

# Building a New Yemen

*Recovery, Transition and the  
International Community*

Edited by Amat Al Alim Alsoswa & Noel Brehony



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## NOTES ON TRANSLITERATION

We have used the simplest method of transliterating Arabic into English. The only symbol used is representing 'ayn when it appears in the middle of words. Whilst trying to be as consistent as possible we have retained in references and quotations the transliterations used by the original authors.



## INTRODUCTION

Writing and editing a book about post-conflict Yemen in early 2021, as the war continues, may seem a futile endeavor. Six years of conflict have damaged or destroyed Yemen's political, economic, and even social infrastructure. The cost in lives (possibly more than 230,000) and of war damage (\$29 billion) is staggering, as is the number of men, women, and children who still live on the brink of famine (up to 16.2 million) six years into the world's worst humanitarian disaster. And these figures do not even reflect COVID-19's acute impact on Yemen. It raced through Yemeni society, lethal yet unremarkable, as overwhelmed public health officials and disinterested rulers lacked the means to measure its spread or disentangle it from the malnutrition and myriad other communicable diseases that have made death so common.

Though this damage far outpaces any grievances at the root of the current violence, the conflict's Yemeni and non-Yemeni participants say they want the war to end while making clear that they will not compromise to end it. Given this impasse, the editors and authors can only outline the problems faced by, and suggest policy fixes for, Yemen's post-war regime (or, just as likely, regimes), while hoping that exhausted domestic parties, regional neighbors wary of Yemen's large population and history of instability, and international concerns over al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) reemergence convince all involved that it is better to build a new Yemen than continue destroying the current one.

To focus their contributions, the authors graciously accepted three key requests: First, to be future-oriented without indulging in too much blue-sky thinking, while also having regard for Yemen's past without being imprisoned by it. No easy feat! In looking forward toward the problems that future regime(s) will address, they were asked to take account of current realities and to base their suggestions on what has and has not worked in Yemen in recent decades. Such a balancing act is tricky but essential for new thinking on post-conflict reconstruction. The occasional comparative perspective, as expanded in Firebrace and Eshaq's discussion and "futures thinking," and their knowledge of post-conflict recovery in Africa, was also welcome (Chapter 10).

Second, the authors were asked to write what they know. This volume is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the post-war situation, and by focusing on their areas of expertise, this collection of authors successfully detail key political, social, and economic concerns in focused, intelligent interventions. The first few chapters examine the political context with a special focus on the likely future

structure of the state, including the role of women, and security issues and the remaining focus on the most significant sectors of Yemen's political economy.

Third, the editors wanted to assist the authors in avoiding the reproduction of prevailing conflict narratives so succinctly laid out by Laurent Bonnefoy in Chapter 1. The story of Yemen's conflict is not as straightforward as ratified by international powers in UN Security Council Resolution 2216, in which a Saudi-led coalition labors to uphold international law, restore an internationally recognized government, and wrest control of the country away from Iran-backed rebels. Nor is it one of unparalleled external aggression on Yemen's people, with the Saudis almost solely responsible for the country's grave humanitarian crisis. Adherence to these narratives has only clouded past interventions by policymakers and international organizations and would be sure to distort any fresh political analyses and resulting policy prescriptions.

For readers, however, the persistence of these narratives does pose a challenge: Is there a reasonable overview of Yemen's recent past and present political, economic, and social circumstances on which we can base, for the purpose of conversation, our future thinking? Mindful of our own fallibility, we will attempt to sketch such an overview in what follows.

### *War and Politics, Past and Present*

Yemen has a long history, and it is no stranger to prosperity, on the one hand, and chaos, division, and famine, on the other. The Greeks and Romans knew it as *Arabia Felix* ("Happy Arabia"), and in medieval times, particularly under the Rasulids (1229 to 1454 C.E.), it was renowned for its wealth and cultural achievements.

The rise of the first Zaydi imamate in the tenth century established a loose pattern for present-day Yemen—an expansion-minded political/religious elite in the northwest, and fragmented polities in the south and east—through (at least) the founding of the Yemen Arab Republic in 1962. For centuries, Zaydi imams stitched together alliances among powerful but fractious and mostly Zaydi northern tribes to rule the northwest but were usually contained by powerful regimes based in the mainly Sunni-Shafi'i Lower Yemen, as outlined by Stephen Day in Chapter 2. Following the Ottoman occupation in the sixteenth century, the Qasimi Imams for a few decades were able to expand into Lower Yemen and the south. After the British arrived in Aden in 1839, they extended their influence into what is now south Yemen, signing protection agreements with the sultanates, emirates, and sheikdoms that had cast off rule by the Imam a century before.

The British and the Ottomans agreed to a border dividing north and south Yemen in 1905, without reference to the views of the Imam. The overthrow of the imamate in 1962 sparked an eight-year civil war that, like the current war, involved both Yemeni combatants and regional powers. Yemen recovered quickly, benefiting from more favorable economic circumstances than exist today: Yemen's population, now at thirty million, numbered only six million in 1970.

In the midst of the war, north Yemen provided a base that enabled revolutionaries to fight the British in the south and set up what became the Marxist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1967. Civil war in the north ended in a negotiated solution, but government was unstable until the emergence of the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh in 1978. Successive governments in both the YAR and the PDRY sought to unify Yemen, but each wanted to achieve unity on its own terms (Brehony 2011). The two Yemens were finally brought together in 1990 after internecine conflict in 1986, and the Soviet Union's patronage-sapping collapse in 1989 weakened the south. Flaws in the unity agreement led to a civil war in 1994 that saw the imposition of Saleh's rule over the whole country; in the 2000s, Saleh's marginalization of southern political and economic aspirations precipitated the resurgence of a southern nationalism now manifest in the separatist policies of the Southern Transition Council (STC).

Despite his recent death, the effects of Saleh's thirty-three-year regime remain. He—as had the Imams—built his political rule with the support of the major tribal confederations (Hashid and Bakil) of Upper Yemen whilst placing his own relatives and personal supporters in key positions in the military and national security bureaucracies. A boost in state revenues from oil exports after 1990, a major benefit of uniting with the relatively resource-rich south, sustained inclusive patronage networks which drew in politicians, military officers, tribal leaders, and businessmen; opponents of Saleh were excluded or marginalized. Saleh's political party, the General People's Congress (GPC), proved an effective vehicle for mobilizing voters to win presidential and parliamentary elections.

To understand Saleh's longevity, one can reference the careers of figures like Sheikh Abdullah Hussein al-Ahmar, the head of the Hashid Tribal Confederation until his death in 2007. He shared Saleh's interest in maintaining patronage networks that benefited a privileged elite (Sarah Phillips, 2011). Sheikh Abdullah also headed the Yemeni Congregation for Reform—Islah—a conservative political party founded in 1990 which brought into a coalition Sheikh Abdullah's tribal elite, emerging business leaders, the Yemeni version of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even some Salafis.

While such a potent emerging coalition may have unnerved other authoritarian leaders, for Saleh, Islah, and Sheikh Abdullah it presented an opportunity. Within the relatively open, parliamentary system that governed Yemen post-unification, he used Islah to balance against the influence of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), sprung from the PDRY and its allies in the YAR, and to maintain the superior position of the GPC. Saleh was mastering the strategy of “divide and rule”—what he once artfully described as “dancing on the heads of snakes”—to keep both allies and enemies off balance.

Where the utility of parliamentary politics ended, Saleh had no problem turning to strongmen to address his domestic concerns. Another close ally of Saleh was the current vice president of Yemen's internationally recognized government, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (no relation to Sheikh Abdullah), a military commander who played a conspicuous role in both defeating the southern army in 1994 and leading the domestic battles against the Huthis in the 2000s. A mostly behind-the-scenes

figure until his dramatic break with Saleh during 2011's Arab Spring, he slotted well into an elite-driven political system that countenanced some disagreement while keeping the patronage widespread; al-Ahmar doubles as both a member of the GPC and a known supporter of Islah.

After oil revenues peaked in 2003, Yemen's elite increasingly competed for the diminishing resources, opening fissures within the regime. At the same time, Saleh's erstwhile allies—Sheikh Abdullah's sons and Ali Mohsen—fell out with Saleh and frustrated his plan to both extend his rule and to position his son Ahmad as his successor. These fissures manifested politically in the mid-2000s, when Islah united with the YSP and a set of smaller parties to form the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which sought to contest the GPC's parliamentary dominance. Then Sheikh Abdullah's death in December 2007 removed a restraining hand and intensified this rivalry.

During this period, Saleh began a dangerous encounter with the emerging Huthi movement, one which eventually led to his death in 2017. The Huthis, named after their founding figure Hussein Badr al-Din al-Huthi, emerged from a Zaydi revivalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s that spoke particularly (but not solely) to northern elites and former elites whose status (however local or relative) eroded after the imamate's overthrow. An influential subset of these elites were *sada* (also known as Hashemites), or those families claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons Hassan and Hussein, a lineage celebrated in Zaydi belief (the al-Huthi family is itself Hashemite). These individuals and families, who felt cut out of the YAR's development policies and Saleh's patronage network, rallied around Hussein al-Huthi's blend of political populism, religious fundamentalism, and conspiracy-minded anti-imperialism. After tensions between the growing movement and an increasingly wary government came to a head in 2004, the first of the six "Sa'ada wars" ended in Hussein's killing and the advent of a durable martyrdom narrative (Brandt 2017).

Violent conflict only grew the Huthis' base and ambitions. During these wars, the Huthis, now led by Hussein's brother Abd al-Malik al-Huthi and their tribal allies acquired the fighting and organizational skills that helped them to take control of Sana'a in September 2014 and to fight the Saudi-led coalition through to the present day. Yet even as leading general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar bitterly fought the Huthis, Saleh continued his divide-and-rule tactics through occasional, discreet support that kept the Zaydi group strong enough to balance against the Sunni-oriented Islah party and the more militant Salafist elements in the north; Saleh's policies were also a factor in exacerbating longer-term weakening of the influence of local tribal sheikhs that the Huthis were able to exploit (Chapter 3). Meanwhile, southerners disenchanted by Saleh's policies in the south backed Hirak, a movement formed in 2007 that sought to restore an independent south (Chapter 2). The longer-term effects of this divide-and-rule game continue to plague Yemen as do the corruption and other ills of the Saleh period.

The Arab Spring's 2011 arrival fatally fractured the regime. In June and September 2011, civil conflict seemed likely between Saleh on one side and Ali Mohsen and the sons of the late Sheikh Abdullah on the other, this latter camp

splitting from Saleh and nominally adopting the protesters' demands for a new government. Eager to shuffle Saleh off the scene, regional and global powers intervened to negotiate the "Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative." Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf neighbors of Yemen, supported by the United States and major western powers, negotiated a deal for Saleh's resignation in February 2012 in exchange for immunity for himself and his family. Out of this deal, Yemenis got the stage-managed election of President Abdo Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh's longtime vice president, in 2012, alongside a coalition government of the GPC and Islah-dominated JMP. A key part of the transition was an inclusive National Dialogue Conference (NDC) which eventually produced the recommendations that provided the basis for drafting a new constitution at the end of 2014.

The GCC Initiative could not survive its flaws. It permitted Saleh to stay in Yemen as head of the GPC, and he used his influence to undermine President Hadi and the transitional government, undeterred by UN sanctions. Hadi, a southerner who had fled to Sana'a in 1986, may have been head of state, but he lacked a strong power base in the north and antagonized parts of the northern elite by appearing to favor politicians from Abyan, his home governorate. An essential restructuring of the military and security organizations to remove the influence of Saleh's networks was only partially implemented. Ordinary people, who had been promised a better life by the international community, saw living standards fall. There is now a consensus that too much emphasis was placed on the political process at the expense of economic growth and service delivery during the transition.

The Huthis initially cooperated with the GCC deal through their political party, Ansar Allah; at the same time, their militias and tribal networks extended Huthi influence outside the movement's Sa'ada homeland. Saleh, still commanding the loyalty of many civilian and military officials, secretly allied himself with the Huthis. This was a Faustian pact. After a months-long, coercive campaign through the northwest, the Huthis entered Sana'a in September 2014. Military forces loyal to Saleh stood aside as Huthi militants seized government buildings and confronted units led by Ali Mohsen and associated with Islah. Through UN mediation, the Huthi/Saleh forces entered the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA) with Hadi's government.

Hadi's position deteriorated through January 2015, when the delivery of the new constitution, which included an arrangement for a federal Yemen that did not satisfy Huthi or southern interests, set in motion the events that led to his resignation, the Huthi assumption of power in February 2015, and the Saudi-led intervention of March 26, 2015. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 2216 the following month, which supported the intervention, demanded the restoration of President Hadi, and imposed conditions that the Huthis, having taken the military initiative, were (and remain) loathe to accept.

Saudi Arabia, which had maintained interests in Yemeni politics since the 1930s and grew alarmed at evident Huthi ties to Iran, took charge of the war in the north and trained, equipped, and paid remnants of the Yemeni army supplemented by newly recruited soldiers to undertake ground fighting supported by Saudi air power. Saudi land forces defended their southern border from Huthi

incursions. Southern Yemen and the west coast became the responsibility of the UAE, which trained, equipped, and mentored Yemenis to fight the Huthis. Many were drawn from southern nationalists who might support President Hadi's internationally recognized government against the Huthis but who ultimately sought independence for the south.

In the thicket of Yemeni politics, Saudi and Emirati interests diverged. In the north, Saudi Arabia needed the support of Islah because of its influence within the Hadi regime and its aligned fighting forces. In the south, the UAE refused to work with Islah, in keeping with Abu Dhabi's policy of seeking to eliminate movements with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. These divisions, and the general incoherence of the anti-Huthi coalition ostensibly fighting for Hadi, has all but ruled out Hadi's clean restoration in Sana'a, and superior Saudi weapons and airpower have contained the Huthis only at the cost of thousands of civilian casualties. The internationalization of Yemen's conflict in 2015 clearly exacerbated the country's fragmentation. (Chapter 2)

Though the war has taken a number of twists and turns since March 2015, its defining feature has been stalemate: the Huthis are not strong enough to take over all of Yemen, and the Hadi government, even with Saudi support, is too weak to prevent them from solidifying their control of the northwest. Notable developments that will have long-lasting reverberations for Yemeni politics, such as the Huthis' 2017 murder of Saleh after his attempted break with the movement, or the UAE's formal withdrawal from the conflict, cannot shift this stalemate.

At the time of writing (January 2021), the two *de facto* regimes—the Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) and the Huthi Supreme Political Council (SPC), through which the Huthis rule—are not prepared to make the compromises necessary for peace. The Huthis continue to fight for territory, and still threaten Marib, the Hadi government's last major stronghold in the north. The IRG, in response, has been able to use UN-sanctioned legal, administrative, and financial devices that, along with the coalition-imposed blockades of air and sea ports, exacerbate the financial stresses faced by the Huthis. On the other hand, the Huthi SPC's government is doing what no recent regime has been able to achieve: it balances its budget (Chapter 6) even if the means of raising income are questionable.

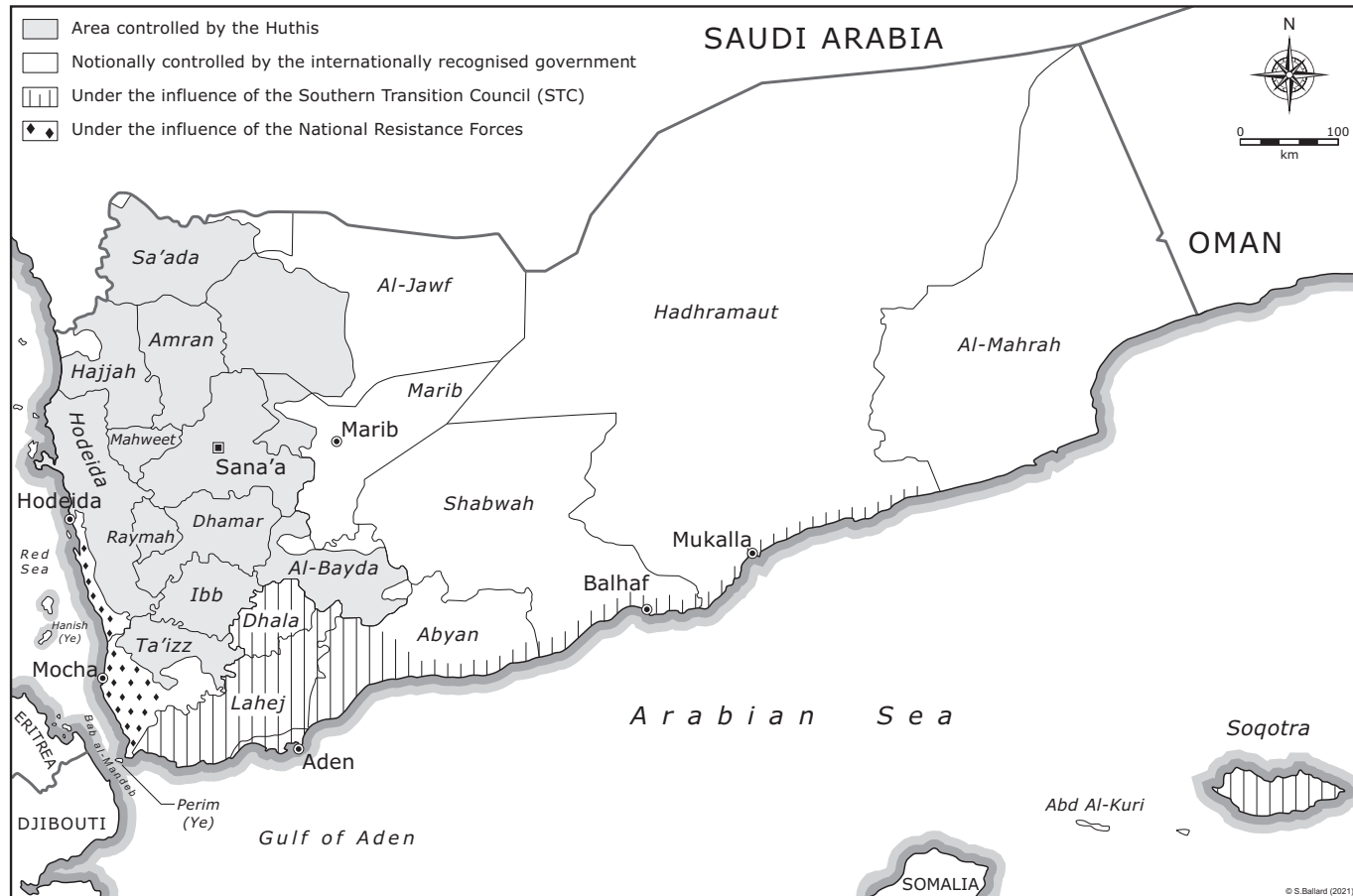
Throughout the conflict, peace talks have been much discussed but seldom engaged in good faith, and multiple rounds in Switzerland and Kuwait were unsuccessful. A breakthrough seemed to occur with the signing of the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018, which averted a Saudi-led coalition offensive on the port city of Hodeida, due to its likely humanitarian fallout; the agreement, however, has floundered, and violence persists in the regions surrounding this Huthi-controlled city. Successive UN Special Envoys have attempted to organize mediation processes that adhere to "the three references": the GCC transition deal, the outcomes of the NDC, and UNSCR 2216. All are thus potentially relevant to the likely structure of the post-war settlement. UNSCR 2216 no longer reflects the political and military reality after six years of conflict and will require substantial amendment or replacement, as will the GCC deal. The NDC and draft constitution

may be acceptable to President Hadi, the GPC and Islah, and some smaller parties, but not to the Huthis and the southerners, who remain resolutely opposed to the draft constitution's federal structure of six regions, four in the north and two in the south, albeit for different reasons. Thus, these references are no longer valid and will have to be amended or renegotiated and based much more closely on the reality of the situation on the ground.

### *The Current Political Map*

Map 1 shows the various parties' main areas of control in early 2021. The UN Panel of Experts estimates that up to 80 percent of Yemenis live in these areas (UNPoE, 2021) although we assess that it is around 65–70 percent. The two sides to the war are quite different in structure. In Chapter 3, Hussein Alwaday and Maysaa Shujaa al-Deen demonstrate that the Huthis relied on tribal militias to take power and were able to mobilize the tribesmen to fight. They seem strong enough to maintain rule of much of Upper Yemen, where the pre-conflict power structure that revolves around a central command is still dominant. The Huthis have only reinforced this structure by deploying a raft of supervisors to oversee governing institutions at the national, governorate, and local levels. These supervisors keep the extant bureaucracy, much of which was responsive to Saleh before his killing, in line with the desires of paramount leader Abd al-Malik al-Huthi and his close circle of family members and advisers (Chapters 1 and 3). Using their networks, knowledge of tribal politics, and the families of the *sada*, they have consolidated their control. Their grip could eventually slip as resentment grows over some of their policies: their privileging of the *sada*, the imposition of taxes, repression of critics, their harsh treatment of tribal opponents such as the Hajour (Chapters 1, 3, and 6) and rivalries within the leadership, and financial abuses (UNPoE 2021). They have few regional or international allies except for Iran (and its associates), although this support has not been insignificant; Iranian weaponry and technical advice underlies Huthi ballistic missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia. Designation of the Huthis as a terrorist organization by the Trump administration on January 19, 2021 was reversed by President Biden but, even so, it seems likely that they will face increasing economic and financial problems, leading to greater dissatisfaction with their rule. These long-term trends will not affect their ability to remain in control in the short to medium term. The Huthis have been successful at portraying the war as one of foreign aggression against Yemen (Chapter 1) and use the war “to justify their extreme austerity, heavy taxation, and manipulation of markets” (Chapter 6).

The IRG was seemingly coherent in 2015 but has fragmented and is not in actual control of all Yemeni regions notionally loyal to President Hadi (Chapters 1, 2, 6, and 10). It suffers from weak leadership and its reputation is undermined by the actions of some of its leading figures ((UNPoE (2021)). Its one success story—Marib, a once marginalized governorate that has thrived throughout most of the conflict—owes much of its progress to a powerful local governor that holds the



**Map 1** Approximate areas of control in early 2021.

Hadi government at arm's length (Chapters 6 and 10). The governorate is virtually self-governing and has been able to benefit from the war economy, although recent Huthi advances threaten its state of semi-autonomy. Islah has significant support in Marib and in the IRG-controlled parts of Ta'izz.

The STC commands a substantial power base among the Security Belt, Elite Forces, and other militias created and supported by the UAE. These militias are particularly strong around Aden, which the STC controls, but weaker in the eastern parts of the former south, such as in Shabwah and Hadhramaut, where newly empowered local groups want greater self-government rather than a return to the prewar status quo when control of their affairs was in Sana'a (or Aden in the PDRY). The STC has considerable support in coastal areas, but the northern areas of these governorates are in the hands of military units allied with Ali Mohsen and Islah, which can be reinforced from Marib.

Clashes between the STC and forces loyal to Hadi in the summer of 2019 led to Saudi intervention (the UAE withdrew most of its forces from Yemen in 2019 though it continued to finance the STC and some related militias) and the signing of the Riyadh Agreement, designed to prevent further infighting among anti-Huthi coalition members. It had only been partially implemented at the time of writing, and the ultimate aims of the IRG and the STC do not seem to be reconcilable. The National Resistance Forces, led by Tariq Saleh, a nephew of the late president who has the support of the UAE, is a significant influence in the Tihama region along the west coast, but it is itself a messy coalition of former northern Yemeni military units and leaders, militias from south Yemen, and local Tihama resistance fighters determined to repel any Huthi incursions. All these various local or regional groups command fighters and lucrative local war economies, which give them the power to demand that their interests are met in any peace deal and post-conflict structure—and the ability to sabotage anything that they disagree with.

State building will be complicated by the way that the war has exacerbated the sectarianism which has been growing in Yemen since the 1970s, and this is explored in Chapter 3. The rise of the Huthi movement was in part provoked by the spread of the Muslim Brotherhood via Islah and of the Salafism first encouraged by the Saleh regime to counter Marxist currents in the 1970s, but the actions of the Huthis and the war have strengthened extremism as well as generating the intolerance and hatreds that all wars inspire.

Further complicating matters, most fighting has focused on the control of resources, ports, and key sources of potential income, whether this involved the war between the IRG and the Huthis or the many local conflicts that have flared up alongside it. The two sides also fight an economic war: for example, the IRG has used its control of the internationally recognized Central Bank to put economic pressure on the Huthis, while the Huthis have developed a separate currency to delink northwest Yemen from the rest of the country. As Charles Schmitz writes:

The logic of Yemen's political economy subjugates the long-term interests of the economy to the short term interests of the many competing political factions. Today Yemen is at war, and logically the economy serves as a tool in the war,

but unfortunately subordination of the economy to political aims is the norm in times of peace as well as war. Rather than staking their political careers on mobilizing Yemen's social and physical resources to achieve economic growth, policy makers in Yemen use the economy for short-term political interests. (Chapter 6)

The UN Panel of Experts reported in January 2021 that "The pattern of conflicts shifted toward widespread economic profiteering perpetrated by networks of commanders, businessmen, politicians and local leaders" (UNPoE, 2021). That applied to all sides.

### *Potential Future Scenarios*

In the face of a stalemated conflict, the situation is so uncertain that attempts to create possible scenarios for future state structure must engage in much speculation.

It is likely that, when the war finally ends, there will be two main political entities: the Huthis in most of what was north Yemen and the IRG in the center and south. As part of a peace deal, it is probable that they will agree to share power in a federal arrangement that enables Yemen to have a government functional enough to manage relief, reconstruction, the restoration of public services, and redevelopment. At best, this government might provide a means for cooperation that, over time, builds sufficient confidence between the SPC and the IRG to enable a gradual expansion of its powers. At worst, it could become little more than an extended cease-fire that at least allows the delivery of humanitarian support and a degree of economic cooperation over access to ports of entry and major roads.

The SPC and IRG will exercise political power in their separately administered areas. They could become separate states. The SPC (that is the Huthis and their allies from the old northern establishment) will seek to impose control of the north by force and negotiation; there could possibly be some limited decentralization where, for example, the populous areas of Lower Yemen under SPC control may be given more freedom on how they govern themselves. That would require a degree of pragmatism that the Huthi leadership has not yet shown. Despite the current (intermittent) fighting in and around Ta'izz, there is some cooperation between opposing groups to assure the delivery of food and basic services, and such local action could become a permanent feature and extend to other contested areas. (Writing in Chapter 5, Bilkis Zabara and Sabria Al-Thawr give examples of local initiatives, often led by women, to foster local reconciliation and cooperation.) Within a federal Yemen, Ta'izz and Ibb might become a separate region: al-Janad, as envisioned in the 2014 constitution.

The IRG seems too fragmented to enable the return of a strong central ruling group and will need to build a decentralized or federal arrangement that enables regions or governorates to have the power to govern themselves. Given the strength of the STC, it is possible that the southern governorates might