



# PROSPECTS FOR DISARMAMENT, DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION (DDR) IN YEMEN

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February 13, 2022

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COVER PHOTO : Yemeni army troops battle Houthi forces near the Um Reish military camp, Al-Jubah district, Marib governorate, on January 14, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdulmajeed Al Khadhmi



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



Yemeni army troops battle Houthi forces near the Um Reish military camp, Al-Jubah district, Marib governorate, on January 14, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdulmajeed Al Khadhmi

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After seven years of conflict, Yemen effectively functions as two separate states. In the north, the Houthi movement is in near complete control. The group has significantly restructured governance in the Yemeni highlands since capturing Sana'a in September 2014 and, increasingly, sees itself as an independent state.

Yemen's internationally recognized government nominally holds the rest of the country, including parts of Marib and most of southern Yemen. In truth, however, political control of non-Houthi areas of Yemen is divided between Hadi's government and the pro-secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC). On the military side, the situation is complicated by the fact that the anti-Houthi coalition is comprised of multiple armed groups, many of which have different command-and-control structures. For instance, military units affiliated with the STC do not take orders from the government. This is also true of Tariq Saleh's Joint Forces – consisting of the Giants Brigades, National Resistance Forces and the Tihama Resistance – which was established with Emirati support in 2018 during the offensive to liberate the Red Sea Coast from Houthi forces.

Given the current state of the conflict, a countrywide Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process is unrealistic. Instead, this paper argues that a DDR process within the anti-Houthi coalition is both the most likely scenario as well as the one that will yield the best results.

This paper examines four different governorates – Marib, Taiz, Lahj, and Al-Dhalea – providing a current trajectory of the conflict, an overview of the armed groups active in each governorate, as well as the steps necessary for completing a successful DDR. However, traditional DDR processes that move sequentially from disarmament to demobilization and then to reintegration are unlikely to work in Yemen, as agreeing to disarm or demobilize prior to reaching a political agreement would effectively neutralize armed groups' leverage and leave them vulnerable to rivals. Instead, this paper strongly recommends a flexible second-generation DDR approach – as opposed to the more traditional and sequential DDR processes – where reintegration would precede both disarmament and demobilization.

There are, obviously, a number of challenges to be dealt with in solving Yemen's political and military conflict. However, there are also some advantages inherent in the approach this paper outlines. First, any DDR process will be dependent on a political agreement among the various actors in the anti-Houthi coalition. Some workable precedents already exist, particularly within such documents as the Riyadh Agreement, the Saudi-brokered power-sharing agreement signed in November 2019 between the government and the STC. This agreement has not been fully or adequately implemented, but the fact that it exists could be an important building block for a DDR process. Second, although the military units affiliated with the STC do not take orders from the government, some of them are – at least on paper – under the command-and-control structure of either the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Interior. This is a workable starting point from which any DDR process can build.

## INTRODUCTION

After nearly seven years of conflict, a unified Yemeni state no longer exists. The armed Houthi movement, also known as Ansar Allah, controls most of Yemen's northern highlands as well as the Red Sea port city of Hudaydah. The group is also pushing east toward Marib city and the governorate's oil and gas fields, which are essential to the establishment of an independent Houthi state. The Houthis have restructured governance in the north through the supervisor (mushrif) system, reorganized the intelligence apparatus and rewritten school curriculums. They believe that they are winning on the ground in Yemen, particularly in Marib, and see little reason to compromise and give up at the bargaining table what they have won on the battlefield.

The anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen is effectively split between three different actors: the internationally recognized government; the Southern Transitional Council; and Tariq Saleh's forces. The internationally recognized government of Yemen, led by President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, controls relatively little territory, but it does hold what one analyst describes as Yemen's "triangle of power": the oil and gas fields in Marib, Shabwa and Hadramawt.<sup>[1]</sup> The revenue from these fields as well as international support are the government's biggest assets.

The Southern Transitional Council (STC), formed in 2017, controls Aden, Socotra, much of Lahj and Al-Dhalea governorates, as well as parts of Abyan. Since its founding, the STC has argued for an independent southern state. However, in August 2019 an STC offensive, which began by ejecting pro-government forces from Aden before moving east toward Hadramawt, bogged down in Shabwa. The STC was forced back into western Abyan and Aden, which is roughly where the lines of control have remained, with the exception of Shabwa, where STC-affiliated forces have begun repositioning themselves since late 2021. Saudi Arabia has tried to paper over the differences between Hadi and the STC and compel them to form an effective, unified alliance against the Houthis, but with limited success.

Tariq Saleh's forces, based in the port city of Mokha on the Red Sea Coast, are backed by the UAE and, to a lesser extent, by Saudi Arabia. Increasingly, Saleh, who during the first few years of the war was an ally of the Houthis during their alliance with his uncle, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, looks to be positioning himself for a seat at the table in any post-conflict negotiating scenario. In 2021, he opened a political office and, in addition to his ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, remains close to Russia.

[1] Ammar Al Aulqi, "The Yemeni Government's Triangle of Power," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 9, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/11542>

Despite the best efforts of four successive UN special envoys, a comprehensive peace settlement remains a long way off. Indeed, the conflict in Yemen has grown more complicated over time. What began as a relatively straightforward binary conflict between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government backed by the Saudi-led coalition has mutated into a multi-sided war, with elements of proxy conflict, and no end in sight.

There are several reasons a comprehensive peace agreement resulting in a reunified Yemeni state is unlikely, but three stand out. First, and perhaps most importantly, Yemen simply has too many different armed groups. None of these groups is strong enough to force every other group to submit to its will, but nearly all have enough men and munitions to act as spoilers to any sort of a national agreement that they believe does not adequately provide for their interests.

Second, the longer the war continues, the more armed groups appear. That means, in essence, that there are more and more actors fighting over fewer and fewer pieces of the economic pie, which in Yemen is largely limited to the oil and gas fields in Marib, Shabwa and Hadramawt.

Finally, there is the growing currency discrepancy between Houthi-controlled territories and non Houthi-controlled territories. Over the course of 2020 and 2021, the value of the Yemeni rial (YR) in Yemen's north and south has taken two different trajectories. In Sana'a, which is under Houthi control, the value of the Yemeni rial has largely remained constant, trading at roughly YR600 against the US dollar. This is down from YR250 to the dollar in early 2015. However, in Aden the Yemeni rial has lost significant value, and by the end of 2021 was trading at close to YR1,000 to the dollar. Part of the discrepancy can be traced to President Hadi's 2016 decision to effectively split the Central Bank of Yemen, leaving the one in Sana'a to the Houthis and relocating the government-controlled central bank to its interim capital in Aden. Another key factor was the printing of new bills in the south, which the Houthis banned in the territory under their control.

Broadly speaking, there are three scenarios for the future trajectory of the conflict in Yemen. First, a successful peace process that results in a re-unified state. This scenario would require a robust Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) process to bring Houthi and anti-Houthi forces back under the control of a single, central government. Given the current state of the conflict, this is the least likely scenario. The second broad scenario is a de facto partition of the country into Houthi-held territory and anti-Houthi territory. Such a scenario would also require a DDR process, particularly in non-Houthi territories, as a way of bringing armed groups back under the command and control of the internationally recognized government. The third scenario is a Balkanized future in which armed groups seize, hold and administer territory as Yemen fragments into multiple

statelets. Although this scenario is certainly possible, if not probable, given the current state of the conflict, it would not require a DDR process as the various armed groups would remain separate, with no desire to reintegrate. As a result, this paper does not deal with this scenario.

This paper takes the view that it is extremely unlikely that a national peace agreement establishing a re-unified state could be agreed between Yemen's various actors – mainly, the Houthi movement, the internationally recognized government, the STC and Tariq Saleh's forces. Instead, the authors believe that the most likely result of the conflict will be a divided state, either de facto or de jure, that is split between a Houthi-controlled state based in northern Yemen and a mostly southern state held by some configuration of the anti-Houthi coalition, which will require a DDR process in nominally government-held areas. As a result, that is the scenario that this paper explores.

This paper provides a snapshot of Houthi forces in the four governorates surveyed – Marib, Taiz, Lahj and Al-Dhalea – but only as a way of presenting the most accurate overview of the military situation on the ground. Based on the assumptions outlined above, this paper does not include Houthi forces as part of a potential DDR process in Yemen. Instead, it looks at how a DDR process might work among the competing actors in the anti-Houthi coalition, primarily the internationally recognized government (many of whose forces in Taiz and Marib are led by commanders loyal to the Islah party), the STC, Tariq Saleh's forces and the Saudi-led coalition-backed Giants Brigades. It should be noted that STC calls for the formation of an independent southern state pose an obstacle to the envisioned DDR process, given that much of the internationally recognized government's northern forces would likely be excluded in that scenario.

This paper also assumes that the DDR process would take place in a post-conflict environment in which a political agreement has already been reached. The reason for this is obvious. It is highly unlikely that any of the armed groups considered within this paper would agree to disarm or demobilize prior to reaching a political agreement, as that would effectively neutralize their leverage and leave them vulnerable. Yemen has already witnessed this phenomenon with the STC and the internationally recognized government over the 2019 Riyadh Agreement – a Saudi-brokered power-sharing deal whose implementation has broken down over sequencing concerns.

With this condition in mind – that DDR would take place within the anti-Houthi coalition in a post-conflict scenario – this paper examines how such a process might work in Marib, Taiz, Lahj and Al-Dhalea based on their respective current military situations. Not surprisingly, given the fragmentary nature of the conflict, each governorate, with one notable exception, is different.

From a DDR perspective, Marib is perhaps the most straightforward of the four. Tariq Saleh's forces and the STC are absent from the governorate, and relatively few armed groups would need to be disarmed and demobilized. Armed tribal forces, which this paper touches on briefly, will neither disarm nor demobilize. These armed tribal levies have a longstanding role in Yemeni society and attempting to subject them to a DDR process would result in more harm than good.

By contrast, Taiz is the most complicated of the four governorates. Tariq Saleh's forces and the Giants Brigades are both present. Government-aligned forces hold much of Taiz city as well as the southern countryside, while STC forces hold areas along Taiz's borders with Lahj and Al-Dhalea.

To ensure buy-in for a DDR process in Taiz, a political settlement must first be negotiated that clearly spells out the power-sharing responsibilities of each actor in the anti-Houthi coalition. Unlike traditional DDR processes, which moved sequentially from disarmament to demobilization and then to reintegration, second-generation DDR programs are more flexible. Such flexibility is essential in Yemen, as any DDR process is unlikely to proceed along traditional lines. In the post-settlement DDR scenario envisioned for Taiz, reintegration would precede both disarmament and demobilization.

Lahj and Al-Dhalea, although separate governorates, can largely be treated as a single entity. The region provides the biggest base of support for the STC and is home to many of its leaders. Based on interviews, however, in recent months the STC's level of support in the region, particularly in the Al-Sobaiha tribal area of western Lahj, has receded significantly, in large part due to economic concerns. The challenge in Lahj and Al-Dhalea, though, will not be the DDR process but rather reaching a political agreement between the internationally recognized government – with or without President Hadi – and the STC.

In Lahj and Al-Dhalea, as in Taiz, disarmament and demobilization will need to be the final steps, not the first ones. Due to how many of the STC forces were established – backed by the UAE, but some units, on paper, under the control of the Ministry of Defense – a post-settlement reintegration of these forces is the obvious and simplest first step. Over time, as the new state establishes itself and as trust is built between former rivals, these units can be integrated, so that there are not, for example, pro-STC brigades and pro-Islah brigades. Once that step has occurred, and depending on the security needs of the state, other brigades can be disarmed and demobilized in line with the state's budgetary priorities.



Yemeni army troops battle Houthi forces near the Um Reish military camp, Al-Jubah district, Marib governorate, on January 14, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdulmajeed Al Khadhmi

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## METHODOLOGY

This report draws on a number of sources in both Arabic and English. Much of the data collection on the various armed groups and associated military units was conducted by Sana'a Center staff and observers on the ground in Marib, Taiz, Lahj and Al-Dhalea. These governorates were selected as the focus of the report because they have witnessed some of the most active frontlines throughout the war and contain multiple armed groups that are the focus of this research. Roughly 70 interviews were carried out across the four governorates. In addition, the writers and research staff for this report drew on think tank and non-governmental organization reports, academic articles, books, UN expert panel reports, media accounts, white papers and the Twitter and Facebook pages of relevant military units. These sources include both the latest empirical research on Yemen as well as the most up-to-date reports from the frontlines.

# MARIB

## Part I: Overview of the Conflict

Marib governorate is located in north-central Yemen and has 14 districts. Its capital, Marib city, is about 175 kilometers east of Yemen's Houthi-controlled capital, Sana'a. Almost half of the governorate's current population, between 1.5 and 3 million<sup>[2]</sup> according to official government estimates,<sup>[3]</sup> live in Marib city,<sup>[4]</sup> which became a major military hub of the Saudi-led coalition and the internationally recognized government during the war, as well as a destination for more than a million internally displaced people (IDPs) fleeing Houthi-controlled areas.

In March 2015, about six months after Houthi forces allied with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh stormed Yemen's capital Sana'a, they coordinated large-scale attacks in Marib's western and northwestern districts<sup>[5]</sup> but failed to reach Marib city and the nearby Safer oil facilities.<sup>[6]</sup> The Houthi-Saleh forces were confronted by popular resistance forces (tribal fighters) and units of the Yemeni army's Third Military Region,<sup>[7]</sup> which commands military operations in Marib and Shabwa.

At this point, the national armed forces were in disarray following two years of patchwork reforms carried out by President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi aimed at creating a unified army. During the Saleh era, the national army largely consisted of factions loyal to either President Saleh or General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. In August 2012, Hadi established the Presidential Protection Brigades (loyal to himself) and attached eight brigades from the Republican Guards (loyal to Saleh) and the First Armored Division (loyal to Ali Mohsen) to regional commands.<sup>[8]</sup> The move was designed to loosen Saleh and Ali Mohsen's grip on the military, while strengthening Hadi's hand. In April 2013, he restructured the five military regions into seven and renamed them.<sup>[9]</sup>

[2] Marib's pre-war population was estimated to be about 400,000.

[3] "Marib Urban Profile: a precarious model of peaceful co-existence under threat," UN Habitat, March 2021, [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408\\_marib\\_small.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/04/210408_marib_small.pdf)

[4] Marib city's pre-war population was estimated to be about 49,000.

[5] At the same time, Houthi-Saleh forces were advancing into other strategic areas including the port city of Aden and Taiz.

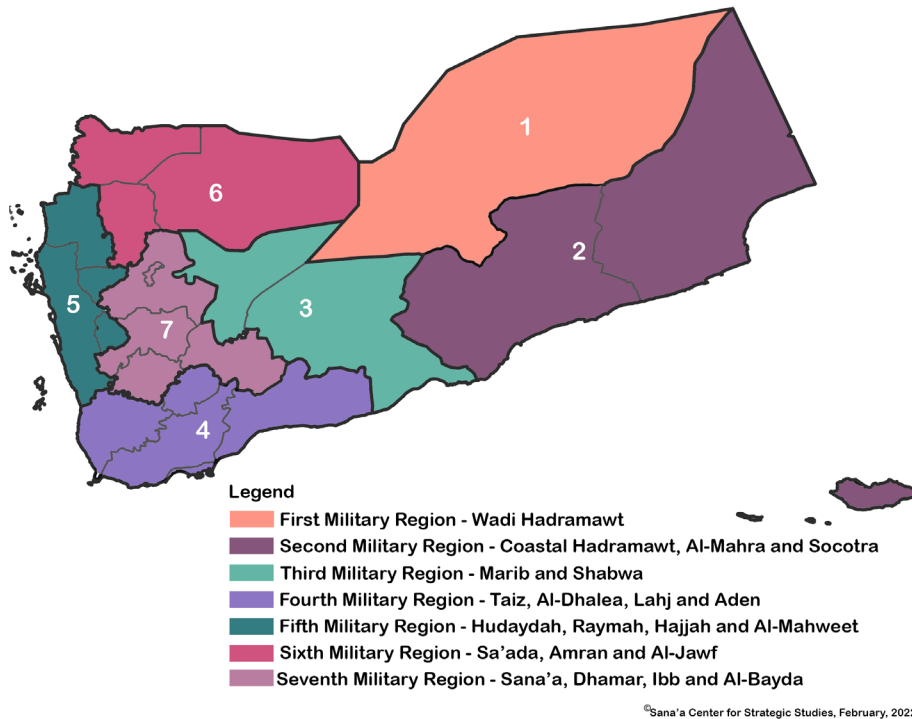
[6] The Safer oil pipeline, which runs to Ras Issa port in the Houthi-controlled port city of Hudaydah on the Red Sea coast, has been damaged since the start of the war.

[7] These brigades included the 14th Armored Brigade, at the time led by Brigadier General Mohsen al-Daari, the 312th Brigade led by the now-deceased Brigadier General Abdulrab al-Shaddadi, as well as the 107th Brigade led by Brigadier General Khaled Yaslam. Support for these units increased following the intervention of the Saudi-led Arab coalition on March 26, 2015. See, Naif al-Qodasi and Adnan al-Jabriani, "Parallel militaries: Anatomy of the armed forces fighting Yemen's war," Almasdar Online English, January 3, 2021, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/915>

[8] "Two presidential decisions ... [AR]," Saba News Agency, August 6, 2012, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news277201.htm>. Brigades redeployed in Marib are discussed below in this paper.

[9] The former five regional commands were called the Middle, Northwest, Central, Southern and Eastern regions. These were replaced by seven regional commands numbered one through seven. "Al-Masdar Online publishes decisions to appoint commanders of military regions and form reserve forces [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, April 10, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/2016117211205/http://almasdaronline.com/article/44065>

### Yemen Military Regions



In April 2015, the Hadi government started rebuilding the military to take on the Houthi-Saleh forces, appointing Major General Abdulrab al-Shaddadi commander of the Third Military Region. Three months later, Hadi incorporated some of the irregular popular resistance tribal forces into the military.<sup>[10]</sup> By the end of 2015, these forces had managed to thwart Houthi advances and secure Marib city for the government. In April 2016, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar was appointed vice president and deputy supreme commander of the armed forces.<sup>[11]</sup> Together with Saudi-led coalition troops, Ali Mohsen established Marib as the command center for military operations against the Houthis in the north.<sup>[12]</sup>

Marib's population and economy have greatly expanded over the course of the war, owing to the influx of displaced people fleeing Houthi-controlled areas and the resource-sharing deal that Governor Sultan al-Aradah struck with Hadi's government in 2016 to keep 20 percent of the governorate's revenue from oil and gas sales. This revenue allowed the local authorities to provide public services and help accommodate the population explosion.

The Islamist political party Islah, bolstered by its longtime backer Ali Mohsen, has eclipsed the General People's Congress (GPC) party of former President Saleh in influence in Marib. During the war, Islah revamped the military and security command structure across much of the governorate, replacing officers with party

[10] Naif al-Qodasi and Adnan al-Jabrani, "Parallel militaries: Anatomy of the armed forces fighting Yemen's war," *Almasdar Online English*, January 3, 2021, <https://al-masdaronline.net/national/915>

[11] "Yemeni president sacks prime minister, appoints new senior team: state media," *Reuters*, April 3, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security/yemeni-president-sacks-prime-minister-appoints-new-senior-team-state-media-idUSKCN0XooUC>

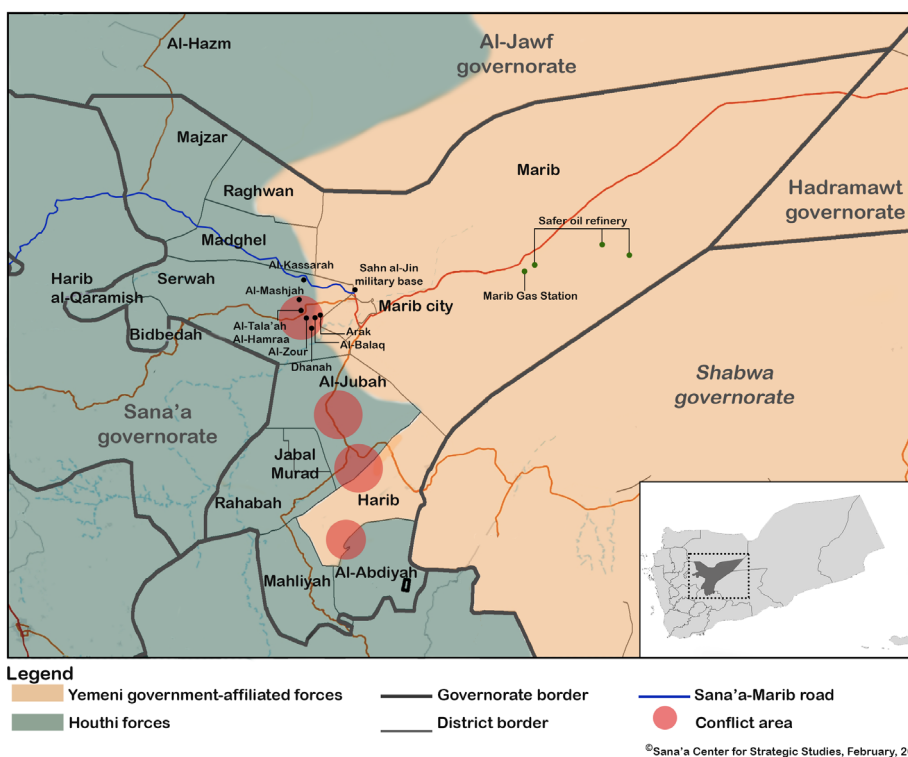
[12] The UAE had a military presence in Marib for most of the war, but withdrew its troops and Patriot missile batteries in July 2019. The last Saudi forces in Marib withdrew from the governorate in early 2021. Interview with Marib-based researcher, October 2021.

loyalists.<sup>[13]</sup> Al-Aradah is from the local Abidah tribe and aligned with Islah, despite holding prominent positions in the GPC in the past.<sup>[14]</sup>

In January 2020, following a four-year lull in intense fighting, Houthi forces resumed efforts to seize control of the governorate. Since then, the Houthis have gradually advanced toward Marib city and the Safer oil facilities.<sup>[15]</sup> Capturing these areas would give the Houthis access to the oil and gas resources necessary to run a viable economy and deprive its main opponent, the internationally recognized government, of its primary stronghold in northern Yemen.

### Current State of the Conflict

#### Marib Governorate: Zones of Control



The Houthis currently control most or all of 11 districts to the west and south of Marib city and Marib al-Wadi district, while the latter two remain fully under the control of the internationally recognized government's army and its anti-Houthi tribal allies. Harib district, to the south of Marib city, was recaptured by pro-government forces in late January 2022. The main frontlines are clustered in the hills and mountains about 15-30 km outside of Marib city to the northwest, west and southwest. The most active fronts on the city's northwestern and western outskirts include the Al-Mashjah, Al-Kassarrah, Al-Zour, Arak, Al-Rawdhah and Dhanah areas, which straddle two main roads connecting Marib to Sana'a. To the south, near the road connecting Marib city

[13] Casey Coombs, Salah Ali Salah, "How Outsiders Fighting for Marib are Reshaping the Governorate," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, November 4, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/1566>

[14] Al-Aradah was a member of the GPC Standing Committee and a Member of Parliament with the party.

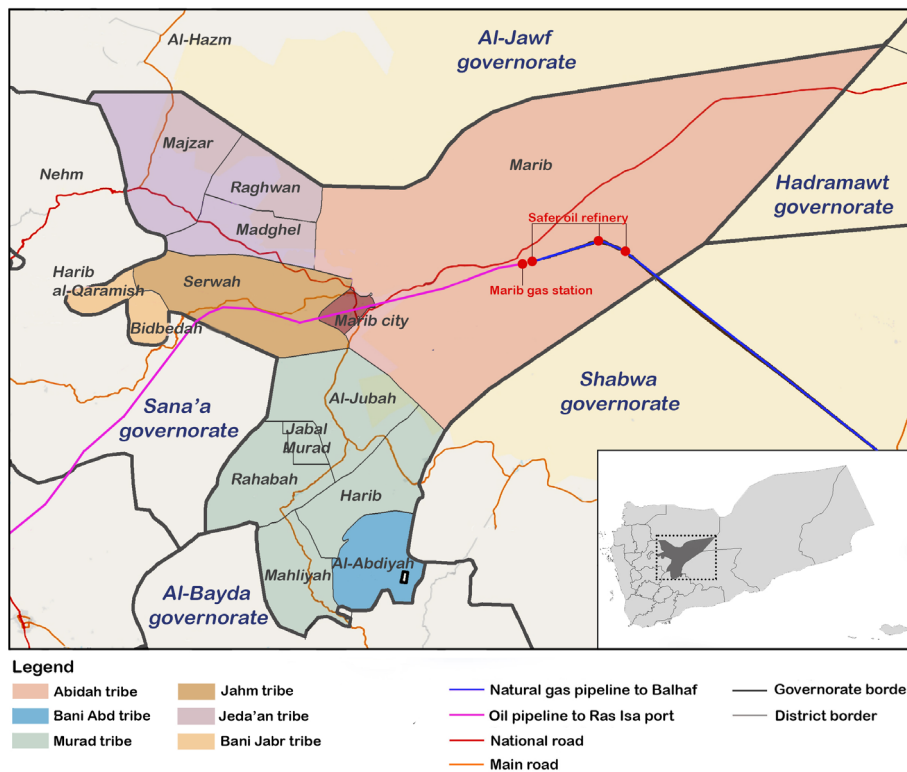
[15] Maged Al-Madhaji, "A view from the ground: Will the battle for Marib determine Yemen's fate?" Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 19, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/13451>

to Al-Jubah district, active fronts include the areas of Al-Falaj and Al-Lajmah, along the eastern edge of the Al-Balaq mountain chain. Houthi forces are also trying to push into Marib from Al-Jawf governorate to the north.

The majority of the armed groups in Marib are formally affiliated with the Ministry of Defense's Third Military Region,<sup>[16]</sup> which is responsible for combat operations in Marib and Shabwa governorates. The remaining forces are affiliated with the Seventh Military Region,<sup>[17]</sup> the Ministry of Interior's Marib Police Department or are irregular tribal fighters armed and funded by the Ministry of Defense and the local authorities under Governor Al-Aradah.

At the start of the war, a small number of Marib locals sided with the Houthis, including individuals from the Hashemite Al-Ashraf group,<sup>[18]</sup> the Zaidi Shia minority of the Bani Jabr tribe and its Jahm subtribe in Harib al-Qaramish district, and a few tribal figures from the Murad tribe. Since then, the Houthis have unsuccessfully attempted to recruit additional Marib tribal sheikhs and fighters. Houthi-affiliated media have repeatedly claimed that the Houthis are on the cusp of negotiating the peaceful handover of territory in Marib.<sup>[19]</sup> While some minor tribal leaders have made deals with the Houthis, the majority have consistently refused to negotiate because they see the Houthis as aggressors who have used negotiations to advance their own goals at the expense of the tribes.

### Marib Tribes



[16] The regional military command has undergone several leadership changes during the war. The current commander is Major General Mansour Abdullah Thawabeh.

[17] This military region covers Sana'a, Dhamar, Ibb and Al-Bayda governorates.

[18] Like the Houthi family, the Al-Ashraf are Hashemites, or descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. Hashemites have received preferential treatment under Houthi rule.

[19] "Handing over Marib without a fight at the negotiating table in Sana'a [AR]," Yemeni Press Agency, November 1, 2021, <http://www.yppagency.net/405572>

## Part II: Who's Who? Armed Groups in Marib

### *Government Forces*

Third Military Region: soldiers are paid YR60,000 every three to six months by the Ministry of Defense.

- **48th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Major General Mansour Abdullah Thawabeh, who is also commander of the Third Military Region. Thawabeh is from the Dahm tribe in Al-Jawf governorate and sits on Marib's security committee, which is led by Governor Al-Aradah and includes the leadership of the Third Military Region (Defense Ministry), the police department (Interior Ministry) and the Political Security Organization (intelligence services).

The brigade is also fighting in Al-Jawf's Khab wa Al-Sha'af district. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

- **13th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Akram al-Adimi, since April 2021.

Based in Marib city, the brigade is currently fighting on the Al-Mashjah and Al-Kassarah fronts in Serwah district. Estimated strength: 1,150 men.

- **14th Armored Brigade:**

- Commander: Ali Ammar al-Jaifi, appointed in September 2019 after his predecessor, Mohsen al-Daari, was appointed deputy commander of the Joint Forces in Marib.

The brigade is based in the Sahn al-Jin military camp in Marib city. In March 2015, under Al-Daari's command, the brigade joined with other brigades in the Third Military Region and popular resistance fighters in Marib to repel Houthi-Saleh advances toward Marib city. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **107th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Khaled Yaslam.

Based around the Safer oil facilities east of Marib city. In March 2015, under Yaslam's command, the brigade joined with other brigades in the Third Military Region and popular resistance fighters in Marib to repel Houthi-Saleh advances toward Marib city. Estimated strength: 700 men.

- **312th Armored Brigade:**

- Commander: Sadeq Moawadha, since May 2021, when he replaced Aidarous Naji al-Dumaini.

Based at the Kofal military camp in Serwah district until Houthis captured the base in February 2021, the brigade is currently fighting in Tala'a Al-Hamra near Serwah's border with Marib city. The brigade was previously led by Mohammed Ahmed al-Halisi, who was appointed chief of operations of the Third Military Region in 2019 and then commander of the forward operating base for the fronts in Rahabah and Jabal Murad districts. Estimated strength: 2,500 men.

- **3rd Mountain Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Ali Ammar al-Jaifi, who has also commanded the 14th Armored Brigade since the killing of former commander Naji bin Ali Hanshal.

Based at the Third Military Region camp in Marib city. Estimated strength: 800 men.

- **180th Air Defense Brigade:**

- Commander: Mujahid al-Shaddadi. Previously led by Sadiq Makram.

Based at the Sahn al-Jin camp in Marib city. Estimated strength: 650 men.

- **26th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Mofareh Behaibah, who belongs to the Murad tribe and sits on Marib's security committee. Behaibah is one of Marib's most prominent military commanders. He also commands the Bayhan Axis, although most of its forces are from Marib and many are currently fighting on the Marib frontlines.

Based in Al-Jubah and Harib districts until Houthi forces took control of those areas in October. President Hadi formed the Bayhan Axis in March 2018, after the Houthi-Saleh alliance unraveled and government-aligned troops liberated northwest Shabwa governorate. Composed of five brigades, including the 26th Infantry Brigade, the Bayhan Axis covers Shabwa's Usaylan, Ain and Bayhan districts, as well as Marib's Harib and Al-Jubah districts. Estimated strength of the 26th Brigade: 2,500 men.

- **159th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdulhakim Abdulrab al-Shaddadi. The previous commander, Saif Abdulrab al-Shaddadi, died in April 2021 after contracting the coronavirus.

Formerly based in Marib's southern Al-Abdiyah district, near the Qaniyah front in northern Al-Bayda governorate. Estimated strength: 2,700 men.

- **2nd Road Protection Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Samed al-Azani. The previous commander, Abdulwahid Dokar al-Haddad, was killed in clashes with tribal saboteurs in August 2021.

The brigade, which was established in 2020, is based between the Safer oil facilities and Marib city. Estimated strength: 700 men.

- **143rd Armored Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Theyab Abdulwahed al-Qibli, a prominent Murad tribesman and nephew of senior Murad tribal and General People's Congress (GPC) party leader in Marib, Sheikh Ali al-Qibli Namran, who died in August 2021. Theyab is also pro-GPC.

Currently fighting along the fronts southwest of Marib city, the brigade previously fought on several fronts throughout southern Marib districts. The brigade was formed in 2015 with Saudi-led coalition support. Estimated strength: 2,000 men.

- **Military police:**

- Commander: Naji al-Munif, a member of the Islah party, belongs to the Murad tribe in Al-Jubah district and sits on Marib's security committee.

Based in Marib city. Estimated strength: 900 men.

Seventh Military Region: soldiers paid YR60,000 every three to six months by the Ministry of Defense.

- **Hassan Farhan bin Jalal Brigade:**

- Commander: Hassan Farhan bin Jalal, current director of the Military Industrialization Department in the Ministry of Defense.

Based in Jalal's native Marib al-Wadi district east of Marib city, the brigade consists of one battalion. Estimated strength: 800 men.

Dhamar Resistance: paid YR60,000 every three to six months by the Ministry of Defense.

- **203rd Mechanized Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Hilal al-Qams. Formerly led by Mohammed al-Asoudi, who was killed in battle in February 2021.

Formed in 2017, the brigade is currently fighting on the Al-Mashjah and Al-Kassarrah fronts west of Marib city in Serwah district. Estimated strength: 2,300 men.

Azal Axis: salary information unknown.

- **Marib Martyrs' Battalion and Al-Abdiyah Martyrs' Battalion:**

- Commander: Sami al-Mabri Abu Obaydah.

Both battalions came from the 102nd Border Brigade in Sa'ada governorate that joined the Marib fronts in mid-November 2021. The battalions were trained and equipped by the Saudi-led coalition. Estimated strength: Unknown.

Marib Police Department: forces paid YR60,000 every three to six months by the Ministry of Interior.

- **Special Security Forces (SSF):**

- Commander: Salim al-Sayaghi, who is also deputy director of the Marib police department and sits on Marib's security committee. Al-Sayaghi is from Ibb governorate and previously worked as a security commander in Al-Jawf governorate. He succeeded Abdulghani Ali Abdullah Shaalan, a pro-Islah commander appointed by Marib Governor Al-Aradah, in November 2016, after leading forces that helped prevent a Houthi takeover of Marib early in the war. As commander of the SSF, Shaalan played a significant role in reorganizing the forces. He was killed on the frontlines in Serwah in February 2021.

Based in Marib city but dispersed throughout the active fronts. Estimated strength: 5,000 men.

- **Emergency Patrol and Road Police:**

- Commander: Ahmed Said Darkom, from Rahabah district, belongs to the Murad tribe and the GPC party and sits on Marib's security committee.

Based in Marib city. Estimated strength: 250 men.

- **Facilities and Personnel Protection Forces:**

- Commander: Ali Saleh Doman, who belongs to the Jeda'an tribe and the Islah party and sits on Marib's security committee.

Based in Marib city. Estimated strength: 750 men.

### *Houthi Forces*

- Commanders are listed along with relevant biographical details. Salary information of Houthi forces is unknown.
- Abdulkhaleq al-Houthi (Abu Younes), commander of the Central Military Region, which encompasses Sana'a, Dhamar, Amran, Ibb and Al-Bayda governorates, as well as Sana'a city (Amanat Al-Asimah). He is also

commander of the Houthi-controlled Republican Units/Brigades, Special Forces and Missile Brigades. He oversees frontlines in northern and western Marib. Brother of Houthi leader Abdelmalek al-Houthi.

- Mohammed Abdullah Abu Mahdi, deputy commander of the Central Military Region.
- Mohammed Abdulkarim al-Ghamari, head of the General Staff of the Houthi armed forces, the most senior commander in the Houthi military leadership structure. Al-Ghamari recently replaced Abdulkhaleq al-Houthi as head of the Houthi offensive in Marib. The US designated Al-Ghamari for sanctions in May 2021.
- Yusuf al-Madani, commander of the Fifth Military Region (Hudaydah, Hajjah, Mahwit and Raymah governorates), was recently assigned to help lead the offensive in Marib. Al-Madani is married to one of the daughters of Houthi founder Hussein Badreddine al-Houthi. Al-Madani was appointed commander of the Fifth Military Region in April 2017, when it became clear that the Saudi-led coalition was preparing for an offensive to take the Houthi-controlled port city of Hudaydah. The US designated Al-Madani as a specially designated global terrorist (SDGT) in May 2021.
- Jamil Zara'a (known as Abu Badr), commander of the Sixth Military Region, which covers Amran, Saada and Al-Jawf governorates. Oversees frontlines in the Al-Alam and Al-Jadafer areas along the border of Marib and Al-Jawf governorates.
- Abdulhakim Sarea'a, commander of the Al-Jawf Axis, also known as the Khab wa Al-Shaaf Axis, which includes frontlines near Marib in eastern Al-Jawf.
- Nasser Sobhan al-Mohammedi Abu Mortada al-Manbahi, commander of the Border Brigades. He has commanded a large number of fighters on the Al-Kasarah frontline (west of Marib city) for about a year and a half.
- Mubarak al-Mishn al-Zayadi, former director of security in Al-Jawf governorate. He was appointed advisor to the Houthi-run interior ministry and formally appointed commander of the Third Military Region (Marib and Shabwa), but does not command the region in practice. His role is limited to formal inspection visits. Al-Zayadi, who hails from one of the most prominent families of the Jahm tribe in Marib's Serwah district, has had relations with the Houthis for over 10 years. He is also a member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council.
- Brigadier General Naji Obeid Rubaid, deputy commander of the Third Military Region, oversees the region in practice.

- Brigadier General Abdulwali al-Houthi, head of operations in the Third Military Region. Oversees the fronts in Serwah. He is more influential than Naji Obeid Rubaid.
- Brigadier General Saleh al-Aawbali, commander of the Serwah fronts. His participation in commanding these fronts is nominal.
- Abu Huda Zuwyab, commander of Al-Sammad Brigades fighting in Serwah district.
- Hamza al-Shahari Omran, commander of Al-Hadi Brigades, fighting on fronts northwest of Marib city, such as Al-Mashajah.
- Abu Harb al-Aayani, commander of the Houthi Special Forces.
- Haytham Mansour Nemran, commander of the Murad Brigade. The Murad Brigade has between 200 and 300 fighters and operates under the Fifth Military Region in Hudaydah governorate. The brigade's members come from several governorates and graduated from the Houthis' ongoing military mobilization training programs. The Murad Brigade helped the Houthis seize control of Marib's Rahabah and Mahlyah districts in late 2020. The brigade then moved to fronts in Al-Jawf governorate. Nemran succeeded his father, who was affiliated with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh during the latter's alliance with the Houthis before being killed in an October 2016 airstrike in Hudaydah governorate.
- Bakil Saleh al-Wahabi, commander of the Al-Wahabi Battalions. Bakil was appointed to this role in December 2021, following the death of his father, General Saleh al-Wahabi, who established the battalions. The latter was one of the Houthis' first commanders in Al-Bayda governorate. He once led the Qaniyah front in northeastern Al-Bayda and participated in the Houthi takeover of neighboring areas in southern Marib.
- Major General Abdulatif Hammoud al-Mahdi (aka Abu Nasr al-Sha'f), commander of the joint operations room for the Fourth and Seventh Military Regions, which include the governorates of Al-Bayda, Dhamar, Ibb, Taiz, Al-Dhalea, Abyan, Lahj and Aden. He supervises Marib's Murad frontlines because they are linked to the frontlines in Al-Bayda governorate, and is considered one of the most important Houthi military commanders.
- Ahmad Mohammed al-Khaywani. His official title and position are unknown. Al-Khaywani formerly oversaw frontlines in Marib's Mahilyah district and in the Qaniyah area on Marib's border with Al-Bayda governorate.

- Ali bin Abboud al-Sharif. Leads Houthi fighters in the forces of Jamil Zara'a (Abu Badr), commander of the Sixth Military Region. These forces are fighting on the Al-Alam front in northern Marib governorate on the border with Al-Jawf governorate.
- Abdulghani Jubran, general supervisor (mushrif) in Marib. A member of the Khawlan tribe in Sana'a governorate's Khawlan district, Jubran is considered the de facto Houthi governor of Marib. He coordinates the various Houthi political, military, security, cultural and social elements in the governorate.
- Hussein Abu Nab, deputy supervisor. Performs the same roles as Jubran. A member of the Al-Ashraf group from Marib city.
- Ali Maaqal, security supervisor. In charge of security in the Marib districts under Houthi control. From Sa'ada governorate, Maaqal previously worked as a security supervisor in Harf Sufyan district in Amran governorate.

### **Part III: DDR Analysis**

The majority of anti-Houthi armed groups in Marib governorate are either formally part of the national armed forces, or are funded and armed by the Ministry of Defense and Marib's local authorities. As such, any post-conflict DDR process would simply be a matter of decommissioning certain brigades or units that are no longer necessary for the defense of the state. The one exception to this is Marib's tribal fighters. For generations, Marib tribes have been heavily armed, semi-independent actors in the territory in and around the present day borders of the governorate. Any attempts to formally disarm or demobilize tribal forces in Marib would be politically unsustainable and likely create new security challenges for the state.

## TAIZ

### Part I: Overview of the Conflict

The governorate of Taiz is located in southwestern Yemen and has 23 districts.<sup>[20]</sup> The population is largely concentrated in and around the capital Taiz city, which straddles the three northern districts of Al-Mudhaffar, Al-Qahira and Salah. Taiz city is one of Yemen's largest urban centers and a traditional cultural hub that has been a key battleground throughout the war. Another strategic center is the port city of Mokha on the governorate's Red Sea Coast, which is currently held by Tariq Saleh's forces and lies near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, one of the world's most important shipping lanes.

In March 2015, about six months after the Houthis entered Yemen's capital Sana'a and launched a coup against the internationally recognized government, Houthi forces attempted to seize control of Taiz city while expanding to Aden and other strategic areas of the country. A variety of anti-Houthi armed groups known as "popular resistance forces" quickly emerged as Houthi forces besieged Taiz city. A number of security forces, military brigades and their headquarters were overrun by the Houthis during this period, forcing commanders to reconstitute the units at a later date with existing and new personnel. By August, popular resistance forces had partially lifted the blockade by establishing a supply route to Aden. Protecting this road, which runs through Al-Turbah city in Al-Shamaytayn district in southern Taiz, has been a top priority for anti-Houthi forces in the governorate's capital.

Since 2017, the fighting in Taiz has been at a relative stalemate, as Houthi forces have remained embedded in the northern rural areas, controlling all but one entrance to Taiz city, and the popular resistance forces have splintered into competing factions. The tension has primarily been between the internationally recognized government's Taiz Military Axis, dominated by the Islamist political party Islah, and UAE-backed forces formed in the early years of the war to defend southern governorates from a Houthi takeover and to retake the port city of Hudaydah from the Houthis in 2018.<sup>[21]</sup>

As Islah gained the upper hand within the anti-Houthi resistance in Taiz, particularly through its influence in the Taiz Military Axis, the party appointed

[20] In 2018, Yemen's Central Statistical Organization estimated the population of the governorate at about 3.1 million, of which nearly 400,000 are internally displaced. Migrants are not included in these estimates. See "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen," OCHA, February 2021, pg. 35, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen\\_HNO\\_2021\\_Final.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Yemen_HNO_2021_Final.pdf)

[21] Many of the UAE-backed forces are affiliated with Yemen's former ruling General People's Congress political party, the chief rival of which has been Islah. Maged Sultan and Ahmed al-Sharjabi, "Ripple effects from Yemen's south threatens stability in Taiz," Yemen Policy Center, September 2019, [https://www.yemenpolicy.org/icsp\\_eu\\_researchdebrief/taiz2019sept13/](https://www.yemenpolicy.org/icsp_eu_researchdebrief/taiz2019sept13/); Khaled Farouq, "Taiz: A Hotbed of Irregular Militias," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15055>

allies to senior leadership positions, such as Major General Khaled Fadel,<sup>[22]</sup> and his advisor, Brigadier General Abdo Farhan al-Mekhlafi, also known as Salem.<sup>[23]</sup> Between 2017 and 2019, the Islah-led axis consolidated control of Taiz city by driving out prominent UAE-backed forces, including the Abu al-Abbas Brigade<sup>[24]</sup> and the 35th Armored Brigade. The Abu Al-Abbas Brigade was subsequently integrated into the 35th Armored Brigade, which currently controls rural areas in the southern and southeastern parts of the governorate known as Al-Hujariah. Islah-affiliated popular resistance forces including the Al-Sa'alik (Mischievous Outlaws) Brigade,<sup>[25]</sup> the Al-Tullab (Students) Brigade<sup>[26]</sup> and the Al-Asifah (Storm) Battalions<sup>[27]</sup> have also been nominally integrated into government military units. However, a number of irregular forces continue to operate outside the formal command structure of the internationally recognized government, although they are aligned with government troops. At least three armed groups formed by Islah-affiliated commander Sheikh Hammoud al-Mikhlafi, one of the founders of the popular resistance forces, are said to be funded by Qatar and Turkey.<sup>[28]</sup>

Coastal areas of Taiz, including the port city of Mokha on the Red Sea, are held by the UAE-backed National Resistance Forces<sup>[29]</sup> under Tariq Saleh, nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the Giants Brigades, a UAE-backed force composed mostly of southerners and led by Salafists. The Giants Brigades were formed in 2016 to regain control of Mokha city and surrounding areas near the Bab al-Mandab Strait from Houthi-Saleh forces. They accomplished this goal by early 2017 and have since remained in the area. The National Resistance Forces were established in Mokha in early 2018 to lead other UAE-backed forces, including the Giants Brigades, in a military campaign to wrest control of the strategic port city of Hudaydah (about 185 km north of Mokha city) from Houthi forces. Although the campaign was aborted in late 2018 with the signing of the

[22] Fadel is said to enjoy support from the office of Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, a longtime Islah ally. Khaled Farouq, "Taiz: A Hotbed of Irregular Militias," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15055>; Samir Abdullah Al-Sabri replaced Fadel in December 2018, but Fadel was reappointed a year later.

[23] Salem works independently of state institutions, carrying out directives from the chairman of Islah, Mohammed al-Yadumi, who is based between Riyadh and Istanbul. Khaled Farouq, "Taiz: A Hotbed of Irregular Militias," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15055>

[24] Named after the leader of the battalions, Adel Abdo Farea, known as Abu al-Abbas, a Salafist who relocated to Taiz after fighting the Houthis in the town of Dammaj in Sa'ada governorate, where he was protecting the Salafist Dar al-Hadith Institute. Abu Al-Abbas agreed to depart the governorate in August 2018, after years of tensions compounded by his designation by the US in October 2017 for allegedly financing Al-Qaeda affiliates. His battalions were ejected from Taiz city in April 2019. "Counter terrorism designations," US Department of Treasury, October 25, 2017, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20171025>

[25] A tactical unit of former popular resistance fighters including forces led by Azzam al-Farhan, one of the most powerful figures in Taiz and an advisor to his father, Brigadier General Abdo Farhan al-Mekhlafi (Salem). Sa'alik forces, which have enjoyed strong support from Saudi Arabia, were integrated into several brigades in the Taiz Military Axis, including the 22nd Mechanized Brigade, 17th Infantry Brigade and the 145th Infantry Brigade as well as the Taiz Security Forces. Adam Baron and Raiman al-Hamdani, "Appendix 1: Detailed Summary of Armed Groups in Taiz," New America Foundation, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/the-proxy-war-prism-on-yemen/appendix-1-detailed-summary-of-armed-groups-in-taiz/>

[26] A group of university students who joined the popular resistance, led by Abdo Hamoud al-Saghir, a former teacher and local council member in Taiz affiliated with the Islah party. Al-Saghir is the 17th Brigade's chief of operations and commands battles on the western fronts of Taiz city. Adam Baron and Raiman al-Hamdani, "Appendix 1: Detailed Summary of Armed Groups in Taiz," New America Foundation, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/the-proxy-war-prism-on-yemen/appendix-1-detailed-summary-of-armed-groups-in-taiz>

[27] Formed by local Islah leader Wahib al-Hawri, a former military officer in the now-defunct First Armored Brigade led by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the Al-Asifah Battalions were integrated into the 22nd Mechanized Brigade in February 2017. The Al-Asifah Battalions were also integrated into the 17th Brigade See, Adam Baron and Raiman al-Hamdani, "Appendix 1: Detailed Summary of Armed Groups in Taiz," New America Foundation, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/the-proxy-war-prism-on-yemen/appendix-1-detailed-summary-of-armed-groups-in-taiz>

[28] Khaled Farouq, "Taiz: A Hotbed of Irregular Militias," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, September 14, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/15055>; Maged al-Madhaji, "Taiz at the Intersection of the Yemen War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 26, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9450>

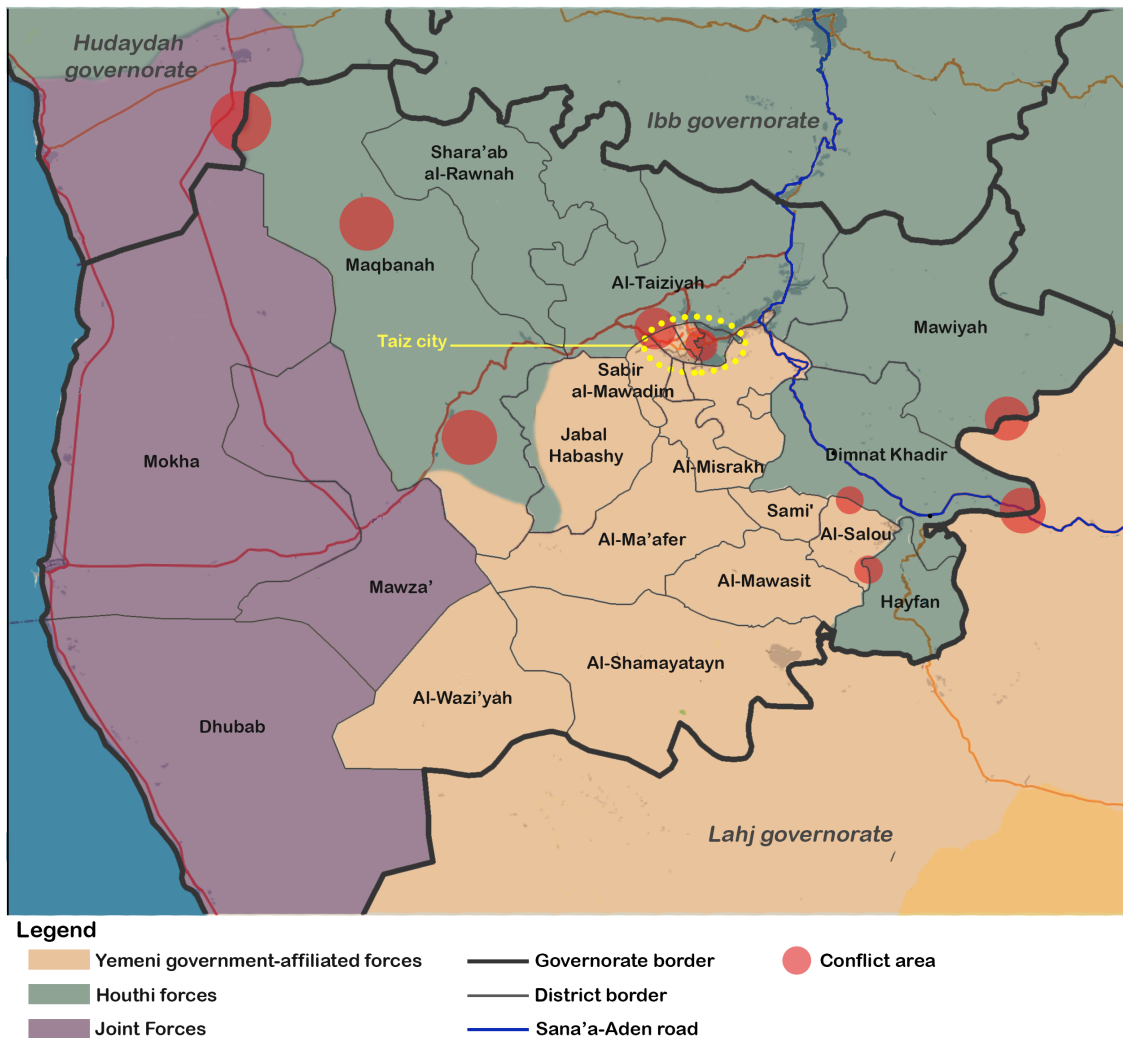
[29] Also known as the Guardians of the Republic.

Stockholm Agreement, many of these forces remained stationed along a narrow coastal strip stretching from the southern outskirts of Hudaydah city into Taiz governorate.

From November 9–12, 2021, National Resistance Forces and the Giants Brigades withdrew from most of their frontline positions near Hudaydah city.<sup>[30]</sup> Some of them massed in Taiz’s Mokha city, while others redeployed to nearby frontlines in southern Hudaydah and western Taiz’s Maqbanah district. Both National Resistance Forces and the Giants Brigades continue to receive salaries and other support from the Saudi-led coalition.

### *Current State of the Conflict*

#### Taiz Governorate: Zones of Control



[30] The 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 8th and 13th Giants Brigades relocated to Taiz's port city of Mokha. The extent to which some of these redeployed forces will join frontlines in Taiz is unclear.

Control of Taiz is broadly divided between three main military forces: the Houthis in northern rural areas; forces aligned with the internationally recognized government in Taiz city and southern and southeastern rural Taiz; and the Saudi coalition-backed National Resistance Forces and the Giants Brigades, which control Mokha city and the coast. The frontlines along northern Taiz city between Houthi forces and the Islah-affiliated Taiz Military Axis remain largely static. Fighting takes the form of regular shelling from each side and the targeting of civilians by Houthi snipers.

In the southern part of Taiz, Islah-affiliated government troops are fighting Houthi forces in rural Hayfan and Al-Salou districts, while managing a precarious relationship with UAE-backed STC forces stationed along a major supply route across the border in Lahj governorate. National Resistance Forces and the Giants Brigades (also UAE-backed) based on Taiz's western coast for years have recently sent fighters eastward to battle Houthi forces in Maqbanah district, where Islah-affiliated government troops are already engaged. Surrounded by the Houthis and UAE-backed forces, Islah-affiliated troops feel like they could be besieged at any time.

## Part II: Who's Who? Armed Groups in Taiz

### *Government Forces*

Taiz Military Axis: soldiers paid YR65,000 by the Ministry of Defense on an irregular basis.

- **22nd Mechanized Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Mohammed Mahfadi, since December 2020, when he replaced Major General Sadiq Sarhan.
- Battalion 1 Commander: Mahfouz Thabit.
- Battalion 2 Commanders: Ahmed al-Baadani and Yahya al-Raymi.
- Battalion 3 Commander: Abdulraqib Marei.
- Battalion 4 Commander: Nabil al-Ra'ini.
- Battalion 5 Commander: Bakr Sadiq Sarhan.
- Battalion 6 Commander: Abdulhakim al-Shuja'a.

The headquarters of the 22nd Mechanized Brigade is in the Osaifirah neighborhood of Al-Qahirah district in northern Taiz city. Its battalions are stationed throughout the capital and the fronts surrounding it. Prior to the war, the brigade was based slightly to the north of Taiz city in the Al-Hawban area of Al-Taiziyah district, which is currently held by the Houthis. After the Houthis took control of its headquarters in 2015, Sarhan reconstituted the brigade by drawing from popular resistance fighters aligned with irregular forces like the Al-Sa'alik and Al-Tullab Brigades and the Al-Asifah Battalions. Estimated strength: At least 2,500 men.

- **17th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdulmalek al-Ahdal,<sup>[31]</sup> who replaced Abdulrahman Thabet al-Shamsani in September 2020.
- Head of Operations: Abdo Hamoud al-Saghir.

The brigade's headquarters is in a former orphanage in the Bir Basha area of Taiz city. Its six battalions are composed of recruits from other brigades inside and outside of Taiz, as well as popular resistance forces such as the Al-Sa'alik Brigade, the Al-Tullab Brigade and the Al-Asifah Battalions. Al-Shamsani reformed the brigade between 2016 and 2017. Its forces are deployed around Jabal Han, 30th Street and the Old Airport in the southern Al-Taiziyah district, the Air Defense camp in northern Al-Mudhaffar district as well as parts of Jabal Habashy and Maqbanah districts. Estimated Strength: at least 2,500 men.

- **35th Armored Brigade:**

- Commander: Commander Abdulrahman Thabet al-Shamsani, appointed in July 2020 after the assassination of former commander Adnan al-Hamdani in December 2019.

The brigade's main headquarters are located in the Al-Ain area of Al-Mawasit district. Composed of six battalions and reserve forces, the brigade is deployed across rural fronts in several districts including Al-Salou, Al-Shamayatayn, Al-Misrakh, Al-Mawasit and Al-Ma'afer. In the early years of the war, the brigade was perceived as close to the Socialist and Nasserist parties and for years enjoyed Emirati support. In 2020, the Taiz Military Axis pushed the brigade out of Taiz city and appointed loyalist commanders like Al-Shamsani to its ranks. The brigade's current forces are drawn from popular resistance fighters like the Battalion of Martyr Abdulraqeb Abdulwahab, as well fighters from the Abu Al-Abbas Brigade, which are administratively under the command of the 35th Armored Brigade but exercise a great deal of autonomy on the western coast of the governorate. Estimated strength: 8,000 men.

- **170th Air Defense Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdullah Abdo Hammoud al-Qaisi, since December 2020, when he replaced the previous commander, Abdulaziz al-Majidi, a member of the Yemen Socialist Party.

Based in government and civilian buildings, such as the Canada Dry Factory in the Al-Hasab neighborhood and the Al-Nahdha school in Zaid al-Mushki neighborhood, the brigade's forces are deployed on the northern front around Taiz city, in the Kalabah and Al-Rawda areas, as well as around 40th Street and the Air Defense camp. Al-Majidi reformed the brigade in 2017. Its five battalions consist of mostly tribal forces from Shar'ab Al-Rawnah and Shar'ab Al-Salam districts in northern Taiz. Some of the brigade's forces are affiliated with Islah-aligned commander Hammoud al-Mikhlaifi. Estimated strength: 2,500 men.

[31] Al-Ahdal was appointed by the Taiz Military Axis, rather than by presidential decree. He is affiliated with the Islah party.

- **145th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Khaled Fadel, commander of the Taiz Military Axis.

The brigade is based in civilian and government buildings in Taiz city, such as the orphanage building in the Aqaqa area next to the Central Prison. Deployed on fronts to the north and west of Taiz city in the districts of Jabal Habashy, Al-Taiziyah, Al-Mudhaffar and Maqbanah, the brigade's six battalions are drawn from the Al-Tullab and Al-Sa'alik Brigades. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **4th Mountain Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Abu Bakr al-Jabouli.

Based in the Technical Institute building in the Al-Asabeh area of Al-Shamayatayn district, the brigade's forces are deployed in Taiz's border districts of Hayfan and Al-Shamayatayn, and Lahj's border districts of Al-Maqatirah and Tur Al-Bahah. Formed in 2017, the brigade includes the 4th Mountain Infantry Battalion, which was created after splitting from the 35th Armored Brigade forces on the Al-Ohkom front in Hayfan district. In recent months, some members of the brigade deserted their positions due to lack of payment. Estimated strength: 2,000 men.

- **Military Police:**

- Commander: Jalal al-Ramsi, who replaced Jamal al-Khawlani.

Based in the Technical Institute building in Al-Qahirah district, the military police forces are deployed at the entrances to Taiz city, as well as in central locations, and contribute to securing government-held neighborhoods. The forces include former personnel of the Military Police, in addition to selected individuals from new military brigades.

Taiz Police Department: Paid YR60,000 on an irregular basis by the Ministry of Interior.

- **Special Security Forces:**

- Commander: Jamil Aqlan, a member of the GPC.

Based in the Industrial Technical Institute in Al-Ma'afar district and deployed mainly in rural Al-Hujariah in Taiz's southern and southeastern countryside. Estimated strength: Unknown.

- **Taiz Security Department:**

- Commander: Mansour al-Akhli.

Based in Salah district in Taiz city, the security forces were drawn from the Al-Sa'alik Brigade, the Al-Tullab Brigade, the Abu Al-Abbas Brigade, the Hasm Brigades and fighters from the Ibb Resistance Movement.

- Emergency Patrol and Road Police (Al-Najda):
- Commander: Mohammed Mahyoub.

Based in the Al-Saqr Club in the Bir Basha area of Taiz city and deployed in Al-Taiziyah district, the police force is made up of former Al-Najda personnel from before the war, as well as recruits from various military brigades and individuals nominated by political parties. Estimated strength: Unknown.

Forces under President Hadi: paid YR65,000 by the Ministry of Defense on an irregular basis.

- **5th Presidential Protection Brigade:**

- Commander: Adnan bin Ruzaiq<sup>[32]</sup>

The brigade is based in civilian and government buildings, including Taiz University's Medical School Building, in the Bir Basha area of Taiz city. Its forces are deployed mainly on the northwestern front of Taiz city in the areas of Hadhran, Al-Dhabab, Wadi Ghorab and near the Ghee and Soap Factory.

Its five battalions are composed of members of the Hasm Brigades, which includes individuals from southern governorates such as Shabwa, Abyan, Aden and Lahj governorates as well as individuals from Taiz. It is one of the best-armed brigades in the governorate, with armored vehicles and advanced weapons. The brigade was formed by presidential decree in 2017. Estimated strength: 2,500 men.

Irregular Islah Forces: paid YR60,000 every three to four months by Qatar and Turkey.

- **Al-Hamd Camp:**

- Commander: Hammoud al-Mikhlaifi.

Based in the Technical Institute building in the Yafrus area of Jabal Habashy district, its forces are deployed elsewhere in Jabal Habashy and in the districts of Al-Ma'afer and Sabir Al-Mawadim. The camp is aligned with the internationally recognized government but is not under the command of the Ministry of Defense. Estimated strength: 5,000 men.

- **3rd Support and Backup Brigade:**

- Commander: Adnan al-Foudai.

Stationed in Al-Shamayatayn district, the brigade is aligned with Hammoud al-Mikhlaifi and the internationally recognized government but is not under the command of the Ministry of Defense. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

[32] Bushra al-Maqtari, "The evolution of militant Salafism in Taiz," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 29, 2017, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/4843>. Bin Ruzaiq, whose full name is Adnan bin Ruzaiq al-Qamoushi, is a Salafist. He reportedly commanded a number of Kataib Hasm fighters in Shabwa governorate drawn from the al-Qamoush tribes. Reports suggest that many of his fighters are Salafists from Aden, as well as soldiers in Taiz who were previously imprisoned by the Houthis.

- **5th Support and Backup Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdullah al-Maqrami.

Three battalions are deployed in and around Taiz city and near Taiz's southern border with Lahj. The 1st battalion is based at the Technical Institute's training center in the Yafrus area of Jabal Habashy district and deployed elsewhere in Jabal Habashy and in other districts, including Al-Misrakh and Sabir Al-Mawadim. The 2nd battalion is in Al-Turbah city and Al-Asabeh area in Al-Shamaytayn district, as well as in Lahj governorate's Al-Maqatirah district. The 3rd battalion is stationed in Salah district in eastern Taiz city. The brigade is aligned with Hammoud al-Mikhlaft and the internationally recognized government but operates outside the command of the Ministry of Defense. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

Fourth Military Region leadership: paid YR60,000 on an irregular basis by the Ministry of Defense.

- **Al-Usbah Brigade (Facilities Protection Brigade):**

- Commander: Marwan Atiq, who replaced Colonel Radwan al-Adini after he was killed in June 2018.

Based in the Nasser School and composed of fighters who were affiliated with the Abu Al-Abbas Brigade, the brigade is deployed in Al-Qahirah district in Taiz city. Formed by popular resistance fighters in 2015, the brigade was formalized in late 2017. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

Southern Transitional Council (STC) and internationally recognized government: fighters paid YR65,000 by the Ministry of Defense on an irregular basis.

- **4th Hazm Brigade:**

- Commander: Wafi Ahmed Mohammed al-Ghabs al-Sobaihi, pro-STC.

The brigade is deployed in the Al-Bayda area along the border of Lahj governorate's Tur Al-Bahah district and Taiz's Hayfan district. Its soldiers are affiliated with both the internationally recognized government and the STC.

Saudi-Led Coalition-Backed Forces

National Resistance Forces: paid 1,000 Saudi riyals (US\$270 as of the end of January 2022) by the coalition on a monthly basis.

- **20th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Haitham Qasim.

Some troops from the brigade are based in Taiz's southwestern Al-Wazi'yah district. Estimated strength: Unknown.

- **9th Brigade:**

- Commander: Unknown.

Based at Jabal Al-Narr in Mokha district. Estimated strength: 1,200 fighters.

Giants Brigades: paid 1,000 Saudi riyals by the coalition on a monthly basis.

- **1st Giants Brigade:**

- Commander: Raed al-Habhi.

Five battalions from this brigade are tasked with defending coastal areas in Mokha district. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **3rd Giants Brigade:**

- Commander: Vacant. Abu Harb al-Radfani (Abu Harb) was killed in battles in Bayhan district, Shabwa, on January 8, 2022. Abu Harb replaced Ali Nasser al-Awdhali (Abu Aisha), who was preceded by Abdulrahman al-Lahji.<sup>[33]</sup>

The brigade's five battalions are in charge of air defense in Mokha district. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **11th Giants Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdul Rahman al-Jaari, who replaced the previous commander Mamoun al-Mahjami in July 2021.

Based near the frontlines north of the Al-Juma'a area in Mokha district, the brigade has two battalions. Estimated strength: 800 men.

## *Houthi Forces*

Commanders are listed along with relevant biographical details. Salary information of Houthi forces is unknown.

- Salah Bagash, governor. He held the position of a deputy and acting governor from April to August 2021, following the dismissal of former Governor Salim Mughales. Mahdi al-Mashat, president of the Houthi-run Supreme Political Council (SPC), appointed Bagash governor in August.
- Abdullah al-Nuwairi, general supervisor. Hails from Sa'ada governorate. Prior to the Houthi coup in September 2014, Al-Nuwairi was in charge of prisons in Sana'a. He was later appointed supervisor of Hajjah city until 2019, when Abdelmalek al-Houthi appointed him general supervisor of Taiz governorate.

[33] When the UAE merged the military forces on the western coast under the supervision of Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami and Tariq Saleh, Abdulrahman al-Lahji, who is loyal to the internationally recognized government, refused to continue under that leadership, forcing the Emirates to replace him with Ali Nasser al-Awdhali (Abu Aisha). Like Al-Lahji, Abu Aisha declared support for the internationally recognized government and refused to recognize the leadership of Al-Muharrami and Saleh. Abu Aisha was dismissed in January 2021 and forced out of his position on June 9. In his place, Abu Harb al-Radfani (Abu Harb) was named commander of the 3rd Giants Brigade. Abu Harb was killed in battles in Bayhan, Shabwa on January 8, 2022.

- Ismail Abdelmalek Sharaf al-Din, first deputy governor of Taiz. Previously the Houthi educational supervisor in Taiz.
- Hamis al-Habari, social supervisor. Hails from a family of influential tribal sheikhs in Arhab district in Sana'a governorate. The Al-Habari family also works in commerce and is one of the most important wheat traders in Yemen.
- Brigadier General Ahmed Yahya Madas, Taiz director of security. Previously served as Al-Mahwit governorate's director of security until he was transferred to Taiz in August 2021.
- Major General Abdulatif al-Mahdi (Abu Nasr Al-Sha'f), commander of the joint operations room for the Fourth and Seventh Military Regions and one of the most prominent Houthi commanders. He is assisted by Colonel Ali Hussein Al-Sharafi. Al-Mahdi is involved in leading Houthi fighting in Marib, Lahj and Al-Dhalea.
- Brigadier General Mohammed Yahya al-Khaled, assistant commander of the Fourth Military Region and the most prominent commander of Taiz fronts. He also oversees operations in Lahj.
- Major General Hammoud Dahmash, chief of staff of the Fourth Military Region.
- Colonel Ahmed al-Qarn, chief of staff of the Taiz Axis.
- Brigadier General Talal al-Shamiri, commander of the 33rd Armored Brigade leading the Al-Barah front.
- Ramzi al-Saqqaf, in charge of military mobilization for the Taiz fronts.
- Fa'ed al-Sami'i, supervisor of the western sector of Taiz governorate.
- Brigadier General Mansour Mohsen Ahmed Mu'ajir, commander of the Houthi-affiliated 35th Armored Brigade.
- Ahmed al-Dhayani, commands the central and eastern fronts of Taiz city.
- Brigadier General Abdullah Jamil al-Hadiri, commander of the 145th Infantry Brigade.
- Youssef al-A'qbari, commander of the 149th Brigade stationed east of Taiz city.

### Part III: DDR Analysis

Taiz presents a unique set of challenges for any DDR process. The governorate is home to a variety of armed groups that share a common goal of defeating the Houthis. At the same time, these groups are competing intensely among themselves for territorial influence and control. Early in the war, some irregular forces were relatively successfully integrated into the national army, such as Islah-affiliated popular resistance forces like the Al-Sa'alik Brigade, the Al-Tullab Brigade and the Al-Asifah Battalions. This integration process was facilitated by the fact that many of the absorbed groups shared the same political affiliation as the Taiz Military Axis brigades they joined.

A less successful case was the integration of the UAE-backed Abu Al-Abbas Brigade into the formerly UAE-backed 35th Armored Brigade, which has since come under the command of the Islah-aligned Taiz Military Axis. Although administratively under the command of the 35th Armored Brigade, these forces are present in Mokha district and conduct their own military operations in the Al-Kadha area of Ma'afar district.

The prospects of the National Resistance Forces led by Tariq Saleh coming under the command of the internationally recognized government's armed forces are poor. Although Saleh has expressed a willingness to work together with the government to defeat the Houthis, and the government has at times welcomed these gestures, there remains a lack of trust between the parties. President Hadi and Islah spearheaded efforts to remove former President Saleh (Tariq's uncle) from power in 2011 and to dismantle the security and military forces loyal to him, including Tariq Saleh's Presidential Guard forces. Tariq is likely worried about being removed as commander of the National Resistance Forces if they are integrated into the government's command structure.

Tariq Saleh was allied with the Houthis from the onset of their siege of Taiz city in March 2015, up until December 2017, when they killed former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, prompting Tariq to defect. Another potential hindrance to Tariq's forces joining a unified command structure is that his troops are by and large from northern governorates controlled by the Houthis. Unless the Houthis are driven out of these areas, Tariq and his troops would likely be forced to settle in their current areas of control in the southwestern districts of Taiz, which could create friction with political rivals in the governorate, such as Islah, due to Tariq's affiliation with the UAE.

The Saudi coalition-backed Giants Brigades, on the other hand, are more likely to integrate into a unified command structure, given that many among the Salafist-led forces are apolitical and already side with the government.

Any DDR process in Taiz will need to be preceded by a political settlement in which power sharing responsibilities are clear. Absent that, there will be no disarming, demobilizing or reintegrating most of these groups, as taking any of these steps would effectively end their respective abilities to project political power.

In the scenario envisioned by this paper – a post-settlement DDR – it is likely that reintegration would need to precede both disarmament and demobilization. However, Taiz cannot be dealt with in isolation. In order to have any chance of working, any political settlement and subsequent DDR process must be part of a broader agreement among local groups in the anti-Houthi coalition.

## LAHJ

### Part I: Overview of the Conflict

On March 24, 2015 – six months after the Houthis entered Sana’a and a month after President Hadi escaped house arrest in the capital and fled to Aden – Houthi forces and military units loyal to former president Saleh entered the governorate of Lahj. The governorate, which is divided into 15 districts and is often considered the gateway to Aden, is home to roughly one million people. The next day, Houthi and Saleh forces took the Al-Anad air base, 50 kilometers north of Aden, and arrested then-Yemeni Minister of Defense, Mahmoud al-Sobaihi. Hours later, Saudi Arabia announced from Washington D.C. the beginning of combat operations in Yemen.

By the time Saudi-led coalition forces, primarily Emirati troops, landed in Yemen, Houthi-Saleh forces were entrenched in Aden. The battle for the southern port city lasted most of the summer, but by mid-July Houthi forces were in full retreat, withdrawing from both Aden and later Al-Anad air base.<sup>[34]</sup> They eventually established a pair of frontlines in northern and western Lahj, around Kirsh in the district of Al-Musaymir in December 2015 and around Kahbub Mountain in the district of Al-Madaribah wa Al-Arah in April 2016.<sup>[35]</sup>

In March 2016, the UAE began to establish proxy forces in southern Yemen. One of the first groups that the UAE funded, trained and armed was the Security Belt forces, which were designed to provide a protective “belt” around Aden, where UAE troops were headquartered. The Security Belt forces operate in Aden, Lahj and Abyan and are now separate from the Support and Backup Brigades, another pro-STC, UAE-backed force.<sup>[36]</sup> In June 2021, STC president al-Zubaydi assigned different overall commanders to Security Belt Forces and the Support and Backup Brigades. Initially, the Security Belt forces numbered roughly 10,000, but that number quickly swelled to 15,000.<sup>[37]</sup>

In 2017, the war in Lahj changed from a binary conflict between Hadi’s government and the Houthis, to a multi-sided one, when President Hadi elected to fire Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the governor of Aden, and Hani bin Breik, a minister without portfolio. Both men were close to the UAE and, within weeks of being fired, the two had formed the Southern Transitional Council (STC) with the expressed goal

[34] Saeed al-Batati and Kareem Fahim, “Saudi-backed Forces Said to Wrest Aden, Yemen, from Houthis,” The New York Times, July 17, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/18/world/middleeast/yemen-aden-houthis-saudi-arabia.html>

[35] “Yemen’s Fractured South: Aden, Abyan, and Lahj,” ACELD, December 18, 2019. <https://acleddata.com/2019/12/18/yemens-fractured-south-aden-abyan-and-lahij/>

[36] Nadwa al-Dawsari, “Fantasies of State Power Cannot Solve Yemen’s War,” The Century Foundation, July 13, 2021. <https://tcf.org/content/report/fantasies-state-power-cannot-solve-yemens-war/?agreed=1>

[37] UN Panel of Experts on Yemen, “Annual Report 2017,” January 2018, pgs. 18-19. <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2018/594>

of creating an independent southern state. In many ways, the STC became the political wing of many of the armed proxy units the UAE formed across southern Yemen.

Not all UAE-backed groups, however, support the STC. The 13 brigades within the UAE-backed Giants Brigades are widely considered neutral in the government-STC conflict. Indeed, one of the most powerful military figures in Lahj, Hamdi Shukri al-Sobaihi, is a commander in the Giants Brigades. Al-Sobaihi is considered pro-secession but does not support the STC. (In recent months, he has thrown his support behind President Hadi, although it is unclear how long this will last.)

In 2018, Houthi forces around Kahbub Mountain in western Lahj withdrew to confront the UAE advance toward Hudaydah along the Red Sea Coast. In recent years, however, much of the conflict in Lahj has been between armed groups affiliated with the STC and military units loyal to Hadi's government. Following the STC takeover of Aden in August 2019, which sparked a failed STC offensive east toward the oil and gas fields in Shabwa and Hadramawt, the STC took military control over much of Lahj. It should be noted that much of the STC's leadership comes from Lahj and Al-Dhalea and is broadly opposed by an Abyan-Shabwa axis. The acrimony dates back to a political power struggle that led to a brief but bloody civil war in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) in 1986.

Unlike in Aden, the STC does not have administrative or budgetary control in Lahj. The Hadi-appointed governor is still in place and any official who publicly supports the STC is subjected to a suspension of their salary. This has led to a confusing situation in some districts, which feature competing local councils: one aligned with the STC and another with Hadi's government. There have also been scattered clashes between units loyal to Hadi and those affiliated with the STC, most notably around the Al-Anad air base in July 2020.

## Current State of the Conflict

### Lahj Governorate: Zones of Control



As noted above, there are two conflicts taking place simultaneously in Lahj. The first is between the Houthis and the anti-Houthi alliance. The second is within the anti-Houthi alliance between Hadi's government and the STC.

There are currently two active fronts with the Houthis in Lahj. The first is on Lahj's northern border with Taiz and is largely contained to the district of Al-Qabbaytah, and cross-border fighting in Al-Musaymir and Tur Al-Bahah districts. This is known collectively as the Al-Qabbaytah front. The second front is on Lahj's eastern border with Al-Bayda, in the district of Al-Hadd. This is known as the Al-Hadd Yafa'a front.

There were significant clashes along the Al-Hadd Yafa'a front in July 2021, with Houthi forces seizing territory in and around Al-Jamajim. Al-Hadd is strategically important as the northernmost district in Lahj, bordering Al-Bayda, that contains a key road between northern and southern Yemen.

The Houthis have also carried out missile attacks – reportedly launched from the Al-Hawban area northeast of Taiz city – on Al-Anad air base. One such attack, in August 2021, killed at least 40 soldiers, most of whom were affiliated with the 3rd Giants' Brigade.<sup>[38]</sup>

[38] Abubakr al-Shamahi, "State of the War," *The Yemen Review*, August 2021. [https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/14977#Al\\_Anad\\_strike](https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/14977#Al_Anad_strike)

Although the conflict between the STC and Hadi's government touches upon all districts in Lahj, in recent months much of it has been centered on the Al-Sobaiha area in western Lahj. STC support appears to be eroding in parts of the governorate, primarily along the coast and in the central areas. This appears to be largely due to two concerns: the declining value of the Yemeni rial; and the fact that the STC has been unable to significantly alter the political or economic situation in the governorate.

In the Al-Sobaiha area, which is largely tribal, the STC has struggled to make inroads, particularly as key local figures such as Hamdi Shukri al-Sobaihi have lined up against the STC. At the moment, STC military assets in Al-Sobaiha are limited to some Security Belt forces and elements of the 9th Thunderbolt Brigade. At different times, both units have been forced to withdraw from their positions due to tribal opposition.

## Part II: Who's Who: Armed Groups in Lahj

The base salary for soldiers in units listed below is YR60,000 per month, unless otherwise noted. This salary is distributed every 4-6 months, but is often in arrears.

### *Government Forces*

Ministry of Defense

- **Fourth Military Region:**

- Commander: Fadhl Hassan al-Amri, based in Aden.

- **17th Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Ahmad Abdullah al-Turki, who is also the Hadi appointed governor of Lahj. Al-Turki was appointed commander of the brigade on January 8, 2016.

The brigade is based in the districts of Tur Al-Bahah and Ras al-Ara, in the west of the governorate, some units are currently stationed in the districts of Al-Hawtah and Tuban (administrative center of the governorate) to protect the governor there. Estimated strength: 3,500 men.

- **131st Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Thabit Jawas al-Radfani, who is also the Al-Anad Axis commander.

The brigade is based in Tuban. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **101st Mechanized Brigade:**

- Commander: Hassan Salim al-Qubayti.

The brigade, which is based in Al-Qabbaytah, is aligned with Hadi's government. However, many of its soldiers are sympathetic to the STC.

- **201st Mechanized Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Fadl Ahmed Hassan Tahsheh, who was appointed on January 8, 2016.

The brigade is stationed in Al-Anad air base. Estimated strength: 3,500 men.

- **Military Police:**

- Commander: Sabri Abdu Tahir al-Sobaihi.

Ministry of the Interior

- **Police Forces:**

- Commander: Saleh Said al-Yafa'i, appointed by Hadi in 2016. However, Al-Yafi'i has since become affiliated with the STC and, in 2021, was appointed head of the STC's Support and Backup Brigades. Hadi has yet to relieve him of his command.

Estimated strength: 7,000 men.

- **Police Patrol and Road Security:**

- Commander: Mohammed Amr al-Junaydi.

Irregular Islah forces affiliated with the unofficial Tur Al-Bahah Military Axis: <sup>[39]</sup>  
Salary information unknown.

- **4th Mountain Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Abu Bakr al-Jabouli

The brigade is stationed in Tur Al-Bahah district and parts of Al-Maqatirah district. The brigade was formed in early 2017. Estimated strength: 2,000 men.

- **9th Infantry Brigade**

- Commander: Munif al-Atawi al-Sobaihi

Estimated strength: 1,000 men

[39] The Islah-affiliated Tur Al-Baha Axis, led by Abu Bakr al-Jabouli, is not officially under the Ministry of Defense because it was not formed by government decree. It consists of at least five brigades, all of which are stationed in the northern parts of Lahj's Tur Al-Baha and Maqatirah districts along the Taiz border. The axis is funded largely by imposing taxes on commercial goods coming from Aden to Taiz, although the 4th Mountain Infantry Brigade receives some financial support from the Ministry of Defense. Interview with Taiz-based researcher, February 2022.

- **120th Artillery Brigade**

- Commander: Rami Mahmoud al-Samati

Estimated strength: 1,000 men

- **6th Support and Backup Brigade:**

- Commander: Noman Dokum

Estimated strength: 1,000 men

- **8th Reserve Brigade:**

- Commander: Yasser Mohammed al-Sawmali

### *Saudi-Led Coalition-Backed Forces*

#### Giants Brigades

- **2nd Brigade:**

- Commander: Hamdi Shukri al-Sobaihi, who is the key commander in western Lahj. Al-Sobaihi is widely considered independent and, in the past, has favored secession, although he does not support the STC. In recent months he has backed Hadi against the STC.

Estimated strength: 2,800 men.

- **4th Brigade:**

- Commander: Nizar al-Wajih al-Yafi'i.

- 3rd Battalion Commander: Yusif al-Baraq al-Yafa'i, based on the Red Sea Coast.

#### Hazm Brigades

- **1st Brigade:**

- Commander: Abdulghani al-Sobaihi, who reports to the Saudi-led coalition, but is considered close to the internationally recognized government.

Most of the brigade is deployed across Tur Al-Bahah in western Lahj.

- **2nd Hazm Brigade:**

- Commander: Fadhl Hassan al-Amri, who was appointed on November 11, 2016.

The brigade is based at Al-Anad air base, although some battalions are based in Aden along with Al-Amri, who sided with the STC in August 2019 and is still considered affiliated with the STC. Estimated strength: 1,300 men.

- **3rd Hazm Brigade:**

- Commander: Mahmud Sail al-Sobaihi, who was appointed on January 21, 2017.

The brigade is based in Tur Al-Bahah. Estimated strength: 2,000 men.

- **4th Hazm Brigade:**

- Commander: Wafi al-Qabas al-Sobaihi, who is considered loyal to the STC. The brigade is based in Tur Al-Bahah, Hayfan and Al-Qabbaytah districts.

The soldiers in this brigade are affiliated both with the internationally recognized government as well as with the STC. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

### *Southern Transitional Council-Affiliated Forces*

- **Backup and Support Brigades**

- Commander: Saleh al-Sayed.

- **1st Brigade:**

- 1st Battalion Commander: Fahd Mahmoud al-Marfadi, based in Al-Hadd Yafa'a.

- **4th Brigade:**

- Commander: Hadar al-Shahati al-Yafa'i, based in the Rabat area of the Tuban district.

- 1st Battalion Commander: Ali al-Qadhi al-Yafa'i, based in Al-Hadd Yafa'a.

- 3rd Battalion Commander: Salah Omr al-Sharafi al-Yafa'i, based in Al-Hadd Yafa'a.

- **5th Brigade:**

- Commander: Mukhtar Ali al-Nubi, who was appointed by the UAE on November 24, 2017.

- 1st Battalion Commander: Mubarak Said Hindi al-Radfani.

- 2nd Battalion Commander: Mohammed Hassan.

The brigade is based in Al-Habilin, the capital of the Radfan district. Two battalions are also stationed at the fronts in Al-Qabbaytah. One battalion was stationed in the Crater district of Aden at Camp 20 until March 2020. Estimated strength: 1,300 men.

- **Security Belt forces**
  - Lahj Commander: Husayn Saidi al-Yafa'i.
  - Deputy commander: Tawfiq Said Hassan al-Sobaihi.
  - Security Belt forces Al-Musaymir:
  - Commander: Mohammed Ali al-Hushbi.
- **Security Belt forces Al-Hadd Yafa'a:**
  - Commander: Fahd Mahmoud al-Marfadi, who also commands the Security Belt's 1st Brigade.
- **Security Belt forces Tur Al-Bahah:**
  - Commander: Wadah Amr Said al-Sobaihi.
- **3rd Hazm Brigade:**
  - Commander: Mahmoud Sa'il al-Sobaihi.
  - 7th Battalion Commander: Ali Said, based in Tur Al-Bahah district.
- **Southern Thunderbolt Brigades:**
  - Commander: Ali Ahmad al-Bishi al-Dhaei.
- **4th Thunderbolt Brigade:**
  - Commander: Abd al-Aziz al-Mansouri al-Yafa'i.
  - 1st Battalion Commander: Abu Anwar al-Shayouhi al-Yafa'i, based in Al-Hadd district.
- **9th Thunderbolt Brigade:**
  - Commander: Faruq Ali Ahmed Saeed al-Kalouli, who was appointed by Aiderous al-Zubaidi in June 2019.

The brigade is stationed in Tur Al-Bahah district. Estimated strength: 1,500 men.

- **10th Thunderbolt Brigade:**
  - Commander: Rashdi Ubayd Hazim al-Hushabi, who was appointed by Aiderous al-Zubaidi on July 17, 2020. Al-Hushabi replaced his brother, Yusri, who was killed on the Abyan front on July 4, 2020.
  - 2nd Battalion Commander: Captain Ifaq Abbas al-Hushabi, who is related to the brigade commander.

Most of the force is stationed on the Habil Hanash front in the northwest portion of Al-Musaymir district, and in Karsh and Kahbub in Al-Qabbaytah district. Estimated strength of the brigade: 1,300 men.

- **13th Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Ali al-Nubi al-Radfani, who was appointed by Aiderous al-Zubaidi on August 29, 2020, is the brother of Mukhtar al-Nubi.
- 4th Battalion Commander: Salah bin Muhatim, based in Al-Qabbaytah.

The Brigade is based in the al-Mallah district. Some battalions are currently in Abyan. Estimated strength: 1,500 men.

#### Southern Resistance Forces

- **Resistance Forces Al-Qabbaytah:**

- Commander: Mohammed Farid.

- **Resistance Forces Al-Musaymir:**

- Commander: Shukri Sharif al-Hushabi.

### *Houthi Forces*

Commanders are listed along with relevant biographical details. Salary information of Houthi forces is unknown.

- Ahmed Jarib, governor since June 2015.<sup>[40]</sup> Formerly a prominent merchant in the honey trade who lived in the UAE and other Gulf countries while building his business. Since the Houthis came to power in late 2014, Jarib has presented himself as the Houthis' man in Lahj, seeking to build influence near Lahj's border with Taiz governorate. He now enjoys the trust of Houthis and tries to play a greater role in communicating with figures and tribes in Lahj and Aden. Recently, he stated that the Houthis should take the opportunity to re-establish control over Aden.
- Jalal al-Subaihi, general supervisor (mushrif). He is a pragmatic figure, mainly involved in fighting because the Houthis do not control any territory in Lahj that would permit other activities.
- Major General Mohammed Saleh al-Otari, Lahj security supervisor. From the Al-Otari family in the Al-Subaiha area. Houthis took an interest in him given the status of the Al-Otari family.
- Major General Abdulatif Hammoud al-Mahdi (Abu Nasr Al-Sha'f), commander of the joint operations room for the Fourth and Seventh Military Regions, and one of the most prominent Houthi commanders. He is assisted by Colonel Ali Hussein Al-Sharafi. Al-Mahdi is also involved in leading Houthi fighting in Marib, Taiz and Al-Dhalea.

[40] "The decision of the Supreme Revolutionary Committee to appoint Ahmad Hammoud Mohammed Salih Jarib as governor of Lahj Governorate [AR]," Saba News Agency, June 25, 2015, <https://www.saba.ye/ar/news398399.htm>

- Major General Maher Jamil, commander of the 157th Brigade, leads the Al-Qabbaytah front.
- Brigadier General Radwan Salah, commander of the 201st Brigade, leads the Karsh front (Al-Hawamrah and Hamala).
- Brigadier General Naji Amir, commander of the 15th Infantry Brigade.
- Brigadier General Nabil Tarish al-Sami'i, commander of the 119th Brigade stationed at Mount Hamala or Jabal Hamala.
- Abu Ishaq Al-Siraji, military supervisor for the Lahj fronts.
- Hammoud Julhum, commander of the Special Forces in the Fourth Military Region.
- Brigadier General Mohammed Yahya al-Khaled, assistant commander of the Fourth Military Region. He also oversees operations in Taiz.

## AL-DHALEA

### Part 1: Overview of the Conflict

In many ways, Al-Dhalea straddles Yemen's north-south divide. The governorate was created out of Lahj during the unification process in 1990. It has nine districts and can be divided into two parts: northern Al-Dhalea and southern Al-Dhalea.

Houthi-Saleh forces took control of Al-Dhalea in March 2015 during their push south to Aden. But by August 2015, Houthi and Saleh forces had largely been pushed out of the governorate. They did, however, maintain control over a pair of strategic footholds in northern Al-Dhalea. The first was in the district of Damt, on the border with Ibb, and a key choke point on the Sana'a-Aden road. The Houthis' second foothold was in the Qa'tabah district in western Al-Dhalea, which links the governorate to Taiz.

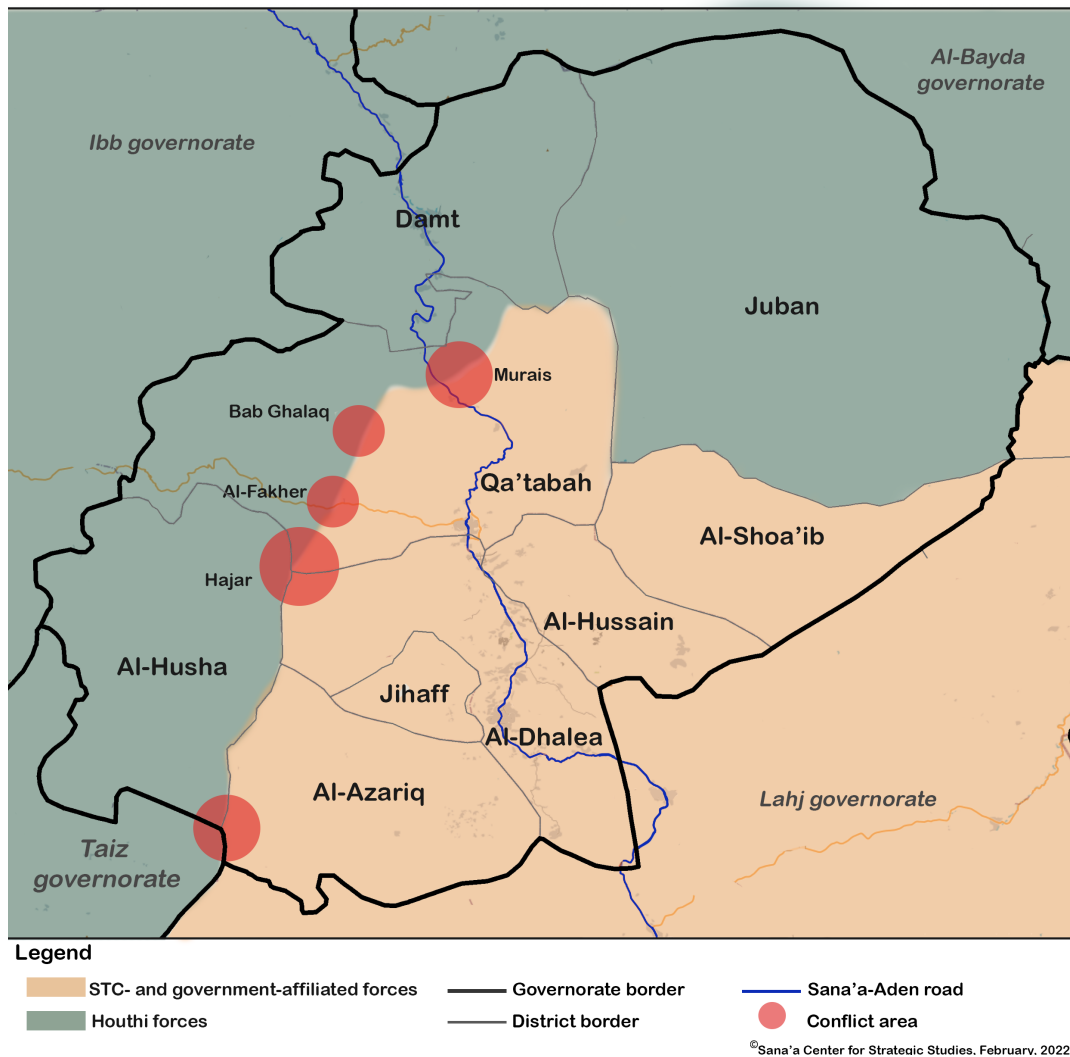
For the first few years of the war (2015–2018), the frontlines in Damt and Qa'tabah served as the de facto border between Houthi-controlled territory and government-held areas. In 2018, forces aligned with the STC managed to take parts of southern Damt as well as much of Qa'tabah from the Houthis. Less than a year later, however, in March 2019, the Houthis retook much of the same territory.

Both areas remain important for the Houthis for the same reasons they were in 2015. By holding much of Damt and Qa'tabah, the Houthis block the north-south axis on the Sana'a-Aden road as well as the east-west axis on the road to Taiz city, effectively blocking the anti-Houthi coalition.

Al-Dhalea is also a key base of support for the STC. Both Aiderous al-Zubaidi, the president of the STC, and Shallal Shayea, a key military figure and the head of the Southern Resistance forces, are from Al-Dhalea.

## Current State of the Conflict

### Al-Dhalea Governorate: Zones of Control



As in Lahj, there are three primary actors in Al-Dhalea: Houthi Forces, forces affiliated with the government and forces affiliated with the STC. The Houthis control most of Juban, Damt, and Al-Husha districts as well as parts of Qa'tabah. Government forces are concentrated in the districts of Qa'tabah and Al-Dhalea. The STC controls much of the southern part of the governorate and its forces are on the frontlines near Ibb and Taiz governorates.

There are currently five fronts in Al-Dhalea. Four of these fronts – Murais, Bab Ghalag, Al-Fakher, and Hajar – run in a rough north-south line from Damt in the north, through Qa'tabah and into northern al-Husha. The fifth front, Al-Azariq, is in southern Al-Husha, on the border with Taiz.

The northern fronts are primarily important because of the roads that run through them. For instance, the Sana'a-Aden road runs through the Murais front, while a road linking Al-Dhalea to Ibb runs through the Al-Fakher front.

## Part II: Who's Who: Armed Groups in Al-Dhalea

The base salary for soldiers in units listed below is YR60,000 per month, unless otherwise noted. This salary is distributed every 4-6 months, but is often in arrears.

### *Southern Transitional Council-Affiliated Forces*

- **Southern Resistance:**

- Commander: Shallal Ali Shayea.
- Prominent Deputy: Qasim al-Thubani.

- **1st Brigade:**

- Commander: Basal Sayf Sukrah, the son of the brigade's initial founder and the younger brother of its second commander.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Munir Sayf, based at the Maris front.
- 2nd Battalion Commander: Mahmud al-Jilani, based at Al-Jib front.
- 3rd Battalion Commander: Sabri al-Sila, based at Al-Fakher front.
- 4th Battalion Commander: Abdullah Makhzaq, based at Sabira front.
- 5th Battalion Commander: Saleh Salem, based at Al-Azariq front.

The forces of the brigade are distributed from Murais in northern Al-Dhalea, all the way to the Al-Fakher front and then to the areas of Batar, Al-Jib and Sabira in the southwest and north of Qa'tabah, as well as to Al-Azariq front, which is in western Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **2nd Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Mohammed Ali Mohsen, known as Abu Hammam, he is the brother of Ammar Ali Mohsen, known as Abu Ali al-Dali, who commands the 12th Giants Brigade.
- Chief of Staff: Major General Fuad al-Jabali.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Capt. Ibrahim Ali Mohsen, based at the Murais front.
- 2nd Battalion Commander: Abu al-Qaqa.

The forces of the brigade are stationed in Murais and Battar in the southwest of Qa'tabah district. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **3rd Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Zakariyah Amr Qahtan Qaboos.
- Chief of Staff: Major General Ali bin Ali Hassan.
- Personnel Supervisor: Abd al-Karim Abdu Ali al-Oud.

The forces of the brigade are deployed in the north and west of Al-Dhalea at al-Fakher front. Five companies of the battalions are stationed at the Hajar front in western Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **4th Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Osan Ali al-Shaeri.
- Chief of Staff: Major General Barakat al-Jabali.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Capt. Asil Hizam al-Marhabi.
- 2nd Battalion Commander: Ibrahim Qasim.
- 3rd Battalion Commander: Capt. Shafiq Hassan.

This brigade was established in early 2019. The brigade consists of several infantry battalions, armored companies, rapid intervention companies and military support companies. The forces of the 4th Resistance Brigade are stationed in a number of locations, the most important of which are at the Al-Fakher front and at the Bab Ghalq front. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **5th Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Mahmoud Ahmad al-Batoul.

The brigade was formed on November 30, 2019. Most of the brigade's forces are stationed in Al-Shujafa, and along Al-Azariq front in western Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **6th Brigade:**

- Commander: Mohammed Yahya al-Shubaji.

The brigade was formed on March 27, 2020, and is stationed at Al-Fakher front. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **3rd Battalion:**

- Commander: Hamada Ali Saleh.

The 3rd Battalion is independent and reports directly to the General Command of the Southern Resistance. Its members are stationed at Al-Fakher front in Qa'tabah district.

## Popular Resistance Forces

- **Southern Resistance Force Al-Azariq:**
  - Commander: Mohammed Ahmad Abu Zayd, who is also the commander of the 1st Battalion of the 12th Thunderbolt Brigade.
- **Southern Resistance Force Murais:**
  - Commander: Mohammed Naji al-Khayarani, who is also the commander of the Murais Axis Resistance Brigade.
  - Chief of Staff: Colonel Adel al-Jaradi.
- **Resistance Forces Al-Hasha:**
  - Commander: Abd al-Hafiz al-Hadhifi.
- **Salafist Resistance Forces:**
  - Commander: Mujahid Sheikh Rashad al-Sharabi.
  - Prominent leader: Sheikh Fuad al-Tohamy, who is entrusted with the general supervision of Al-Dhalea.
- **Battalions of the Martyr Marwan al-Ashwi:**
  - Commander: Mansour Mohammed Saleh al-Ashwi.

These forces were formed on December 14, 2019, and are based in Al-Masharih.

- **Southern Thunderbolt Brigades**
  - Commander: Ali Ahmad Fadhil al-Bishi, who is known as Abu Tahir and is particularly close to STC president Aiderous al-Zubaidi.
- **1st Thunderbolt Brigade:**
  - Commander: Abd al-Karim Musa Saleh al-Sulani al-Shuaybi.
  - Chief of Operations: Colonel Abd al-Fattah Aweja.
  - 3rd Battalion Commander: Nazim Ahmed Nasser Abu Raad, considered one of the most prominent and capable commanders in the brigade.

The brigade was established on May 2, 2019. It is stationed in the west of Al-Azariq district. Other forces from the brigade were deployed at the Hajar Front and in Al-Mashareeh. There are other military companies stationed at Habil Al-Abdi and Al-Hurra. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **2nd Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Mohammed Mohsen Mahdi al-Halami.
- Chief of Staff: Brigadier General Ahmed Khaled Mohsen.
- Chief of Operations: Colonel Mohammed Saif al-Hashri.

The brigade was established on May 21, 2019. The brigade's recruits started receiving training in Jabal Hadid camp in Aden, and were deployed to Al-Dhalea in June 2019. The brigade is headquartered at the Al-Jarba camp in Al-Dhalea city, and its members are deployed in the areas of Hajar, Beja, Markhaza al-Fakher, and Habeel al-Kalb in Qa'tabah district. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

- **3rd Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Mohammed al-Zubaidi, the brother of STC president Aiderous al-Zubaidi. However, Mohammed al-Zubaidi contracted Covid-19 and has been incapacitated in recent months.
- Acting commander: Colonel Qassem Kaaboub, who has taken over while Mohammed al-Zubaidi is sick.
- Chief of Staff: Brigadier General Ali Nasser al-Muakir.
- Chief of Operations: Colonel Omar Mashbaa.
- 5th Battalion Commander: Mohammed al-Bakri, deployed in Abyan.
- 8th Battalion Commander: Colonel Muthana Ali Qaid, stationed at Al-Jib camp in the northwest of the governorate.

The brigade is headquartered in the encampment that was known as the 3rd Presidential Protection Brigade camp prior to the 2019 clashes between government and STC forces in Aden. Estimated strength: 1,000 men.

- **5th Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Yusif Muslah al-Hakim al-Shuayabi, who is known as Abu Majid.
- Personnel Supervisor: Major General Saeed Qasim al-Hakim.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Wadah al-Haribi.

The 1st battalion is considered one of the most prominent battalions of the brigade and is stationed at Maris front. There are also the so-called Al-Wael companies in the battalion, which are stationed on the Murais front. Estimated strength: 800 men.

- **6th Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Ubayd Muthna al-Aram, who is also the commander of the al-Azariq Front.
- Chief of Staff: Major General Ahmed al-Faqih.
- Chief of Operations: Major General Ali Hassan Nasher.

The brigade was established in Al-Azariq district, and most of its forces are currently stationed at Al-Azariq front. It also has a battalion stationed in Murais. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

- **7th Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Abd al-Aziz Musa'ad al-Hadaf.
- Chief of Staff: Colonel Ahmed bin Ahmed Musaad (Abu Tawfiq).
- Chief of Operations: Colonel Fadl Ali Mohammed al-Naqib.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Colonel Waddah al-Azraqi.
- Artillery Battalion Commander: Mu'in al-Halimi.

The brigade is headquartered at the Al-Jib camp in northern Qa'tabah district, and units are deployed at the Hajar and Al-Fakher fronts in western Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 900 men.

- **12th Thunderbolt Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Abd al-Aziz Abdullah Hassan al-Batoul, known as Abu Nasr. He previously served as commander of the Al-Suqur Battalion within the brigade before he was promoted in 2020.
- Chief of Staff: Colonel Ali Mohsen Saeed al-Humaydi.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Colonel Mahmoud Ahmed Abu Ziyad, who is also the commander of the southern resistance forces in Al-Azariq district.

The main station of the brigade is the former Special Forces camp in Zinjibar, Abyan governorate. The 8th battalion is stationed in Al-Jib in northwest Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 800 men.

- Security Belt forces:
- Commander: Brigadier General Ahmed Qaid Saleh al-Qubba.
- Deputy Commander: Walid Hassan.
- Chief of Staff: Mahmoud Ali Saleh.
- Chief of Operations: Capt. Fahman Aziz.
- 2nd Sector Commander: Nader Mohammed Muqbil.
- 3rd Sector Commander: Aboud Mahmoud al-Jaridi.

- 4th Sector Commander: Zaghoul Ali Mohammed Muthanna.
- 5th Sector Commander: Nasr Jawal.
- 6th Sector Commander: Mohammed Ali Saleh al-Hamidi.

Estimated Strength: 1,500 men.

### **Support and Backup Brigades:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Nasser Muthanna Ali, known as Abu Omar.
- Artillery Battalion Commander: Brigadier General Saleh Muthanna Taher.
- Tank Battalion Commanders: Colonel Fadl al-Abal and Colonel Abdullah Ali bin Ali.

The Support and Backup Brigades were formed at the beginning of 2019 by Aiderous al-Zubaidi. The Support and Backup Brigades are independent military units in the Al-Dhalea military axis, with financial, administrative and organizational independence. The Support and Backup Brigades are distributed across fronts in Al-Dhalea.

## ***Government Forces***

Ministry of Defense

### **• 4th Reserve Brigade:**

- Commander: Fadhl Abd al-Rabb al-Qadi.
- Chief of Staff: Major General Abd al-Salam al-Qahtani.
- Chief of Operations: Major General Abd al-Karim al-Farah.
- Maris Sector Commander: Mohammed al-Askari.
- Al-Samih Sector Commander: Mohammed Mitri’.
- Bab Taghloq Sector Commander: Khaled al-Sharqi.

The 4th Reserve Brigade is one of the military brigades affiliated with the Ibb Axis, which is part of the Seventh Military Region, and are stationed at the Murais front in northern Qa’tabah. The main headquarters of the brigade is Al-Sadreen encampment in Murais.

### **• 82nd Infantry Brigade:**

- Commander: Hussein al-Shanfarah, appointed on April 23, 2021.
- Chief of Operations: Colonel Mohammed Naji Husayn.

- Operations Commander: Colonel Mohammed Salih Mohammed Mutlaq.

The forces of the brigade are stationed in the village of Kharaza, Habeel al-Abdi sector and at the Bab Ghalq and Al-Fakher fronts. The 82nd Infantry Brigade was established by one of the leaders of the Southern Movement, Brigadier Salah Saleh Qa'id al-Shanfra, in 2016.

- **83rd Artillery Brigade: Adil Shaybah, based in Qa'tabah.**

- **5th Special Forces Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Ahmad Mohammed Nasser Samnan, appointed on June 7, 2019.

The main headquarters of the brigade is Al-Jumaima encampment, which is located near Murais front in Qa'tabah district. Forces from the brigade are stationed at the Murais and Al-Fakher fronts. The brigade is affiliated with the Ibb Axis.

- **30th Armored Brigade:**

- Commander: Hadi Ahmad al-Awlaqi, also commander of the Al-Dhalea Axis, appointed on March 12, 2019, by President Hadi.
- Chief Counselor: Colonel Abdo Musleh.
- Chief of Staff: Colonel Mohammed Taher.

The main headquarters of the brigade is the Martyr Abdellatif al-Quhaif encampment in the Qa'tabah district, with the presence of the battalion's companies east of Al-Hasha district and others on the front lines in Al-Fakher. Estimated strength: 3,500 men.

- **33rd Armored Brigade:**

- Commander: Ali Muqbil Saleh, who is also the governor of Al-Dhalea.
- Commander of the 7th Battalion: Colonel Tahir MUSAAD al-Uqla.

The brigade's forces are stationed in Al-Jarba encampment. It also has a unit stationed at the Hajar front. Estimated strength: 3,000 men.

- **Military Police:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Fadhl al-Aqalah.
- Commander in Al-Dhalea: Brigadier General Fadel Saleh Mahmoud Qaid al-Uqla, appointed on January 10, 2019.
- Chief of Staff: Colonel Qassim al-Shuaibi.
- Chief Trainer: Captain Abd al-Nasser Saadan.

A military police camp was established in the governorate in mid-2018 in a special military police encampment in Al-Jumaima.

#### Ministry of the Interior

- **Special Security Forces**

- Commander: Capt. Baligh Abbas Muhsin al-Hamidi, who also holds the position of Deputy Director of Security in Al-Dhalea.

- **General Security:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Ahmad Qaid al-Qubah, appointed on January 18, 2021. Al-Qubah is also the head of the STC-affiliated Security Belt forces in Al-Dhalea. He has attempted to straddle the fence and works with both President Hadi and the STC, but is considered closer to the STC.

- **Patrol and Road Security:**

- Commander: Saleh Sha'if Muqbil.

- **Emergency and Security Support Forces:**

- Commander: Colonel Haitham Nuwaisr.

- Saudi-Led Coalition-Affiliated Forces.

#### Giants Brigades

- **1st Brigade:**

- Commander: Brigadier General Ra'id al-Habhi.

- Chief of Staff: Colonel Dhuizen al-Salami.

- Chief of Operations: Colonel Akram Fuad.

A battalion from the 1st Giants Brigade is currently deployed in Al-Dhalea.

- **4th Brigade:**

- Commander: Nizar al-Wajih al-Yafi'i.

- 2nd Battalion Commander: Alawi Sa'il, stationed at the Maris front.

The first two companies of the 2nd Battalion, 4th Brigade, arrived in Al-Dhalea in mid-2019.

- **5th Brigade:**

- Commander: Abu Khaled al-Yafi'i.

- De facto commander: Abu Harun al-Yafi'i.

- Chief of Staff of 5th Brigade battalions in Al-Dhalea: Abu al-Laith al-Shuyabi.
- Rapid Intervention Battalion Commander: Samad al-Qabah.
- 1st Battalion Commander: Nabil al-Jubayli, stationed at the Al-Fakher front.
- 2nd Battalion Commander: Mohammed Sufyan, stationed in Marib.

Some of the battalions and units of the 5th Giants Brigade are stationed in the mountains of Murais while others are in the districts of Sanah, Qa'tabah and Beja. Estimated strength: 1,200 men.

- **12th Brigade:**

- Battalion Commander in Al-Dhalea: Brigadier General Ammar Ali Mohsen, known as Abu Ali Al-Dhalea, who is the brother of Brig. Gen. Mohammed Ali Mohsen, known as Abu Hammam, who commands the 2nd Southern Resistance brigade. Ammar Ali Mohsen was the commander of the Special Security forces until his resignation on June 25, 2021.

Companies from its battalions are stationed on the fronts of Murais in the northern part of Al-Dhalea. Estimated strength: 1,300 men.

## ***Houthi Forces***

Commanders are listed along with relevant biographical details. Salary information of Houthi forces is unknown.

- Abdullatif al-Shaghdari, deputy governor and acting governor, since the removal of former governor Mohammed Salih Al-Hadi in December 2021.
- Brigadier General Salah Ahmed Hataba, general supervisor who hails from Sa'ada governorate. He is one of the most prominent figures of the group in Taiz and was the previously supervisor of Amran governorate.
- Brigadier General Hussein al-Hamzi, Al-Dhalea director and supervisor of security.<sup>[41]</sup> Hails from Sa'ada governorate.
- Major General Abdulatif Hammoud al-Mahdi (Abu Nasr Al-Sha'f), commander of the joint operations room for the Fourth and Seventh Military Regions, and one of the most prominent Houthi commanders. He is assisted by Colonel Ali Hussein Al-Sharafi. Al-Mahdi is also involved in leading Houthi fighting in Marib, Taiz and Lahj.

[41] Typically, the security director (formal government position) handles security work and general routine administrative issues, while the security supervisor (informal Houthi-appointed mushrif) specializes in issues related to war and politics.

- Brigadier General Saleh Hajeb, assistant commander of the Fourth Military Region who oversees Al-Dhalea fronts.
- Abu Ishaq al-Shahil, military supervisor of Al-Dhalea fronts.
- Sajjad al-Sabahi, head of security and intelligence.
- Brigadier General Salim Abbas al-Quhaif, commander of the Al-Sammad Brigade and the fronts in Qa'tabah district.
- Brigadier General Hamis al-Waeli, in charge of military mobilization for Al-Dhalea fronts.
- Colonel Hashem al-Sharif, Damt district's director and supervisor of security.

### Part III: DDR Analysis

Lahj and Al-Dhalea are, broadly speaking, part of the same area. Prior to 1990 the two formed a single governorate and the two are still fairly united today. A traditional DDR process that moves from disarmament to demobilization to reintegration will not work in Lahj and Al-Dhalea as the various sides distrust one another too much to unilaterally disarm or demobilize. Instead, what is needed is a next generation DDR process in which reintegration precedes disarmament and demobilization.

Assuming a political settlement, reintegration in Lahj and Al-Dhalea will likely be fairly straightforward. Within the anti-Houthi coalition there are only two main political actors with military forces: the internationally recognized government and the STC. On paper, many of the brigades affiliated with the STC are already under the umbrellas of either the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of the Interior, although in practice, of course, these units operate independently. After bringing all forces under the appropriate ministries both on paper and in practice, then these units can be integrated and cross-pollinated with soldiers from different units and backgrounds. Once that takes place, then, depending on both security and budgetary needs, the state can make the decision to disarm and demobilize excess or unneeded units.

However, it is important to note that absent a political settlement between Yemen's internationally recognized government and the STC, reintegration will not be possible. In Yemen, a prerequisite for a successful DDR process is a comprehensive political settlement.

## CONCLUSION

The proliferation of armed groups during Yemen's war has undermined the prospects of a political deal that ends fighting and unifies the state, as each of them holds enough power to derail any agreement that does not adequately provide for their interests. Securing buy-in from as many of these armed groups as possible in a post-conflict DDR process will help mitigate the potential of spoilers.

Because the Houthis appear unlikely to participate in a national power-sharing deal, this paper examined how a DDR process might work in Marib, Taiz, Lahj and Al-Dhalea between the competing armed groups in the anti-Houthi coalition, which is primarily composed of the internationally recognized government, the STC, Tariq Saleh's forces and the Giants Brigades. Each governorate presents its own unique challenges.

Marib is unique in that most of the armed forces fighting there are under the command of the internationally recognized government, which precludes the need for a DDR process. The exception is Marib's armed tribal forces, which operate independently of the state in many ways. However, these armed tribesmen have a longstanding role in Yemeni society, so attempting to subject them to a DDR process would result in more harm than good.

In Taiz, disarmament and demobilization will need to be the final steps, not the initial ones. From a DDR perspective, Taiz represents the most complicated of the four governorates, given the presence of major actors of the anti-Houthi coalition within Taiz or along its borders. To ensure buy-in for a DDR process in Taiz, the power sharing responsibilities of each actor in the anti-Houthi coalition must be clearly spelled out in a political settlement. Then irregular armed forces of Tariq Saleh, the Giants Brigades and the Islah party can be integrated into formal command structures as agreed upon by the parties.

As in Taiz, the main DDR challenge in Lahj and Al-Dhalea will be negotiating a political agreement between the parties of the anti-Houthi coalition. The primary armed groups on the ground there are loyal to the internationally recognized government and the STC, which have had a particularly contentious relationship in recent years as witnessed by stalled implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Although many of the UAE-backed STC forces in Al-Dhalea and Lahj are already technically under the control of the Ministry of Defense, in practice they exercise a great deal of autonomy due to the absence of an agreed upon political division of power.

Further complicating the prospects of a successful DDR process there is the fact that Al-Dhalea and parts of Lahj are STC strongholds. Nonetheless, a post-settlement reintegration of the remaining STC forces outside government control should be the first step.

Over time, as the new state establishes itself and as trust is built between former rivals, newly integrated units can be redeployed so that there are not pro-STC brigades and pro-Islah brigades, for example. Depending on the security needs of the state, excess brigades in all four governorates can then be disarmed and demobilized in line with the state's budgetary priorities.

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