would also be required to implement the local ceasefire in Amran as well as secure an agreement that the capital is off-limits for violent confrontation and that demobilisation should begin there.

Negotiating a general ceasefire will not be easy; securing and implementing a peace agreement will be more difficult still. Any durable peace would have to be based on NDC principles and address the core demands of belligerents. The Huthis view power sharing as a prerequisite for moving forward with other steps, such as disarmament.¹⁰⁸ They do not trust the current government or security services, in which their adversaries, particularly Islah and Ali Mohsen, play substantial roles. Accordingly they demand a new government, national-level power sharing, simultaneous disarmament of all non-state actors and specific changes to local government and security services, especially in Amran. In addition, they insist on securing the right to peacefully spread their religious ideas and engage in political activities, which they say are still proscribed in disputed areas like Amran.

For their part, the Ahmars, Islah and Ali Mohsen have no confidence that the Huthis will honour the commitment they made during the NDC to disarm. These stakeholders insist they immediately lay down heavy weapons and form a political party – an outcome not specified in the NDC – as an indication they are committed to electoral competition.¹⁰⁹ Increasingly, other stakeholders, including many GPC members, independents and seemingly President Hadi, are making the same demand.¹¹⁰

A compromise that secures each camp's core interests is possible. At base, the Huthis would agree to a phased disarmament plan, beginning with heavy weapons, and form a political party in return for steps by the state to improve the neutrality and inclusiveness of its institutions, including the military-security apparatus. The agreement would also involve a power-sharing agreement at both national and local levels until new elections can be held.

At the national level, the Huthis could be brought into the consensus government. To facilitate this adjustment, the GPC and JMP – even as each maintains the same number of ministerial portfolios as its rival, as they do now – could relinquish an equal number of portfolios to open positions for the Huthis

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Huthi representative, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Islah members, Sanaa, November 2013; Ahmar supporter, Sanaa, January 2014; Islah members, Sanaa, February and April 2014.

¹¹⁰ The various parties make slightly different demands of the Huthis and are prepared to offer the group somewhat different rewards in return, but all agree on the basic principle that they must relinquish heavy weapons and agree to form a political party. Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni academic, civil society activist, independent journalist, presidential adviser, prominent GPC sheikh, Sanaa, February 2014; prominent GPC member, Sanaa, April 2014.

and any other necessary groups. All new appointments could be based on professional qualifications, in addition to political affiliation.

Equally important is power sharing at the sub-national level in order to ensure Huthis that local administrations are not biased against them. For example, the Amran governor and the 310th brigade commander, affiliated with the anti-Huthi bloc, are particularly controversial. Appointing less contentious figures might ease tensions in the area. Other positions in local government and the security services, for example in Saada, might also be negotiated as needed, with efforts to ensure basic acceptance from all sides.

A phased disarmament plan would likely need to accompany any power-sharing agreement. It would apply to all non-state actors simultaneously and not target any particular group; in addition to the Huthis, others who possess heavy and medium weaponry – including the Ahmars, other tribal sheikhs, and the Salehs – would be required to relinquish it, in accordance with NDC outcomes. Disarmament might start with heavy weapons, not only because they are so dangerous and fewer groups have them, but because that would signal to the Huthis' adversaries that the movement is prepared to gradually reduce its military advantage in the interest of a political solution.¹¹¹ While what constitutes a tank is clear – thus making it a logical candidate for starting the disarmament – the same cannot be said of other heavy weapons, the definition and sequencing of which would have to be clearly specified. This lengthy process would require an agreement on local and possibly external oversight, through the UN or a trusted regional broker like Jordan, and enforcement mechanisms.

Measures also would be needed to protect freedom of religious belief and practice as well as the right to engage in peaceful political activities. As a first step, the Ahmars, Islah, Salafis and Ali Mohsen might publicly acknowledge the Huthis' right to propagate their religious views and pursue peaceful political activities. Simultaneously, the Huthis would be expected to do the same regarding Islah and Salafis. As a further indication of their commitment to the political process, the Huthis might form a party to compete in upcoming elections. Both camps could significantly lower tensions by halting stigmatisation of their rivals in their media outlets and affiliated mosques.

This would be a complex and multi-layered negotiation that should proceed in phases. In April 2014, President Hadi started the process by initiating direct talks with Abd-al-Malik al-Huthi over NDC implementation writ large. According to politicians familiar with the talks, Yemeni negotiators, together with a representative of UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar, reportedly presented Abd-al-Malik with four requests: refrain from militia activity; register as a political party; relinquish heavy weapons first (with a focus on tanks) and then medium weapons; and explore how to implement Saada NDC working group outcomes, including the complex issue of reintegrating Huthi fighters, through a special committee.¹¹² Abd-al-Malik responded favourably, while expressing concern regarding a range of issues, including the lack of steps taken thus far to implement Saada working group agreements such as development projects and political inclusion in the government, among others.¹¹³ While there seems to be agreement on basic principles, details regarding every aspect of the process, including the basic timeline and sequencing, are yet to be addressed.

Strengthening and expanding the political track will require close follow-up, specifically by Hadi and Benomar, and clear support from countries assisting Yemen's transition agreement. The Huthis must also do their part by first nominating representatives to the follow-up committee, which they have failed to do thus far, and by articulating specific power-sharing demands and implementation proposals. Still the current formula has a number of potential shortcomings that they will need to address. First, it is not clear

¹¹¹ While other non-state actors are well armed, the Huthis possess greater stockpiles of heavy armaments, especially tanks. Crisis Group interview, foreign military expert, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, April 2014. During discussions, the Huthis agreed to participate in a committee comprised of five negotiators from the president's side, a representative of the UN and five Huthi representatives. As of this writing, the Huthis have not nominated their representatives. Crisis Group interviews, foreign diplomats, June 2014.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, foreign diplomat, May 2014.

that discussions will address the critical issue of national and local power sharing, and especially of an acceptable consensus government. Without basic agreement on political inclusion, all sides are likely to adhere to maximalist positions, enhance their military readiness and refuse to relinquish weapons.

Secondly, not all relevant stakeholders are part of current negotiations. Talks at this stage are primarily between the president and the Huthis, ostensibly because the Huthis and the state have primary responsibility for implementing Saada working group outcomes,¹¹⁴ and also because the Huthis have a disproportionate share of the heavy weapons.¹¹⁵ As the talks progress, it will be necessary to include a greater variety of actors. The GPC, Islah, Salafis, Ali Mohsen and the Ahmars are also important stakeholders, capable of either advancing or undermining any deal. The same can be said of external actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, who would need to be brought into the discussion, at least informally.

Recent negotiations with Abd-al-Malik are a positive first step, but only that. Violence in the north has slowed for now, but for key belligerents the fight is far from over. Both sides profess commitment to peaceful coexistence while preparing for renewed hostilities. The time has come when they must choose between them.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, individual familiar with the talks, Sanaa, April 2014.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, May 2014.

