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THE FUTURE STRUCTURE OF THE YEMENI STATE

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY

After more than four years of fighting, the war in Yemen continues to drag on. Although the rival parties came to a deal at the end of 2018 in Stockholm, they have failed to fully abide by its terms due to ambiguity about the future Yemeni state. Currently, there are multiple, rival authorities in different regions of the country, and the individuals in power disagree whether there should be one state, two states, or multiple states. They also disagree whether the future states of Yemen should be independent or linked through a federal or confederal system of government. Profound questions about the country's future remain unanswered, and before negotiations can move forward the parties will likely need to address the elephant in the room: the future structure of Yemen as a state.

INTRODUCTION

After more than two years of fighting, rival forces in Yemen's multi-sided civil war appeared to reach a stalemate in 2017. Throughout that year and much of the preceding one, the main battlefronts were frozen. But in 2018, government forces allied with the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) coalition advanced up the Red Sea coast under the direction of southern military commanders from Lahej Province who are tied to the old southern ruling party, the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). Moving south to north along the coastal region known as Tihama, these southern commanders were eventually aided by Tareq Muhammad Saleh, a nephew of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the late president. Saleh switched sides in 2017 and began opposing Houthi rebel leaders who came to power in Sanaa by means of a military coup in 2014 that Saleh originally supported. In early December 2017, fierce clashes erupted on the streets of Yemen's capital, and Saleh was killed at the hands of Houthi fighters. Months after Tareq and his supporters escaped Sanaa, they linked up with government forces advancing toward Hodeida, a strategic Red Sea port held by Houthi leaders.

In the summer of 2018, government forces began attacking the Houthis at Hodeida with naval and air support provided by the GCC coalition. They managed to seize the airport and neighborhoods adjacent to the seaport, while attempting to cut off access roads to a city of more than 2 million people.[1] The UN special envoy to Yemen, British diplomat Martin Griffiths, intervened to negotiate a cease-fire during the summer, preventing a battle that jeopardized food and medical supplies for some 15 million people in areas controlled by Houthi leaders along the Tihama coast and Yemen's inland mountains. During the fall of 2018, representatives of the warring sides at Hodeida met for negotiations in Sweden. They agreed by the middle of December to withdraw armed forces from the city in order to give the UN a chance to establish international authority over the port.[2] It was hoped that the Stockholm agreement would guarantee delivery of humanitarian supplies, while creating momentum for diplomatic efforts to end the war via a step-by-step process. Unfortunately, both sides failed to abide by the terms of a mutual withdrawal from Hodeida, and the war continued.[3]

One of the main barriers to negotiating a peaceful end to the war in Yemen via a step-by-step process is that the parties have enormous incentives to hold their ground and continue fighting during negotiations over relatively small matters like port security at Hodeida. This is true because the warring sides want leverage when negotiations turn to more significant matters, such as the political make-up of Yemen's government and the future structure of the state. Houthi leaders, who control the

capital Sanaa under the banner of a religious party called Ansar Allah ("Partisans of God"), are desperate to hold Hodeida because they know if they lose control of the port, then they will be forced to make greater concessions later. Their rivals, including the GCC coalition, want to force the Houthis from Hodeida for the opposite reason. Their goal is to deny the leaders of Ansar Allah a prominent role in defining the future structure and composition of Yemen's government. Thus, they seek to pressure Ansar Allah in the capital by cutting the main supply route between Hodeida and Sanaa.

Most international negotiations involve consideration of matters both large and small. There is a tendency to address the small matters first because there is greater likelihood of agreement. Negotiators hope to use the agreements on smaller matters to build momentum toward larger, more difficult ones. But if the parties to a conflict are unsure about the direction negotiations will take on the large matters, they are more likely to prolong conflict by continuing to contest the small ones. This is the primary problem in Yemen, where rival factions at Hodeida failed to abide fully by the terms of the Stockholm agreement due to ambiguity about the future state of Yemen. Currently, there are multiple, rival authorities in different regions of the country, and the individuals in power disagree whether there should be one state, two states, or multiple states in a future Yemen. They also disagree whether the future states of Yemen should be independent or linked through a federal or confederal system of government. In early August 2019, forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) seized power in Aden, thus adding a further layer of complexity because the STC aspires to govern all southern lands as an independent state.[4]

Because such profound questions about Yemen's future remain unanswered, it is hardly surprising that UN Special Envoy Griffiths could not persuade rival parties at Hodeida to implement the Stockholm agreement on mutually agreed terms. Griffiths certainly managed to forestall the battle looming over Hodeida in 2018. On May 11, 2019, he accepted Ansar Allah's unilateral withdrawal of security forces from the port.[5] Two months later in July, the UAE announced that it would withdraw its military forces from the Red Sea coast. But Yemeni and Sudanese forces participating in the GCC coalition remain in firing range of Ansar Allah's positions. Moreover, the GCC coalition and Ansar Allah continue fighting on other fronts. In the spring of 2019, Houthi forces launched an assault on al-Dali north of Aden in a clear attempt to lessen pressure at Hodeida by attacking the home region of southern soldiers who form the largest contingent of government troops in Tihama. It remains possible that the battle of Hodeida might occur after temperatures drop along the sweltering Red Sea coast in late September. But even if it does not occur, there are no signs that Griffiths has managed to convert the Stockholm agreement into a step-by-step peace process with enough momentum to end the war. For all of the reasons above, it is likely to prove necessary to move negotiations forward by addressing the elephant in the room: the future structure of Yemen as a state.

President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi (C) speaks during the closing ceremony of the National Dialogue Conference on Jan. 25, 2014 in Sanaa. (*Photo by MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images*)

THE NDC FEDERAL CONSTITUTION OF 2015

When Yemen's political system collapsed two months before international warfare commenced on March 26, 2015, there was a plan to restructure the state along federal lines. The plan was based on the outcomes of a UN-sponsored National Dialogue Conference (NDC) held in Sanaa during 2013 and early 2014. The NDC sought to devolve power over decision making to elected authorities in multiple regions around the country. Delegates at the NDC could not agree on the number of federal regions, so the decision was left to a special executive committee appointed by transitional President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.[6] After the NDC ended, Hadi's committee decided to restructure Yemen as a six-region federal state. A new constitution was prepared at the start of January 2015 with plans calling for a popular referendum prior to national elections and formation of a new government later in the year. But Houthi rebel forces operating in league with former President Saleh blocked the federal constitution, and this precipitated a violent power struggle leading to major warfare.[7]

The question of Yemen's future structure as a state, whether unitary or federal/confederal, clearly rests at the heart of the country's problems. The growing power of the STC in 2019, both at Aden and elsewhere in southern territory, makes this abundantly clear. There is no escaping the fact that the question must be addressed to end the

country's war and bring peace to a suffering population. For a variety of reasons, it is difficult to imagine that the NDC six-region federal plan can be implemented in the near future. The longer the war continues, the more vested interests are created among powerful actors on the ground in different regions of the country who seek to keep fighting.[8] These actors, especially in regions south and east of Sanaa where fighting declined after 2016, are unlikely to sacrifice control over their own local affairs by agreeing to resubmit to government authority in Sanaa. This is particularly true as long as the STC continues to gain ground around Aden, and leaders of Ansar Allah, specifically influential members of the Houthi family from Saada Province on the northern border with Saudi Arabia, retain power in Sanaa.

The draft constitution of 2015 based upon the NDC six-region federal plan might conceivably help restart talks on the future political structure of Yemen. Both the constitution and NDC outcomes contained good ideas that appeal to all antagonists in the war, including Houthi leaders who so adamantly opposed the draft constitution in January 2015. Contrary to common perceptions in Yemen, especially among Houthi leaders and their supporters, the draft constitution envisioned a federal state with a relatively strong central government in Sanaa balanced against six institutionally weak regional governments. Although Houthi leaders and Saleh denounced the six-region federal plan as a scheme to destroy Yemeni unity, their own actions during the 2014 coup did far more harm. Through its multi-tier financing scheme, the draft constitution ironically allowed the federal government to retain control of revenues collected from valuable resources like oil and gas at sub-regions of the country, called *wilayat*.[9] In other words, the central government in Sanaa would have been able to bypass the authority of new regional parliaments, which merely served as symbolic representatives of people living in different regions. Today, this is a lost option because the STC and allied groups in the south insist upon fully independent power, refusing to recognize any authority in Sanaa.

After more than four years of death and destruction, it is difficult to imagine Yemen can be stitched back together with a draft constitution prepared at a time of relative peace five years ago. But it is not necessary to advance the original six-region plan word-for-word. It is only necessary to use the plan to restart political discussions about the future structure of the state. The 2015 draft constitution inevitably requires amendment due to dramatic changes on the ground which now leave the country more fragmented than at any time in the past half century. Yemen's current divisions approach those seen in the 1960s, when an earlier civil war was badly aggravated by foreign military intervention. Given Yemen's current fragmentation, it may require amending the draft constitution by granting greater powers to the six regions, perhaps along the lines of a confederation. Supporters of the STC might propose a future confederation with two capitals, Sanaa and Aden, allowing executive

authorities in each city to govern territories that do not necessarily correspond to the old north-south border.

A major sticking point in negotiations to end the war is the influence of foreign powers in the country: namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, each of which maintains armed forces on the ground under the umbrella of the GCC coalition. Saudi Arabia is most influential in Yemen's northern lands, particularly the Tihama and the interior desert province of Marib, while the UAE continues to wield military influence in southern lands, including the port city of Aden and its surroundings in the southwest, where it is allied with the STC. The presence of GCC forces gives them the capability to dictate the political path forward, creating an obvious problem for UN negotiators seeking peace. History shows that Yemen's political system is highly susceptible to foreign interference because the population is one of the world's poorest and the country is one of the most strategically located. Wealthy foreign powers with geo-strategic interests in the lands of Yemen have long been able to shape and define its internal politics to serve their own interests. Influential local actors are also adept at seeking support from foreign leaders with deep pockets. Thus, the dynamics of events in Yemen have long resulted from the interplay of internal and external interests, reflecting both foreign and domestic political divisions and rivalries.[10]

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For decades, Yemenis debated federalism as a solution to the problem of national unity. Thus, the idea did not come out of nowhere at the NDC in 2013. The idea first arose in the 1950s when British colonial authorities proposed a Federation of South Arabia. During the era of decolonization, as government officials in London prepared to withdraw from Aden, they sought to transfer power to a federated council of more than 20 local leaders who ruled different areas under a British "protectorate" system. The foreign origin of the idea had negative consequences in Yemen because it carried the stigma of outside imperial interference, particularly along the lines of traditional "divide and rule" policy, which local nationalists used thereafter to stir up opposition. This was true during the post-2011 political transition as much as it was true in the 1960s. In essence, when Houthi leaders allied with former President Saleh to obstruct discussions of federalism at the UN-sponsored NDC, and then staged a military coup against the draft constitution's six-region federal plan, it paralleled what happened when leaders of a southern liberation movement launched armed resistance against Britain in October 1963.

At the heart of the NDC six-region federal plan and draft constitution of January 2015, there was an inherent problem due to the public perception of outside interference. This included the role of G-10 ambassadors, primarily representing GCC and NATO

Saudi soldiers stand guard as a Saudi air force cargo plane, carrying aid, lands at an airfield in Yemen's central province of Marib, on Feb. 8, 2018. (*Photo by ABDULLAH AL-QADRY/AFP/Getty Images*)

member states, as well as the UN Security Council and the UN secretary-general's special envoy to Yemen. Despite the fact that hundreds of Yemeni delegates who attended the all-Yemeni NDC desired a federal devolution of power, many citizens perceived that a change in state structure was being forced upon the country by foreign interests. A big part of the problem was poor public relations and domestic media coverage of the NDC. By agreement of the G-10, the task of supervising the public relations and media effort was given to the Russian ambassador who was not inclined to prepare the ground for success. As a result, citizens did not receive good information about the NDC. Houthi leaders and Saleh were able to exploit widespread public perceptions of foreign interference when they sought to kill the six-region federal plan at the time of their coup.

In order to grasp Yemen's underlying political problems, it is essential to consider whether or not it is a nation suitable for common rule under a single authority. Commentators unfamiliar with Yemeni history tend to explain the ongoing tragedy in Yemen as a foreign assault on a state that previously served the interests of one national group. As a premise for making sense of recent events and finding a constructive path forward, this is a profoundly mistaken starting point. Across history the population of Yemen was rarely governed by a single authority due to multiple strong regional identities inside the country. During pre-Islamic and Islamic times, it was more common to find separate ruling authorities competing as rivals on the same territory. The old north-south border of Yemen was originally drawn by the Ottoman and British empires at the end of

the 19th century. In other words, the north-south division occurred decades prior to other well-known Cold War divisions in Germany, Korea, and Vietnam.

It is mistaken to think that Yemen's divisions resulted from the Cold War. Once a Soviet-allied government came to power in Aden at the end of the 1960s, it maintained a rather artificial north-south division which masked older, more significant regional divisions in the country. Until British colonial rule ended in November 1967, there were nearly two dozen local rulers on southern lands, and those in Britain's eastern protectorate adamantly refused to unite with those in the western protectorate. Following Britain's withdrawal, the new government in Aden had difficulty overcoming its internal divisions. Likewise, the post-revolutionary government in the north had difficulty managing multiple divisions on its side of the old border.[11] The new governments in Aden and Sanaa signaled early intentions to launch a project of national unification by appointing ministers of unity affairs. But it took three decades for the project to succeed in 1990. During the interim years, there were two north-south wars in the 1970s, numerous coups and political assassinations, and an outbreak of major regional strife in the south during January 1986.

Shortly after Yemen's unification on May 22, 1990, civil strife and assassinations returned to the country. Practically from the start, the new unified state experienced major problems, forcing a postponement of the first scheduled parliamentary elections from the fall of 1992 to the spring of 1993. When voting did not result in majority party

Yemen's ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh gives a speech addressing his supporters during a rally at Sabaeen Square in the capital, Sanaa, on Aug. 24, 2017. (*Photo by MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images*)

rule in parliament, it forced negotiations over a coalition government during the summer of 1993. This led to political stalemate, as sentiments of "buyer's remorse" spread among southern citizens who were outnumbered more than four-to-one by northerners. Southern leaders of the YSP, which placed third behind Saleh's ruling party and a conservative Islamist party called Islah ("Reform"), revived discussions of federalism at this time, demanding decentralization of government powers. Northern politicians suspected talk of federalism was part of a plot to secede, thus they responded by accusing YSP leaders and their southern supporters of treason.

During the winter of 1993-94, an earlier set of Yemeni national dialogue conferences prefigured the work of the NDC in 2013-14. The majority of participants from all regions favored decentralizing power to locally elected governors and mayors at the provincial, district, and municipal levels. This became the key element of an agreement signed by northern and southern political leaders, including President Saleh and leaders of the YSP and Islah Party, at a February 1994 meeting held under the auspices of King Hussein in Amman, Jordan. Ink on the agreement, known as the Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA,) was barely dry when Saleh ordered his military commanders to launch an attack on a southern army camp. Soon afterward, the country descended into a major civil war between late April and early July. Northern troops gradually overran southern lands, and YSP leaders fled into exile. Thereafter, most southern citizens felt they lived under northern military occupation.

The pre-war DPA did not amount to a full federal plan. It merely suggested government decentralization as a way to avoid military conflict. But if Yemeni politicians had unified the country in 1990 on the basis of federalism, it is possible that the 1994 war and much of the preceding political troubles could have been avoided. This is true because the incentive to compete for control over the central government would have been dramatically reduced. Saleh clearly sought to use the civil war in 1994 to consolidate and preserve his powers over the central government in Sanaa. Before the war ended, however, he made a political commitment to decentralize government by allowing elections of local governors and mayors, just as he promised when signing the DPA in Amman. Saleh recommitted himself to the DPA's principles following intervention by Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, and UN diplomats who negotiated a cessation of hostilities once Saleh's victory was assured in early July 1994.

UN officials and Arab leaders in Egypt and Jordan recognized that the DPA offered a potential way to reconcile post-war differences in Yemen and avoid alienating the southern population. The problem was that President Saleh did not take seriously the need to decentralize government. He postponed implementation of the DPA's call for local elections through the remainder of the 1990s. During the long delay, President Saleh and members of

his ruling party continued to treat public calls for decentralization as a sign of treason against the nation. Proponents of federalism were regularly intimidated and harassed by agents of the state, especially in southern and eastern regions. This destroyed what little remained of national unionist sentiment.

President Saleh finally advanced legislation to define the role of Yemen's "local authorities" in February 2000. The law allowed for elected "advisory councils" at the provincial and district levels, but the councils were poorly funded and tasked merely with providing advice to governors, who remained appointed by the president.[12] In short, it signaled Saleh's intention to keep tight control of all government decision making in Sanaa. Two years earlier, the president forced tens of thousands of southern civil servants and soldiers into early retirement. By cutting employment and then offering no effective means of local democratic representation, Saleh created deep disillusionment among southerners. This included close allies of the president who helped maintain a pretense of north-south unity after the 1994 war. At the end of 2001, some of Saleh's most loyal southern supporters organized a group called "the Sons of Southern and Eastern Provinces." They sent a letter to the president demanding a greater share of national benefits. When Saleh ignored the letter, the group went public with their demands. At this point, it became inevitable that Saleh's southern opponents would sooner or later launch a mass protest movement.

There are a couple of factors that explain the importance of internal dynamics in Yemen driving the formation of strong opposition during the 2000s. First, these dynamics reflected regional divisions that badly weakened national unity. Second, they indicated that government decentralization, whether via federalism or other means, was necessary once Saleh resigned in 2011. There were three primary sources of opposition: first, and most importantly, the armed Houthi rebellion that started in 2004 along the border with Saudi Arabia in Saada Province; second, the 2006 formation of a broad coalition of opposition parties, known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), which ran a viable opposition candidate for president during the same year; and third, the southern Hirak movement that began in 2007. Two of these three opposition groups were limited to specific regions of the country. Only the JMP represented a national constituency with the potential to unseat Saleh while maintaining a single governing authority, but it failed to inspire passions common among Houthi rebels and Hirak protesters.

Throughout President Saleh's 33-year rule, he played a dangerous political game by constantly shifting alliances to keep his domestic rivals off balance. In the early 1990s, he relied upon conservatives in the Islah Party, whether members of the Muslim Brotherhood or allies of Wahhabi clerics in Saudi Arabia, to defeat the southern YSP. Then, shortly after the 1994 civil war, he broke relations with Islah and tried to govern solely through his General People's Congress party. Saleh's game of political

survival eventually aided Houthi and Hirak because they, too, considered Islah an enemy. If Saleh had continued governing in alliance with Islah, it is possible that he could have built a relatively strong national unionist government. But the effect of his political maneuvers compelled Islah to join the YSP and other opposition parties in the JMP coalition. Amid ongoing warfare with Houthi rebels in the north and Hirak protesters in the south, the JMP compelled a total shutdown of politics when it organized a nationwide boycott of Yemen's fourth parliamentary elections in 2009.

Two full years before the events of the 2011 "Arab Spring," Saleh's government appeared extremely weak in the face of strong opposition in multiple regions of the country. In fact, there were frequent discussions about Yemen becoming a "failed state." For decades, political analysts foretold that a combination of economic, social, and environmental crises would lead to a total collapse of the state. One crucial element behind Yemen's post-2011 collapse was that Saleh's survival instincts led him to form a reckless alliance with the Houthis. Earlier in the 1990s, elements within Saleh's ruling circle aided the Houthi family when it initiated a Zaidi revival movement among the youth of Saada Province. Saleh and those who sympathized with the revival movement viewed it as a way to weaken the influence of Sunni Islamists who gained influence between the 1970s and 2000s with aid from Saudi Arabia. As early as 2002, senior Yemeni security officers realized the danger of Saleh's new political game.[13] Any alliance with leaders of a Zaidi revival was bound to inflame inter-communal religious conflict that would utterly destroy national unity. This is what happened after the Houthi and Saleh coup in 2014.

Houthi rebel fighters inspect the damage after a reported air strike carried out by the Saudi-led coalition targeted the presidential palace in Sanaa on Dec. 5, 2017. (*Photo credit: MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images*)

CONCLUSION

When President Saleh resigned after mass protests in 2011, Yemen had a mere two decades of experience as a national union. During this time, Saleh failed to advance government policies that could establish state legitimacy across the entire territory. Prior to unification in 1990, this was a perennial problem in each half of the country due to multiple internal divisions. Unification did not alleviate the problem. Instead, it made matters worse by increasing not only the size of territory the government claimed to rule, but also the number of rival groups vying for a share of public goods. Once Saleh resigned in late 2011, the country's political, economic, and social troubles necessitated holding broad dialogue about how best to reform the state. By January 2014, the UN-sponsored NDC reached consensus on federalism, and a committee appointed by transitional President Hadi decided upon a six-region plan. One year later, the coup by Saleh and Houthi leaders ended the federal plan as the country slid toward major warfare and intervention by the GCC coalition.

The internal dynamics of the coup by Saleh and Houthi derive from the tendency of powerful actors on the highland mountain plateau between the capital Sanaa and Saada Province to seek hegemony over the country. Historically, Zaidi imams ruled Yemen in alliance with top sheikhs of the Hashid and Bakil tribes. This was resented by people living along the Tihama coast and in southern and eastern provinces. Thus, the 2014-15 coup by Saleh and Houthi leaders revived an age-old pattern of conflict in Yemen. In the wake of the coup, once Saleh and Houthi forces were pushed

from lands to the south around Aden, while being prevented from moving eastward into Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramawt, government authority became deeply fractured. This made the six-region federal plan obsolete. The reach of Yemen's central government was always limited in different regions of the country, including the Hashid and Bakil tribal areas around Sanaa. But due to stalemate on the main battlefields after GCC forces intervened on the side of Yemenis loosely associated with the "legitimate" authority of President Hadi, multiple rival authorities surfaced on the ground, including some linked to al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

The GCC coalition has been unable since the spring of 2015 to dislodge Houthi forces from Sanaa and the surrounding highland plateau. All of this mountainous territory, including the plateau stretching southward to the lowlands of Ibb and al-Bayda, remains under the authority of Ansar Allah, the Houthi political organization. Ansar Allah also retains control of a large section of the midland province of Taiz and the northern Tihama, except a small area around Harad and Midi near the Saudi border. The "legitimate" government has a weak presence inside the country because Hadi continues living in exile in Saudi Arabia. It is strongest in Marib Province, home to one of Yemen's main oil fields and an important electricity plant. Forces loyal to Hadi's vice president, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who is Saleh's old Sanhan tribal rival, exert control in Marib and over a larger oil field in Hadramawt Province. Unlike Marib's oil field, which operates under a revenue-sharing agreement with local tribes, General Ahmar and his allies monopolize oil revenues from Hadramawt, much to the displeasure of the local population.

Beginning in 2016, Hadi and members of his "legitimate" government established a formal presence in Aden. During the same year, they succeeded in relocating the headquarters of the Yemeni Central Bank to Aden after Houthi leaders drained most of its foreign reserves in the capital Sanaa. The main rival to the "legitimate" government in Aden is the STC, an organization formed by leaders of Hirak who support full national independence within the old borders of South Yemen. STC leaders are closely allied with GCC commanders from the UAE, unlike President Hadi and Vice President Ahmar who are closer to commanders from Saudi Arabia. The STC seeks recognition of a state called South Arabia, and following their seizure of full control in Aden in early August 2019, they are now closer to achieving their goal.

Today the array of governing authorities and fighting forces in Yemen is highly complex. As a result, it is difficult to know what the end game is, and how the state or states will eventually be reconstituted. Yemen is not like Syria, where a long established regime operated effective state institutions that could reassert territorial control after the chaos of ground fighting ended. The chances of continued warfare remain very high in Yemen, but there is ultimately no military solution to the country's conflicts and divisions because of shifting alliances on rugged mountain terrain. For all of these reasons, it is necessary to reopen discussions about the future structure of the Yemeni state based on the six-region federal constitution that resulted from outcomes of the NDC in 2014. Due to political realities on the ground after more than four years of warfare, however, it is necessary to consider the possibility that a loose confederation of two or more states may be the best and most likely outcome.

During 2013, Houthi leaders were granted a prominent role at the UN-sponsored NDC, where one of 11 working groups dealt specifically with their grievances under the title the "Saada matter." Hirak's grievances were addressed in a separate working group called the "Southern matter." These two working groups were unique at the NDC because they were the only forums dealing with regionally based opposition. Another working group, entitled "State structure," addressed sources of regional opposition through the proposal for federal government. Despite similarities between how the NDC dealt with Houthi and Hirak grievances, leaders of the two groups held significantly different interests and motives. Hirak leaders sought autonomy if not outright independence from Sanaa, so they preferred to see a weakened central government. Houthi leaders held hegemonic interests to exercise power through the central government in Sanaa. Thus, Houthi interests aligned closely with those of former President Saleh. This is the main reason why Saleh and Houthi leaders staged a joint coup against the transitional government for the sake of destroying the six-region federal plan.

During the NDC, there was some indication that Houthi leaders collaborated with a faction of Hirak that refused to participate in the national dialogue. The faction was linked to exiled southern leader Ali Salem

al-Beidh, who fled the country in 1994 after failing to achieve southern independence amid the earlier civil war. Once Hirak arose in 2007, it never formed a strong unified leadership. By 2011, its most active factions favored full southern independence. Thus, when the NDC started, Hirak's street-level leaders refused to participate in the conference in Sanaa because they refused any and all associations with the north. President Hadi and his inner circle were forced to recruit southern delegates who acted in the group's name. Some of these delegates preferred a two-region federal state. But President Hadi and many northern delegates feared a two-region state would revert to the pre-1990 division of the country. This was the main reason the NDC ended in disagreement about the number of federal regions, requiring President Hadi to appoint a special executive committee, which then adopted the six-region plan.

As a politician from the southern half of Yemen, President Hadi feared a two-region federal state would allow his main southern rivals, especially Ali Salem al-Beidh, to return to power. But northern delegates from the midland region of Taiz and part of Ibb, as well as provinces further east like al-Bayda and Marib, were unwilling to accept two-region federalism because they refused to continue living under the influence of northern tribes. Tribes from the highland mountain plateau between Sanaa and Saada Province would inevitably dominate any northern region of a two-region federal state, thus northerners in Taiz, Ibb, Hodeida, al-Bayda, and Marib provinces preferred a three- or four-way division of northern lands. The NDC delegate who first introduced the six-region federal proposal, including four regions in the north and two regions in the south, was the head of the northern

Displaced Yemeni children from Hodeida are pictured on Sept. 30, 2018 through a hole in a damaged house where they have been living with other displaced families in Taiz. (*Photo by AHMAD AL-BASHA/AFP/Getty Images*)

Nasserite party.[14] There is great irony in this fact because northern Nasserites were among the leading proponents of Yemeni unity since the 1960s. That the leader of the main Nasserite party favored six-region federalism speaks to the depth of the country's multiple internal divisions.

When the six-region federal plan was formally announced in February 2014, it represented a compromise between the secessionist position of some southern Hirak factions and the position of northerners who opposed any devolution of central government power from Sanaa. Leaders of the Houthi movement were the strongest critics of the six-region plan. They complained that it left their home province of Saada landlocked without access to a port on the Red Sea. For the sake of convenience, technocrats on the post-NDC executive committee defined the six regions along the boundary lines of existing provinces, and Saada previously lacked access to the Red Sea. Once the proposed six-region map was published, citizens in many areas complained about the artificial nature of provincial boundary lines. The government received numerous suggestions of better ways to draw borders between the six regions. But President Hadi and his staff preferred to negotiate the matter after the six regional governments were established. In other words, Hadi never denied Houthi leaders port access on the Red Sea. He simply wanted to postpone redrawing regional boundary lines.

Barring a Houthi defeat by the GCC coalition in the coming year, once negotiations begin on the future structure of the Yemeni state, it is inevitable that Ansar Allah will

Yemen's foreign minister Khaled al-Yamani (L) and the head rebel negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam (R) shake hands under the eyes of UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres (C), during peace consultations in Rimbo, Sweden, on Dec. 13, 2018. (*Photo credit: JONATHAN NACKSTRAND/AFP/Getty Images*)

exercise control of a port on the Red Sea as they do today at Hodeida. The best way to gain bargaining leverage with Ansar Allah is through discussion of Sanaa's status in Yemen's future state structure. Ansar Allah does not want to be excluded permanently from access to valuable energy sources in Marib, Shabwa, and Hadramawt provinces, which are now under the control of President Hadi's "legitimate" government. By rejecting the six-region federal plan through which Sanaa retained importance as the national capital and home of the central government, Houthi leaders created de facto decentralization by splintering political interests around the country. It is not in Ansar Allah's interests that future negotiations move toward a confederal solution or complete political independence of Aden and the south, as STC leaders seek. Thus, Ansar Allah is more likely to seek reconciliation with the "legitimate" government if these options are placed on the negotiation table.

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Cover photo: A Yemeni waves a national flag during a rally celebrating the death of Yemeni ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh a day after he was killed, in the capital on Dec. 5, 2017. (Photo by MOHAMMED HUWAIS/AFP/Getty Images)

Photo on pages ii-iii: Houthi supporters demonstrate in Sanaa on June 25, 2018. (Photo by Mohammed HUWAIS/AFP/ Getty Images)

Photo on pages 11-12: Tents at an IDP camp outside Aden on Nov. 20, 2018 in southern Yemen. (Photo by Giles Clarke/ UNOCHA via Getty Images)

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