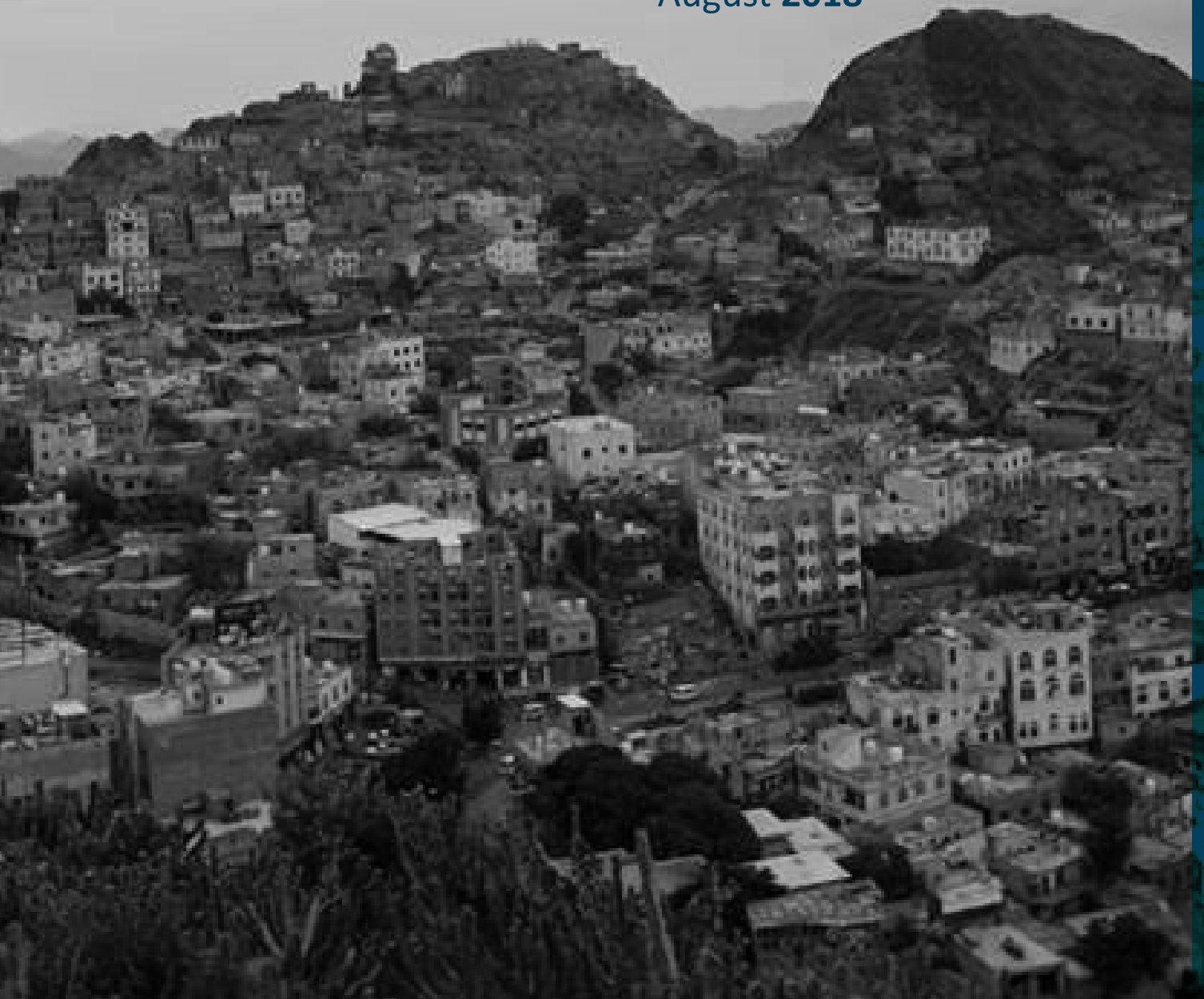




Caught in the Middle:

A Conflict Mapping of Taiz Governorate

August 2018



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Yemeni city of Taiz has long been honored as the country's cultural capital—home to some of the nation's most prized historical sites and a population regarded as being particularly civic-minded. But ongoing local fighting, as part of Yemen's three-year civil war, has robbed the city and its surrounding governorate of much of its former identity. United Nations agencies say the Yemen conflict has caused "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world."⁰¹ Some of the war's most intense fighting has taken place in Taiz, ruining local infrastructure and leaving the civilian population with a severe lack of health, food, and economic resources.

Taiz city, Yemen's third most populated, is also home to a diverse range of the country's political groups, which in part has caused fluid, localized power struggles within the war's larger national context. When war first broke out in Taiz three years ago, the fighting was largely viewed as a two-sided conflict between forces supporting President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi's government and a Houthi/General People's Congress (GPC)-Sana'a⁰² alliance looking to consolidate its power throughout the country. However, battle dynamics have proven far more complex. Groups battling the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a fighters are nominally aligned but fall into at least three distinct groups acting operationally independent from each other.

The Hadi government is represented by the Taiz Axis, the military body technically overseeing all formal military brigades in the governorate. The Taiz Axis cooperates with a host of armed, local anti-Houthi resistance groups, many of which have been integrated into the Axis military structure. Outside of the Axis, along the west coast of Taiz, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is leading an operation—dubbed Golden Spear—that excludes the participation of armed groups from Taiz. Meanwhile, a resistance group led by Salafi Sheikh Abu Al-Abbas, who the US and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states designated a terrorist in October 2017, is also making autonomous military decisions in portions of Taiz city that he controls.

Drawing on dozens of interviews with local political and military officials and members of civil society, this paper provides insight into the ongoing fighting in the governorate. The authors would like to acknowledge that Reham Al-Badr, a prominent humanitarian and human rights activist and member of the monitoring team of the National Committee for the Investigation of Human Rights Violations, was killed in early February while carrying out her work near the frontline. Working as a local researcher in late 2017, Reham had conducted interviews for this research paper and contributed her expertise on the local situation.

01 The World Health Organization, the World Food Programme and UNICEF. "Yemen's families cannot withstand another day of war, let alone another 1,000." Joint statement, December 2017, 29. https://www.unicef.org/media/media_102360.html.

02 More commonly referred to as the Houthi/Saleh alliance before the death of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017, the GPC-Sana'a refers to the portion of the party loyal to the Sana'a-based party leadership still allied with the Houthis.

In order to arrive at a set of recommendations for local and international stakeholders, the dynamics between various military and resistance groups nominally aligned against the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance are analyzed in this report, with particular focus on Taiz city. The report also considers four potential ways fighting in Taiz could develop.

The possible future outcomes for the conflict in Taiz include:

- The Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance is pushed out of Taiz militarily
- The conflict continues largely unabated, but security improves within areas under President Hadi's control
- The situation deteriorates because spoilers disrupt the military restructuring process, and/or the new governor in Taiz politically isolates his opponents
- The siege on Taiz city ends and national reconciliation efforts follow

Based on the conclusions arrived at in this paper and input from dozens of well-placed local interviewees, the following steps are recommended for national and international stakeholders:

- End the siege on Taiz city
- Establish a stronger government presence inside the governorate
- Hold a dialogue between local actors in Taiz
- Complete efforts to restructure the military and security forces
- Empower the local security forces and restore the justice system
- Support civil society

PART 1: INTRODUCTION

As of March 2018, the battle for control of Taiz city and governorate has been ongoing for three years. As fighting rages at deeply entrenched frontlines, residents across the governorate are reeling from the conflict's economic and humanitarian fallout. On one side of the conflict, military forces loyal to President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, local resistance groups, and the Saudi Arabian and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-led Coalition⁰³ are aligned against Houthi forces and the Sana'a-based General People's Congress (GPC) political party.⁰⁴ However, the local, national, and international armed groups nominally aligned under a common mission to drive the Houthis and their allies out of the governorate are also tangled in a complicated struggle amongst themselves. These separate factions are also vying for influence in one of Yemen's most strategically important governorates.

This violent power struggle has had a disastrous impact on the civilian population. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), which provides a standardized assessment of food insecurity situations across countries, around 75 percent of Taiz governorate's 3.18 million people are food insecure, with malnutrition rates reaching a startling 25 percent in some areas.⁰⁵ Residents in Taiz comprise a little more than 11 percent of Yemen's total population.

A pervasive absence of security and stability has likewise penetrated deep into the governorate. Rural areas that were once sheltered from Yemen's past wars are now witnessing a kind of brutality many locals feel has extended beyond a campaign for territorial control. Some say combatting groups are seeking revenge for the local population's past opposition to the Sana'a-based regime under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Perhaps more than any other governorate in Yemen, Taiz is where nearly all Yemen's major national parties and main Coalition partners are jockeying to gain the upper hand. To improve security and the local economy, which in turn will bring much-needed respite from the dire humanitarian crisis, these international and national groups will need to strike a balance of power. This research paper explains the dynamics between these various groups battling for control in the governorate and analyzes why Taiz has become the epicenter of the ongoing war. This insight will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the various scenarios the fighting in Taiz could lead to in the future. The paper will also provide a set of clear recommendations that could help shape peace-building efforts in the governorate and other policies aimed at bringing the conflict to an end.

03 This partnership of nations supporting the Hadi government is larger than just Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but for the purposes of this paper, those are the two countries most heavily influencing the fight in Taiz. Throughout this paper, this particular alliance is referred to as "the Coalition."

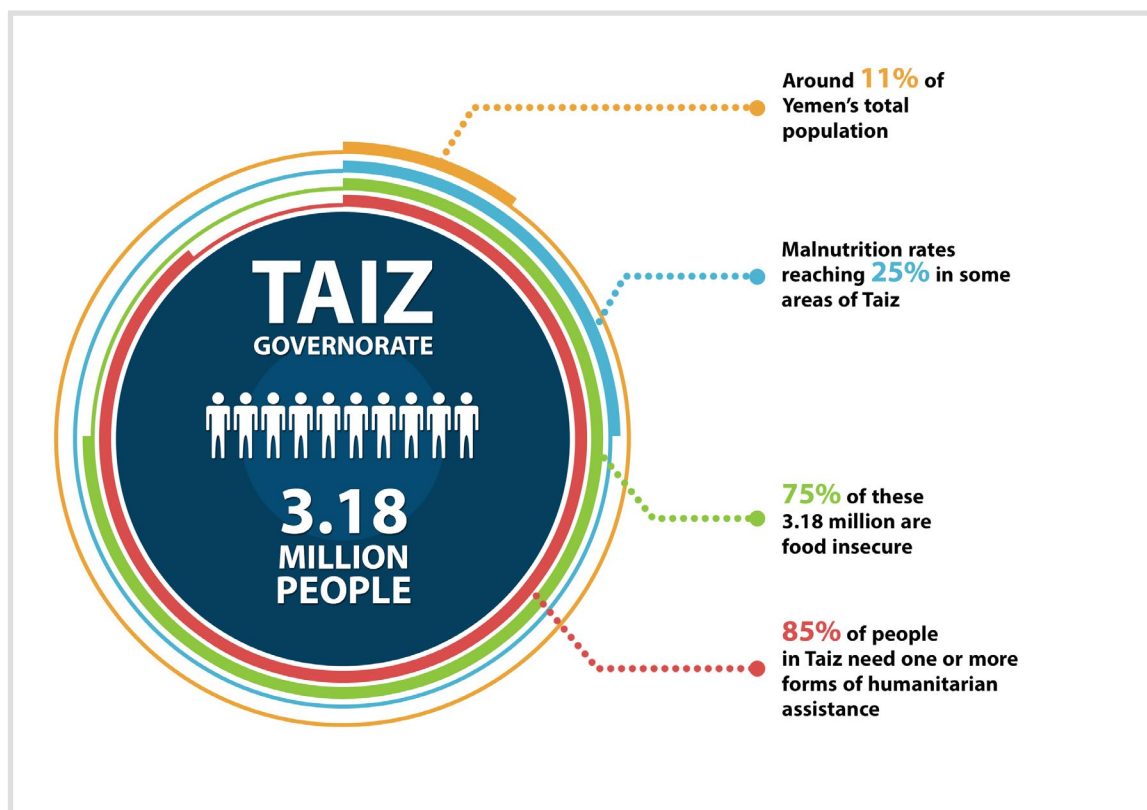
04 Supra note 2.

05 Yemen Food Security Information System (FSIS) Development Programme. "Yemen: Projected Acute Food Insecurity Situation - March-July 2017." Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), March 2017, 14. http://fscluster.org/sites/default/files/documents/ipc_yemen_2017_acute_food_insecurity_analysis_communication_brief_final_draft_2017-03-14-.pdf.

The findings for this research are based on interviews with 32 local officials (including military and security commanders), civil society activists, business owners, and journalists. Interviewees were selected based on their relevance and unique understanding of the situation in Taiz. Interviews took place between May and November 2017. Researchers collected additional data in January 2018. The report also incorporates secondary sources, including reports published by international humanitarian NGOs.

In conducting an assessment of the current conflict dynamics within the governorate and examining the key individuals and factors contributing to the area's political instability and security vacuum, particular focus is placed on the city of Taiz. This is because it is the governorate's capital, the country's third-largest city and is heavily contested due to its political, military and economic importance.

This paper also focuses primarily on the political and security dynamics in Taiz city between the forces nominally aligned against the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a contingent. This is because researchers were able to more readily access and verify information from the actors on this side of the battle. Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance operations are carried out with a high level of secrecy and adhere to a militaristic command structure based in Sana'a, rather than rely on locally-driven decision making.



PART 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Taiz is one of the most geographically strategic regions in Yemen. The city of Taiz is on the main road between the nation's capital Sana'a and Aden, Yemen's second largest city and the capital of South Yemen before it unified with North Yemen in 1990. Taiz governorate's coastline also jets into the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, where Yemen and the African continent are separated by a mere 30 kilometers (about 20 miles), creating one of the most important maritime cargo chokepoints in the world.⁰⁶ The city of Taiz is also extremely important politically. It has long served as a stronghold of opposition to Sana'a-based governments, resulting in a vibrant local political environment. Additionally, Taiz is home to several of Yemen's most prominent businessmen and companies. A combination of these factors led the pre-war national government to base powerful brigades in Taiz, several of which would later—in whole or in part—facilitate the Houthis' expansion in the governorate.

2.1 Taiz During the 20th Century

Historically, Taiz was a significant center of power in North Yemen and its pre-state form, especially under the Resulids Kingdom from the mid-13th to the mid-15th century. Its proximity to the country's fertile agricultural land and to the Red Sea helped transform it into a bustling commercial center. During the 19th century, citizens of Taiz had more access to the global community than those in other northern cities such as Sana'a. This is in large part because streams of workers, students and merchants from Taiz lived and studied in the nearby coastal city of Aden, which was under British colonial rule for over a century. Taiz was a part of northern Yemen during the Imamate's rule from 1912 to 1962. During Imam Ahmed's reign from 1948 to 1962 Taiz was the capital of northern Yemen.

By the 1940s, Taiz had become a hotbed for reformist and revolutionary views that favored forming a national republic over the Imam's monarchical rule.⁰⁷ The reasons for this were manifold. As a center of trade, a relatively large portion of Taiz natives travelled abroad for education and business. With a large labor market, the port of Mocha on its coast, and the relatively cosmopolitan city of Aden to its south, a strong business environment developed in Taiz. The business community also helped foster a relatively robust education system in the governorate. This is in part thanks to several prominent businessmen from Taiz who were educated abroad and returned to offer financial support to area schools. For example, Hayal Saeed Anam, the founder of one of Yemen's largest multinational business groups, funded Mohammed Ali Othman, a popular school in Taiz city.

Taiz has a weaker tribal network than Sana'a and its surrounding northern governorates. In general, as a result Taiz is less enmeshed in tribal customs, which may have encouraged a more active civil and political society. Although Taiz was a part of northern Yemen before the two countries united, it was undoubtedly influenced by southern Yemen's governing system, which was fundamentally different than governance in the north. Before North and South Yemen unified in 1990 as a single state under one president, South Yemen was

⁰⁶ For example, the year before the current war began, an estimated 3.8 million barrels of oil flowed through Bab Al-Mandeb daily. See Bender, Jeremy. "These 8 narrow chokepoints are critical to the world's oil trade." *Business Insider*, April 2015, 1. <http://www.businessinsider.com/worlds-eight-oil-chokepoints4-2015->

⁰⁷ Burrowes, Robert D. *Historical Dictionary of Yemen*, 2, 2010nd, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. pp. 373-372.

first a British protectorate for more than a century. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Taiz harbored southern revolutionaries who were organizing to overthrow British rule. Many of these groups had Marxist leanings, paving the way for the formation of a socialist state in the south when British troops were forced to surrender their rule in 1967. The presence of these southern revolutionaries led to greater political pluralism in Taiz.

After the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, the central government based in Sana'a failed to sufficiently invest in Taiz. As a result, basic infrastructure, such as roads and services like electricity and water, degraded throughout the governorate. Despite this neglect, Taiz remained a business hub for light industry throughout the 2000s. In addition

to its reputation for entrepreneurialism, Taiz is also well known for its outspoken and independent-minded residents.⁰⁸ A multiplicity of national political parties have also co-existed in the area for decades. Taiz has the most representatives in Parliament, even more

than Sana'a, with 38. Likewise, these delegates from Taiz represent a broader spectrum of political interests than those representing Sana'a. During Yemen's most recent parliamentary election in 2003, seats in Taiz were split among the GPC, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (better known as the Islah Party), the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), the Nasserist Unionist People's Organization, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, and independents.



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2.2 The 2011 Uprising and Transition Period

A large number of Taiz natives harbored deep resentment toward former President Saleh and his patronage network (mostly comprised of individuals in Sana'a and extending to surrounding northern tribal areas collectively described as the Highlands). While the Saleh administration gave some representatives from Taiz senior government positions, many residents still felt their voices were absent from the central government's decision-making process. Residents of Taiz have long complained that they have been treated as second-class citizens and over the years have developed a strong opposition movement against the central government.⁰⁹ Therefore, it came as little surprise to many that Taiz spearheaded the 2011 national uprising that eventually stripped Saleh of his presidency following almost a year of protests.

However, the demonstrations in Taiz against the former president came at a great cost to citizens. Throughout 2011, security forces used excessive force against peaceful

⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁰⁹ Kasinof, Laura. "Yemeni city feeds unrest's roots." The New York Times, February 2011, 25. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/26/world/middleeast/26yemen.html>.

demonstrators in Taiz city.¹⁰ On May 29, 2011, military forces attacked the city's main protest square, killing 50 unarmed protesters and triggering a new wave of opposition.¹¹ Soon violent clashes between government forces and forces mobilized by tribal leaders—most of whom were affiliated with the opposition coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)¹²—broke out.¹³ By June 2011, the city had been effectively partitioned into two. Saleh's government forces controlled one section of town and a collection of anti-government, opposition groups were in charge of the other section. The infighting did not cease until government tanks were removed from the city and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) deal was signed in December 2011.¹⁴ As noted in the introduction of this paper, many feel that because Taiz was home to such concerted demonstrations calling for Saleh to step down in 2011 that those loyal to the former president have sought revenge on the local population in the current war.

While the GCC agreement brought the overt conflict to an end, the political and security situation in Taiz remained unstable.¹⁵ As Yemen prepared for a national dialogue as part of its mandated democratic transition, influential members of the GPC (which Saleh continued to lead even after his ousting as president) and the opposition Islah Party¹⁶ continued to tussle over power and influence in Taiz. As a result, the newly-appointed governor of Taiz, Shawqi Hayel Saeed, (a businessman with no political affiliation) struggled to stabilize the city despite political consensus about his appointment. A lack of trust between political parties and growing partisanship led to the local proliferation of armed actors in Taiz.

The Houthis also expanded their footprint in Taiz during the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. Formally known as Ansar Allah (Supporters of God), the Houthis are an insurgent group originally based in the northern governorate of Sa'ada, which borders

10 Kasinof, Laura. "Ancient city anchors political standoff in Yemen." *The New York Times*, November 2011, 2. <http://www.nytimes.com/03/11/2011/world/middleeast/opposition-to-yemens-government-spreads-in-taiz.html?mcubz=1>.

11 IRIN. "Civilians flee violence in the south." May 2011, 31. <http://www.irinnews.org/news/31/05/2011/civilians-flee-violence-south>.

12 The JMP is a coalition of five opposition parties that formed in 2005. It includes the Islah, Socialist and Nasserist parties, in addition to two smaller parties.

13 Al-Saqqaf, Emad. "Fighting rages in Taiz." *The Yemen Times*, July 2011, 17. <http://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/fighting-rages-taiz>.

14 Gaston, Erica and al-Dawsari, Nadwa. "Waiting for change: The impact of transition on local justice and security in Yemen." United States Institute of Peace. April 2013. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW-85Waiting-for-Change.pdf>.

15 The GCC agreement called for a transitional government headed by then Vice President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, who was meant to lead Yemen until national democratic elections could be held and usher in a new government. This "transition process" began at the beginning of 2012 and included reconciliation talks between Yemen's major political parties and members of civil society. Elections were never held, and Yemen's transition ended when President Hadi resigned in January 2015, or as some would argue, when the Houthis captured Sana'a in September 2014.

16 The Islah Party was founded in 1990, the same year North and South Yemen unified. It was originally founded to represent Islamist-leaning Yemenis not represented by the ruling GPC party. However, the Saleh regime initially supported Islah, particularly in areas with strong opposition to the GPC, as a means to weaken the Socialist Party. But by the early 2000s, Islah had become a GPC opponent. Party members were at the forefront of the 2011 uprising. The party made major gains through the GCC deal that gave half of all Cabinet seats to the JMP, of which Islah is the main member.

Saudi Arabia. In the early 1990s, a Zaydi revivalist movement called the Believing Youth formed in Sa'ada. This group sprung up largely in response to the increased presence of Salafis—who practice a fundamentalist version of Sunni Islam—in Sa'ada. The Believing Youth movement also began protesting Saleh's central government, which they believed had systematically marginalized them. After Saleh began taking steps to squash the movement, Hussein Badr Al-Deen Al-Houthi created an armed group in response called the Houthis in 2004. Hussein was killed later that year and his brother, Abdulmalik Al-Houthi, the Houthis' current leader, replaced him. The Houthis have been engaged in conflict for nearly the entirety of their existence. From 2004 to 2010, they fought six wars against Saleh's government. From 2011 to 2014, the Houthis broke out of their base in Sa'ada and began expanding their presence in neighboring governorates including Amran and Al-Jawf, and eventually in Sana'a.

During the 2011 uprising, the Houthis began launching local religious campaigns in Taiz. They invited a small number of local activists to come to Sa'ada governorate and study or receive military training. Support for the Houthis in Taiz governorate came primarily from Hashemite families. A fundamental component of Zaydi ideology, the branch of Shi'a Islam associated with the Houthi movement, holds that the legitimate ruler of the Muslim community should be a descendant of the prophet, referred to as a Hashemite.¹⁷ It is important to note

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however, while the majority of Houthis are Zaydi, many members of the group are not. Notably, a number of Houthi loyalists—particularly those from outside the northern Highland region who were a part of Saleh's patronage network—are drawn to the group for pragmatic reasons rather than religion and have grown closer to the Houthis over the course of the war.

An increased Houthi presence in Taiz following the 2011 uprising provoked political affiliates, particularly those of the Islah Party, to arm their loyalists in an effort to counter Houthi influence. Armed clashes between Houthi and Islah supporters (sometimes involving other groups) broke out frequently in the city.¹⁸ The Islah Party has historically been an organized force of anti-Houthi resistance. Although the two groups' followers found themselves aligned in 2011 under a common mission to remove Saleh from power,

¹⁷ This term refers to people who trace their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed, regardless of religious orientation. The Houthis' Zaydi belief system holds that the rightful ruler should be a Hashemite, and the group is perceived as privileging Hashemites in Yemen.

¹⁸ Supra note 14. Also see "A city on edge." The Economist, October 2013, 19. <https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/-21588123once-seen-yemens-most-sophisticated-city-taiz-bad-way-city-edge>.

following the uprising, the two parties competed for power in the national government and many of their ideological differences eroded trust between the groups.

After the Houthis captured Sana'a in September 2014, they quickly began to consolidate their power in Taiz. They made sure to integrate their loyalists into military and security forces still loyal to Saleh. They also began to transfer military equipment to units where they had greater influence.

In the immediate sense, the Houthis saw Taiz as a gateway to further their power grab and move into southern Yemen, namely Aden. Unlike areas like Sa'ada and Sana'a—which are heavily armed because of their history of recent wars—the Houthis likely saw the relatively unarmed civilian population in Taiz as an easy target to further their power grab. Even after the 2011 uprising, Saleh retained a significant amount of influence in Taiz, which allowed him to help facilitate the Houthis' expansion into the governorate. Because the Houthis enjoyed minimal civilian and grassroots support in Taiz, they had to rely on the military resources Saleh provided to gain a local foothold. Given this, locals in Taiz by and large view the Houthis as an “invading” force without any legitimate claim to govern there.

PART 3: THE CURRENT WAR AND TAIZ

3.1 Peaceful Protests Turn Violent

After President Hadi and his entire cabinet resigned in January 2015, followed by President Hadi's escape from house arrest in Sana'a the following month, the Houthi/Saleh alliance accelerated its military expansion. The Houthis and forces loyal to Saleh began exerting control over areas of Taiz city in mid-March 2015.¹⁹ Before all-out, violent conflict erupted, the civilian population attempted to use peaceful protests to resist the new Houthi presence. Many of the same activists involved in the 2011 uprising organized street demonstrations, calling for the removal of all non-governmental armed forces in the governorate. Shortly after, local Special Security Forces (SSF)²⁰ began violently clamping down on unarmed protesters in Taiz. However, locals reported many of those firing on civilians had Houthi slogans on their weapons and were actually Houthi fighters wearing government SSF uniforms.²¹ Similar incidents happened in Al-Turbah, a town in Al-Shamaytayn district on a main road between Taiz city and Aden.²²

As protestors were killed and injured in the street,²³ locals took up arms against the Houthi/Saleh fighters, eventually forming what became known as the popular resistance forces (*see section 4.2 for more on resistance forces*). The fighting spread rapidly, and the Saudi Arabia-led Coalition joined the fight with their aerial bombing campaign beginning March 26, 2015.

For most of the war, particularly surrounding Taiz city, frontlines have been deeply entrenched with the Houthi/Saleh alliance carrying out regular shelling of residential areas.²⁴ After the initial stage of the conflict in 2015, the scale of civilians affected by the fighting escalated in 2016 and the first half of 2017, as Houthi/Saleh forces expanded and took control of many rural areas of Taiz including the districts of Jabal Habashi, Al-Ta'iziyah, Al-Ma'afer, Haifan, and Al-Wazi'yah. The Coalition's bombing campaign has also resulted in considerable civilian casualties in Taiz. For example, on July 18, 2017, an airstrike on a straw house in the Al-Asheera village of Mawza district killed at least 18 civilians from three families, all of whom were registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs), according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

19 Al-Batati, Saeed and Fahim, Kareem. "Rebels seize key parts of Yemen's third largest city, Taiz." *The New York Times*, March 2015 ,22. <https://www.nytimes.com/23/03/2015/world/middleeast/houthi-rebels-taiz-yemen.html?mcubz=1&r=0>.

20 The Houthi/GPC government uses the term Central Security Forces, which was the original name of the forces before President Hadi changed it.

21 Al-Homaid, Fareed. "Protests continue in Taiz, governor resigns." *The Yemen Times*, March 2015 ,25. <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Opposition+to+Houthi+presence+continues+in+Taiz-a0407757677>.

22 Human Rights Watch found that in two separate incidents in Taiz city and in Al-Turbah, Houthi/Saleh forces killed at least seven peaceful protestors and injured 83 others. See "Yemen: Houthis use deadly force against protestors." April 2015 ,7. <https://www.hrw.org/news/07/04/2015/yemen-houthis-use-deadly-force-against-protesters>.

23 Ibid.

24 Human Rights Watch. "Yemen: artillery attacks kills civilians in Taiz,," August 2017 ,9. <https://www.hrw.org/news/09/08/2017/yemen-artillery-attacks-kill-civilians-taiz>.

(OHCHR).²⁵ In another recent attack, on December 26, 2017, airstrikes on a market in the Al-Ta'iziyah district killed at least 54 civilians and injured 32 others, according to OHCHR.²⁶

Parallel to the fight over Taiz city and the eastern portion of the governorate, a UAE-led operation began January 2017 to retake parts of the coast under the Houthis' control. Called Operation Golden Spear,²⁷ the UAE-supported mission initially focused on retaking Dhubab district in order to restore access and control of the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait to President Hadi's government. Houthi/Saleh forces originally captured the district in early 2015 as they pushed south through Yemen. By October 2015, forces aligned with President Hadi regained control of the area, but the district fell again into Houthi/Saleh hands in February 2016. After Operation Golden Spear finally succeeded to gain control of most of Dhubab in January 2017, the following month, the mission pushed ahead into Mocha district to also recapture the port city of Mocha, handing the Hadi alliance a strategic victory.²⁸

However, this coastal operation also came at a great cost to civilians. The fighting forced thousands of families into displacement.²⁹ All throughout the governorate civilians are reeling from local fighting. Almost 30 percent of all IDPs in Yemen, around 540,000, are from Taiz, according to a May 2017 report from the Task Force on Population Movement (TFPM).³⁰ Over 300,000 of the IDPs from Taiz are displaced within the governorate. As of January 2017, an estimated 200,000 civilians in Taiz city alone were living under

“The fighting forced thousands of families into displacement. All throughout the governorate civilians are reeling from local fighting. Almost 30 percent of all IDPs in Yemen, around 540,000, are from Taiz.

heavy artillery shelling, daily airstrikes, and other armed clashes.³¹ The cumulative impact of this assault has caused almost universal devastation for civilians. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Humanitarian Needs

25 Colville, Rupert. "Press briefing notes on Yemen." OHCHR, July 2017 ,21.

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21899&LangID=E>.

26 McGoldrick, Jamie. "Statement on behalf of the humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Jamie McGoldrick on mounting civilian casualties," OCHA, December 2007 ,28. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/HC20%Statement_IHL_EN_20%27Dec20%202017%FINAL.pdf.

27 Al Batati, Saeed. "Yemeni forces make crucial gains along Red Sea." Gulf News, January 2017 ,7.

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/yemen/yemeni-forces-make-crucial-gains-along-red-sea1.1958030->

28 OHCHR. "Civilians in Yemen caught between warring parties." February 2017 ,10.

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21163&LangID=E>.

29 OCHA. "Yemen: Escalating conflict – western coast." Situation Report No. 3, March 2017 ,10. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA20%Yemen_Situation20%Report_Western20%Coast_No3.pdf.

30 TFPM. "14th Report." Yemen, May 2017. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-task-force-population-movement-tfpm14-th-report-may-2017-enar>.

31 Doctors Without Borders. "Yemen: Healthcare under siege in Taiz," January 2017 ,30.

<http://www.msf.org/en/article/yemen-healthcare-under-siege-taiz>.

Overview 2018 report, an astonishing 85 percent of the governorate's population is in need of one or more forms of humanitarian assistance, up slightly from the 2017 estimate of 79 percent.³² Further threatening civilian life in some areas are scattered, unexploded landmines planted mainly by Houthi troops as they retreated.³³

3.2 The Siege of Taiz City

Taiz city has two main entrances, both connected to inter-governorate roads. The road for the eastern entrance, commonly known as the Al-Hawban line, connects Taiz to Ibb and Lahj governorates. It is also the primary route travelled to reach Sana'a and Aden. The other major entrance to Taiz is to the west through the Beer Basha area, connecting Taiz to Hodeidah governorate and the highway to Bab Al-Mandeb. In August 2015, Houthi/Saleh forces took control of both entrances, effectively putting a blockade on the city. As a result, for three years the majority of civilians entering the city have been forced to queue in long lines where armed Houthi/Saleh forces reportedly confiscate essential goods such as cooking gas and medicine, while donkeys are used to carry larger but still insufficient quantities of essential goods such as sacks of wheat and vegetables into the city via a mountain trail.³⁴

The guarded entrances have cut off vital medical care for citizens in surrounding rural areas who used to travel to Taiz city to access several of its large public hospitals, including Al-Thawrah, Al-Jumhuriyah, and the Yemeni-Swedish Hospital. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) said in a 2017 report that only those living within the city's center were not "effectively blocked" from accessing the hospitals.³⁵ MSF also noted that it is equally hard for those within the city to get out to other parts of the country and access specialized medical care that may not be available at local hospitals.

Movement to and from Taiz city has improved marginally over the course of the conflict. In March 2016, Hadi-aligned forces were able to open a third entry point south of the city, connecting it to Aden. Accessible only via circuitous, arduous secondary roads, the entrance has permitted civilians a degree of movement and the ability to bring goods in and out of the city. As a result of international pressure and other factors, Houthi/Sana'a-GPC authorities now also intermittently allow the passage of more civilians and small quantities of civilian goods, including humanitarian aid, through the main entrances to the city. Nevertheless, access to Taiz city remains extremely limited.³⁶

32 OCHA. "2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview." 2017. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/yemen_humanitarian_needs_overview_hno_0_20171204_2018.pdf.

33 Human Rights Watch. "Yemen: Houthi-Saleh forces using landmines." April 2017, 20. <https://www.hrw.org/news/20/04/2017/yemen-houthi-saleh-forces-using-landmines>.

34 Abdul-Ahad, Ghaith. "Life under siege: inside Taiz, the Yemeni city slowly being strangled." The Guardian, December 2015, 28. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/28/life-under-siege-inside-taiz-yemen-houthi>.

35 Supra note 31.

36 OHCHR. "Yemen: An 'entirely man-made catastrophe' – UN human rights report urges international investigation." September 2017, 5. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22025&LangID=E>; Also see supra note 34; Also see Shiban, Baraa. The New Arab. "The tragic tale of Taiz under siege." February 2016, 27. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/27/2/2016/the-tragic-tale->

In addition to the partial blockade on the city, movement of goods and people within the city is compromised by fighting.³⁷ After pushing the Houthis from key areas inside the city, a mix of resistance and Hadi-aligned military forces now control the city center. However, clashes between resistance factions still happen frequently here. Safely navigating this area is further complicated because Houthi/Sana'a-GPC forces surround the center and control much of the Salah district (one of three districts forming Taiz city). Residents will often try to avoid the fighting by using alternative and sometimes unsafe routes that put them at risk of coming into contact with landmines, shelling, airstrikes, and sniper bullets.³⁸ Transportation has become very costly and time consuming for citizens. For example, it used to take local residents 20 minutes and about 50 to 100 Yemeni riyals (YER), around \$0.11 to \$0.21 USD,³⁹ to get to Al-Hawban, north east of Taiz city, from Jamal street in the center of the city using public transportation or a private car. Now, as a result of the war, the journey takes around 5 hours and costs between 3,000 to 5,000 YER, around \$6.28 to \$10.5 USD.

The Houthis enjoy very little support from residents in Taiz, and their influence in the city is limited to Hawban area of Salah district, currently under their control. This area is important to the group because it is home to some of the governorate's largest businesses. Prior to his death in December 2017, Saleh had some loyalists in Taiz city, mainly pragmatists seeking to benefit from his patronage network. However, Saleh's death has further weakened the connection between these locals and his GPC party.

3.3 Key Frontlines and Geographic Control

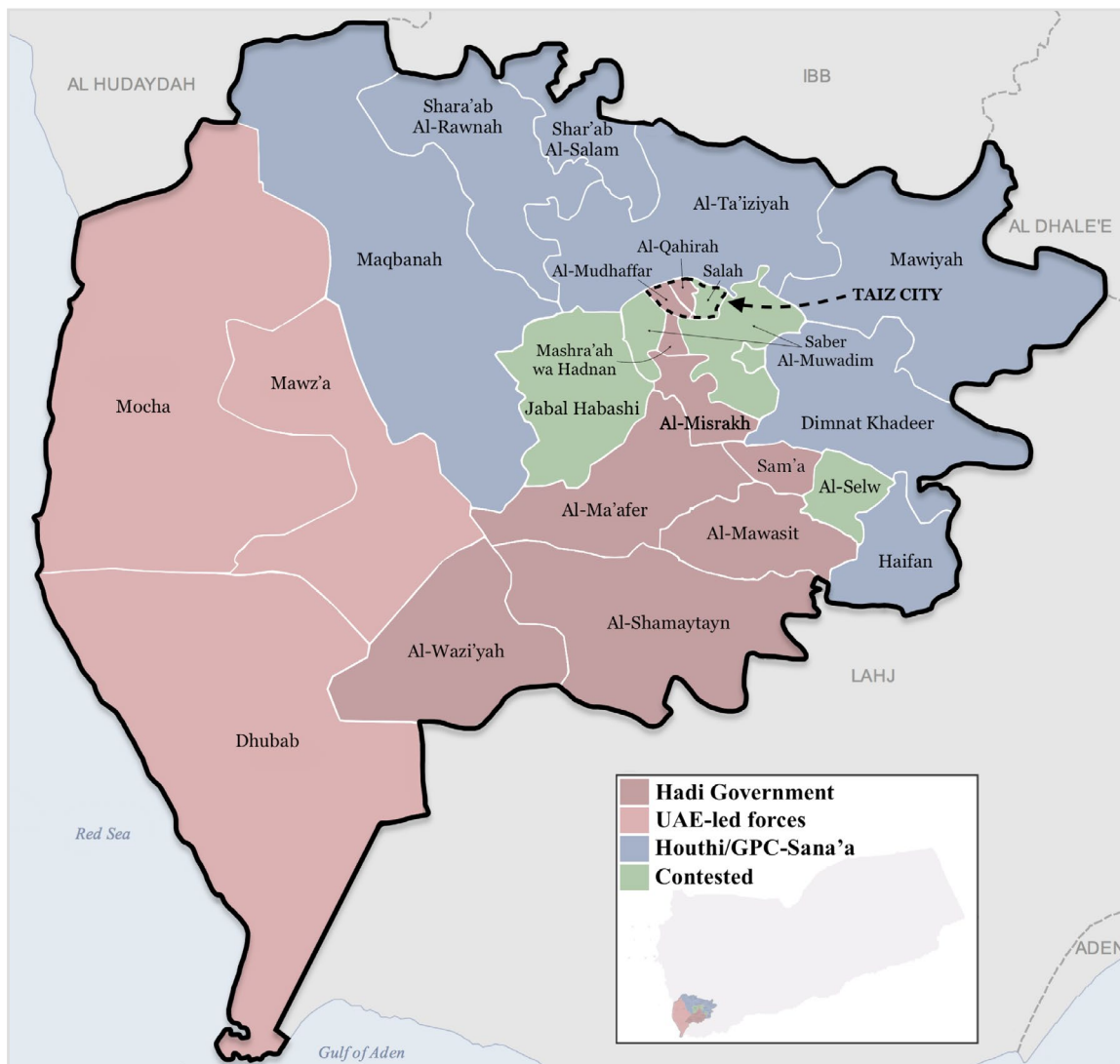
This section provides an overview of the geographic balance of power in the governorate, including listing the brigades active on the major frontlines. Part 4 of the paper examines in closer detail the composition of the different forces. It also expands on the dynamics between individual resistance and brigade commanders who are at least nominally aligned with the Hadi government. Throughout the section, some of the most influential individuals opposing the Houthis are featured. Hadi-aligned forces are not under a strong hierarchical structure, and thus the intensity of the fighting at any given front is often determined by individual field commanders. Rather than relying on directives from national leadership, field commanders fighting the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance have a significant degree of autonomy. Some front lines have more strategic value than others and that is noted where applicable. The map below shows the balance of control on a district level as of mid-2018.

[of-taiz-under-siege.](#)

37 Supra note 31.

38 Ibid.

39 Average exchange rate recorded in February 2018 for the 13 governorates monitored by the food cluster in Yemen was 478 YER/USD. FAO, "Monthly Market Monitoring Bulletin (February 2018)" February 2018, 28. <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/monthly-market-monitoring-bulletin-february2018->



Officially, the city of Taiz comprises three of the 23 districts in the governorate: Al-Mudhaffar, Al-Qahirah, and Salah. In practice however, the city spills into the neighboring Al-Ta'iziyah, Saber Al-Mawadim and Mashra'ah wa Hadnan districts, which collectively encircle the city's center. The following fronts are inside or conducted from within the city:

The Eastern Front: This frontline extends from Wadi Salah to the Al-Qasr roundabout. It is mainly operated by the 22nd Brigade, led by Sadeq Sarhan. The 22nd Brigade has on several occasions clashed with the Abu Al-Abbas Battalions (*see section 4.3 for more details on the battalions*), which also have a presence at this front, particularly in Wadi Salah.

The Al-Kadhah Front: Located on the western side of Taiz city, this front spans four districts: Al-Wazi'yah, Jabal Habashi, Maqbanah and Al-Ma'afer. The Abu Al-Abbas Battalions are in charge of operations at this front although activity here has been relatively quiet for a while. Al-Kadhah is an area in Al-Ma'afer district, and thus this frontline is not actually in Taiz city, but Abu Al-Abbas' faction is based in the city and it extends to Al-Kadhah.



Major General Sadeq Sarhan commands the 22nd Brigade. The Houthi/Saleh alliance initially controlled this brigade because it was a part of the Republican Guard—elite forces formerly commanded by Saleh’s son, Ahmed Ali, who now resides in the UAE. After losing Saleh’s men, Sarhan has been able to begin rebuilding this brigade, in part by recruiting fighters from his Sharab wa Al-Mekhlaf tribe. Several resistance groups in Taiz city have also been integrated into his brigade.

Sarhan’s son, Bakr, is a field commander for fighters from Sharab wa Al-Mekhlaf, and his brother, Abdulwahid Sarhan, is the director of the Taiz branch of the national intelligence organization, the Political Security Organization (PSO). Sarhan is militarily connected to Vice President Ali Mohsen. The major general also courts controversy because of allegations that he supports unsanctioned tax collection in Taiz.

The Al-Shuqab Front: This front is in the southwest part of Taiz city, in the Al-Shuqab village, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the city’s center. It is one of the most active frontlines. The village here has been heavily bombed and is of little strategic importance itself, but the mountainous terrain in the area overlooks the outskirts of Taiz city and is thus strategically advantageous. The 22nd Brigade is currently leading the charge against Houthi/GPC-Sana’a forces here.

There are three major fronts outside of Taiz city. These include battle lines in the Al-Selw and Al-Shamaytayn districts, located in the southeastern Taiz governorate. Hadi’s military forces are clashing with the Houthis here. Another major front is along the west coast of Taiz, commonly known as Operation Golden Spear and is under the direction of UAE leadership.

Brigadier General Adnan Al-Hammadi commands the 35th Armored Brigade. Once commanded by former President Saleh, this brigade used to be the largest in Taiz and one of the most important in all of Yemen. At the onset of the war,



however, troops split into two camps: those loyal to the Houthi/Saleh alliance and those supporting President Hadi. Al-Hammadi, a Hadi supporter, took over the brigade’s command in April 2015. Over the course of the war he has been able to rebuild this brigade to some degree by integrating several resistance groups into it. Al-Hammadi is politically unaffiliated, although he is supported by Nasserist Party Secretary General Abdullah Nu’mān (see section 4.3 for more about Nu’mān)

and is generally well respected in Taiz. The Abu Al-Abbas Battalions are also technically under Al-Hammadi’s command, but in reality he exercises no control over them. Despite Abu Al-Abbas’ refusal to integrate the two forces, the leaders have not clashed.

The Al-Selw Front: This front, located in the Al-Selw district southeast of Taiz city, is important because it intersects a supply line for government and resistance forces fighting the Houthis in rural areas of the governorate. The crucial supply line has turned this front into one of the most intense conflict zones. The 35th Armored Brigade comprise the main Houthi opposition force here.

The Al-Shamayatain Front: The 22nd Brigade and the 170th Air Defense Brigade share duties at this frontline located south of Taiz city. Colonel Taher Al-Azani commands the 170th Brigade, which is part of the national Air Force.

Operation Golden Spear: The Emirati military is directing forces at this frontline. Fighters that are a part of the operation include anti-Houthi Yemeni fighters from southern Yemen and Hodeidah governorate, and Sudanese troops. The operation is isolated from other frontlines in Taiz, which has meant Taiz natives are not represented in any significant portion of the forces. The operation succeeded in pushing Houthi/Saleh fighters out of most of the Dhubab district in January 2017. About a month later, anti-Houthi forces took the port city of Mocha. They then followed this victory up in July 2017 by capturing the Khaled Ibn Al-Waleed military camp in Mawza' district. In early December 2017, the operation expanded into Yemen's southern-most coastal district of the Hodeidah governorate, Al-Khawkhah, solidifying the UAE-aligned forces' control of the entire west coast of Taiz.

Outside of Operation Golden Spear, forces aligned with the Hadi government are meant to be part of a military structure called the Taiz Axis (Mehwar). The Taiz Axis exists under the Fourth Regional Military Command⁴⁰ and is directed by Major General Khaled Fadhel. The Hadi government and the Coalition bolstered the Taiz Axis in order to consolidate disparate resistance forces under a common command aimed at breaking the siege of Taiz city and ultimately liberating the governorate from the Houthis.



The Taiz Axis is led by **Major General Khaled Fadhel**, the most senior military official in Taiz. He oversees all formal military operations, the restructuring of the military and the allocation of salaries to military personnel. When conflict first broke out, Fadhel rallied locals to fight the Houthi/Saleh alliance in his home district of Jabal Habashi after the Taiz Military Council (a group of military officials that formed at the beginning of the war to help coordinate resistance troops) appointed him head of its operations room. Then President Hadi appointed him commander of the Taiz Axis in August 2016. While every brigade commander in Taiz officially receives orders from and reports to Fadhel, in practice not all adhere to this hierarchy. Fadhel is understood to be loyal to the military and not to have any political affiliation.

⁴⁰ Yemen is divided into seven military regions. The Fourth Region Command includes the governorates of Taiz, Aden, Lahj, Abyan and Al-Dhale'a.

PART 4: MAPPING OF ACTORS

4.1 A New Governor

President Hadi appointed Ameen Ahmed Mahmoud, the incumbent governor of Taiz, in December 2017. A source working for the Hadi government said UAE officials nominated Mahmoud for the post in mid-2017, hoping his leadership would create an opportunity to deepen UAE ties in the governorate. Almost all political parties initially rejected Mahmoud's nomination. A committee made up of representatives from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Vice President Ali Mohsen also initially failed to reach consensus on his appointment, with the Saudis and others preferring Ali Al-Ma'mari remain governor. There are fears, especially among Islah supporters in Taiz, that Governor Mahmoud will further UAE's policies in Yemen, which are widely believed to be aimed at weakening the Islah Party.⁴¹

The new governor has started to meet with key figures in Hadi's government, including Vice President Mohsen. Despite concerns about his UAE connection, there is a common sentiment among various Hadi-aligned forces that the new governor should receive support from across the political spectrum. Many think it's possible for Mahmoud to strike a balance between external and internal interests in Taiz, particularly those of the UAE and the Islah Party. Whether Governor Mahmoud's actions will further unite or divide the Hadi-aligned forces in Taiz will be determined in large part by two major factors. If the governor supports the formation of a UAE-aligned paramilitary in Taiz similar to the Elite and Security Belt forces in the southern governorates⁴² and politically sidelines certain parties such as Islah, this could serve to broaden fissures between nominally Hadi-aligned groups in the governorate. In contrast, the governor could continue with former Governor Al-Ma'mari's security and military reform efforts (see section 5.3 for more on these reforms) and demonstrate a willingness to include all political parties in this process, which could begin to restore stability in Taiz.



Governor Ameen Ahmed Mahmoud received his leadership position in Taiz in December 2017. He has been affiliated with the GPC but has never been particularly close to the party. This was evident during Yemen's 2011 uprising when he voiced opposition to Saleh's rule. According to one of his friends and a political ally, Mahmoud's political leanings most closely align with Yemen's Socialist Party (YSP). While he is known to oppose Islamist ideology, he understands given the current climate in Taiz and his backing from the UAE, he must be willing to deal with Islamic fundamentalists, particularly local UAE-supported Salafis. At the time of his appointment as governor, Mahmoud had been living in Canada for over a decade.

⁴¹ The Islah Party has historically been affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE designated the Muslim Brotherhood a "terrorist" organization in 2014.

⁴² The UAE operates paramilitaries in several governorates in southern Yemen comprised of local Yemenis fighters.

4.2 The Resistance

Prominent tribal leader Hamoud Al-Mikhlafl formed what has become commonly known as the popular resistance forces, or simply “the resistance.” Under his leadership, these forces included a mix of Islah Party members, Socialists, Nasserites, Salafis, GPC members not aligned with the Sana’a-based party leadership, and independent fighters. Under Al-Mikhlafl, resistance forces began fighting Houthi forces before the Coalition had organized their operations in Taiz. According to Al-Mikhlafl himself, fighting broke out in Taiz only after he failed to discourage Houthi forces from entering the governorate. Al-Mikhlafl even called for mediators from the GPC to help stymie Houthi advances.⁴³ During the first year of the conflict, Al-Mikhlafl was the top commander in Taiz. He initially enjoyed the support of the major political parties standing by the Hadi government. The Coalition propped up his forces via weapon and ammunition airdrops.



Hamoud Al-Mikhlafl is the titular head of the resistance forces in Taiz, although he has been outside of Yemen since March 2016. He is the sheikh of the Sharab wa Al-Mikhlafl tribe in the Sharab Al-Salam district. During Yemen’s 2011 uprising, he commanded tribal fighters in their battle against the Saleh regime.

Al-Mikhlafl has a complicated relationship with the Islah Party. He is considered an “honorary member” of the party but has never been a part of the party’s policy making process. His relationship with the UAE soured in part due to these ties. His connections with the Coalition as a whole also deteriorated because he repeatedly spoke out about what he saw as the Coalition’s unwillingness to dedicate the resources necessary to outright end the war in Taiz. Al-Mikhlafl also publicly criticized the Hadi government for its failure to return to Yemen.⁴⁴ Under pressure from the UAE, Al-Mikhlafl left Taiz in March 2016 and has not returned since. The Islah Party also allegedly wanted him to leave because opposition was mounting against him, and he often acted independently without consulting the party’s leadership.

Despite this, Al-Mikhlafl had served to bring at least a degree of order to the anti-Houthi campaign. Members of Hadi’s government who remained in Taiz offered him support, and he was well-respected by resistance leaders in the city. His departure left a power vacuum that spurred resistance forces to fragment along more partisan lines. This disintegration was exacerbated by the Hadi government’s inability step in and fill this void. The UAE’s willingness to direct monetary support to Salafi fighters enabled more fractionalization.

⁴³ Interview with Hamoud Al-Mikhlafl, June 2016, 9.

⁴⁴ From a speech Al-Mikhlafl delivered on May 24th, 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey.

To curb this fragmentation, efforts have been made to unify resistance fighters under the formal military hierarchy, the Taiz Axis. As part of a strategy to restructure the military in Taiz, all existing brigades loyal to Hadi were incorporated into the Taiz Axis. This included the 35th Armored Brigade, commanded by Adnan Al-Hammadi, and the 22nd Brigade, led by Sadeq Sarhan. Both brigades existed prior to the war. In order to incorporate resistance fighters, the Hadi government created new brigades or re-established old ones that had been lost to Saleh and the Houthis. Formal military units formed during the war include the 17th, 170th, and 145th brigades.

It is estimated that 25,000 resistance fighters have been enlisted in the military and security forces in Taiz governorate. A total of over 29,000 men are currently on the government payroll, indicating that roughly 4,000 original military personnel stayed employed. While a large number of resistance fighters were civilians prior to the war, many were soldiers who had essentially lost a formal unit or hierarchy to fight under and thus rejoined the military during the integration process. Out of the 29,000 on payroll, 13,000 are working for the Ministry of the Interior in the security sector and 16,000 are under the purview of the Ministry of Defense. According to one senior military official and several other sources interviewed, the Hadi government wants 30,000 military and security personnel in Taiz, indicating about 1,000 more people need to be recruited.

However, it should also be noted that the process of fully integrating resistance fighters into brigades on the ground lags behind the enlistment process on paper. Some locals are also very critical of integration procedures. Activists have complained that fighters are integrated into the military structure based on political affiliation rather than merit. They say many resistance members who have fought on the war's frontlines have been excluded from enlistment into the military—which in theory would make them eligible for a stable paycheck—while others who have not previously fought have been integrated based on political connections.

Despite formal incorporation into the military and security forces, enlisted factions continue to operate with varying degrees of independence. Some factions are still significantly self-directed. Co-existence and coordination between armed factions, whether military or informal, is often based on personal relationships among individual commanders rather than an established chain of command. As a result, armed factions often act more like armed wings of their respective political parties rather than cohesive units that are part of a professional military. Furthermore, enlisted fighters often do not receive the training necessary to be a part of a professional army, which is especially problematic given the large civilian population in Taiz. Several interviewed military leaders said when clashes break out between military factions, it is often the result of individuals acting out.

4.3 The Coalition

There is an overwhelming perception among activists in Taiz—and even some local officials and resistance leaders—that the Coalition has only provided anti-Houthi fighters with enough weapons and money necessary to hold the frontlines in Taiz.

Locals accuse the Coalition of poorly arming the resistance, only offering intermittent air drops and generally ignoring the humanitarian situation in the governorate.⁴⁵ Activists and officials believe the Coalition is limiting their support in Taiz for two reasons. First, they believe Coalition member states—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE—are retaliating against locals for their participation in the country's 2011 political uprising, which threatened Saudi Arabia and the UAE's political stability. Second, they think the Coalition wants to draw out the conflict in Taiz so the Houthis exhaust their resources there and are in a weaker position overall.

Internal divisions inside the city were exacerbated by the funneling of Coalition funds to certain individuals rather than through a formal process. After Al-Mikhlafi left Taiz, due at least in part to UAE pressure, the Coalition began channeling money exclusively through Abu Al-Abbas. The Salafi sheikh has used the Coalition funds to recruit more Salafi fighters loyal to him and grow his support base. Soon after, the UAE also began sending material support to Taiz via Abdullah Nu'man, the secretary general of the Nasserist Party.⁴⁶ The UAE likely selected Nu'man in an attempt to appease the large section of Taiz society that disapprove of religious fundamentalists like Abu Al-Abbas. Nu'man has distributed financial and military assistance from the Coalition to all major players in the Hadi government alliance in Taiz except for Abu Al-Abbas.



Abu Al-Abbas, formally named Adel Abdu Fare'a, is the commander of the Abu Al-Abbas Battalions, an anti-Houthi resistance group. Abu Al-Abbas is a Salafi sheikh from the Al-Shamaytayn district of Taiz. In October 2017, the US and GCC member states designated him a terrorist, alleging ties with both Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (see section 5.3 for more details on the designation).

Throughout the conflict, the UAE has been providing Abu Al-Abbas considerable military equipment and money. In an effort to unify those fighting the Houthis, the Hadi government officially integrated Abu Al-Abbas' troops into the Taiz Axis via the 35th Armored Brigade. However, Abu Al-Abbas refused to comply with the move and kept his fighters under his command. His battalions independently control their own territory in Taiz city, and Abu Al-Abbas collects taxes in the neighborhoods he has administrative control over. Even before Abu Al-Abbas was designated a terrorist, his fundamentalist ideology and disregard for government authority alienated many would-be allies in Taiz. He is known to frequently clash with the leaders of many other anti-Houthi resistance groups and military brigades.

45 Al-Khattab, Al-Rawhani, "Power Shuffle: A Map of the New Players in Taiz," Deep Root, non-public report. 2016.

46 Researcher interview with local security official in Taiz city, August 2017.



Abdullah Nu'man is the Nasserist Party's secretary general and deputy chairman of the Resistance Council. Nu'man maintains close ties with a key member of the Hadi government, Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Abdulmalik Al-Mekhlafi, who is also a prominent Nasserist Party member. Nu'man has influence over the 35th Armored Brigade because of the large number of Nasserist Party loyalists in the brigade. Nu'man is known to clash with Islah Party leaders but is a trusted UAE intermediary in Taiz. Because of this UAE connection, Nu'man's interests often align with those of Abu Al-Abbas, a recipient of funding from the Emirates. However, Al-Abbas' designation as a terrorist in October 2017 has likely affected the pair's relationship.

By 2017, the UAE was allegedly trying to empower Abu Al-Abbas with a goal of establishing a new security force in Taiz similar to the UAE-managed Security Belt Forces in Aden. On September 26, 2017, an Islah Party parliamentarian, Shawqi Al-Qadhi, said that UAE representatives met with former Governor Al-Ma'mari at a Coalition Command Center in Aden, where they offered him generous financial support in exchange for allowing the creation of a UAE-controlled Security Belt Forces unit in Taiz.⁴⁷ Some believe this is one of the reasons the governor ultimately resigned (*for more on the Al-Ma'mari's resignation see section 5.3*).⁴⁸

The direct support from the UAE to Abu Al-Abbas is believed to have emboldened the sheikh to refrain from integrating his forces into the Hadi military. The Abu Al-Abbas Battalions are technically supposed to be a part of the 35th Armored Brigade. But, the brigade commander, Adnan Al-Hammadi, said in a January 2017 letter to Taiz Axis commander Khaled Fadhel, that he had no control over the battalions. Al-Hammadi said Abu Al-Abbas demanded compensation and a promotion in exchange for integrating his fighters.⁴⁹

47 Hour News. [Ar] "Islah leader: This is what the coalition leaders asked of the Taiz governor and pushed him to resign." September 2017, 26. <http://hournews.net/news80469-.htm>.

48 Akhbar 24. [Ar] "Confessions of Taiz Governor 'Al-Mamari': Not everything we know could be said in public." September 2017, 27. <http://www.akhbarye24.net/news/854815/>. Also see Al-Mashhad Al_Yemeni. [Ar] "What does the resigned governor [of Taiz] hide and why does he not announce it to the public?" September 27, 2017. <https://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news109905.html>.

49 Abu Al-Abbas controls parts of the eastern region of Taiz city, which includes parts of the Al-Qahirah and Salah districts. More specifically, he controls the portion of the Old City located between south of Al-Qahirah Fortress and the areas of Bab Musa, Bab Al-Kabeer, the Republican (Jumhuri) neighborhood in downtown Taiz city and part of Salah neighborhood. For Al-Abbas' refusal to integrate with the Taiz Axis, see Yemen Press. [Ar] "Commander of 35th Armored Brigade refuses the orders of the commander of the Taiz Axis to violate military laws...an official document." January 2017, 31. <http://yemen-press.com/news90512.html>.

PART 5: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE ONGOING CRISIS IN TAIZ

5.1 Internal Power Struggles and Factionalization

Despite the fact that Houthi/GPC-Sana'a forces maintain a significant presence on the ground in many districts in Taiz, this external pressure has not discouraged infighting between the various anti-Houthi factions.

One prominent power struggle that threatened unity between anti-Houthi factions was between former Governor Al-Ma'mari and one of his deputy governors, Aref Gamel, both of whom are GPC members. Tension arose over Gamel's decision to remove select local officials the governor had previously appointed and replace them with his own appointments.⁵⁰ According to locals, Gamel hired dozens of men with family relations to him and placed them in districts throughout Taiz. In September 2016, Gamel wanted a list of fighters loyal to him integrated into the security forces so he sent armed men to surround Al-Ma'mari's house to force him to approve the list.

The JMP—the political opposition coalition made up primarily of the Islah, Socialist and Nasserist parties—issued a statement in January of 2017 demanding Gamel no longer be allowed to appoint officials, arguing they violate the law.⁵¹



Former Governor **Ali Al-Ma'mari** is a member of Parliament representing the GPC. He was the governor of Taiz from January 2016 through December 2017. During his tenure, he focused his agenda on five main objectives. These included: facilitating medical care for the war's injured; empowering political parties and the political process to reduce reliance on the military; improving security by reshuffling and empowering local security bodies; integrating resistance forces into the formal military under the Taiz Axis; and restoring state institutions, such as the Ministries of Finance, Education and Justice.

Gamel agreed to stop but later resumed appointing district managers and ministerial office directors. As a result, in November 2017, Al-Ma'mari officially nullified appointments Gamel had made on his behalf.⁵² But Gamel has allegedly used armed

50 Yemenat. [Ar] "The war of decrees among the loyalists to the Saudi coalition in Taiz...Aref Jamel dismisses Al-Mamari and Al-Mamari responds with a decree that references the Civil Service law." November 2016 ,12. <http://www.yemenat.net/273271/11/2016>.

51 Gamel signed letters appointing individuals without the governor's approval. See Al-Salimi, Wajdi. "Taiz: Administrative decrees ignite local disputes." January 2017 ,8. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/1-7/1/2017> ; Supra note 51.

52 Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. [Ar] "Taiz: an official directive to nullify all of Deputy Governor Gamel's appointments and these are the lists of those who were appointed." November 2017 ,20.

men and intimidation tactics to force the men he appointed into office. In June 2017, dozens of armed men believed to be linked to Gamel raided the Taiz Tax Office and assaulted staff. This came two days after Gamel and his office manager allegedly threatened the director of the Tax Office to “blow his off head” if he didn’t quit. While Gamel denied these allegations, he admitted he had a disagreement with the governor over the appointment of this position.⁵³



Aref Gamel, a prominent member of the faction of the GPC that supports President Hadi, is a deputy governor of Taiz. When war first broke out in Taiz, Gamel rallied tribesmen and pro-Hadi GPC members to take up arms against Houthi/Saleh forces in Taiz city. Though he is effective at communicating with a range of groups beyond his party, including independents and Salafis, his tactics are often controversial. On several occasions it is reported he has used force or intimidation against other Hadi-aligned actors in order to get his way. Gamel is also a sheikh in Saber Al-Muwadim district.

Other obstacles to the unification of anti-Houthi forces include a clear jostling for power among political groups in Taiz. All political parties including Islah, the GPC, Nasserists, and the Socialists have armed groups with at least a degree of loyalty to their respective parties. This is in spite of the fact that these armed fighters are officially a part of the formal, apolitical military structure. Islah is the strongest political party in Taiz and has the most resistance and military personnel fighting the Houthis in the city. Furthering the Islah Party’s influence is the fact that the commander of the Taiz Axis, Khaled Fadhel, is close to Vice President Mohsen, a longtime Islah ally. Islah Party loyalists are spread out amongst many brigades and resistance factions—likely this is a strategy to avoid being targeted by the party’s opponents. For example, if Islah Party supporters were only in certain brigades, the Coalition could potentially withhold funding and military equipment from those units.

The Nasserist Party’s influence in Taiz has increased due to Secretary General Abdullah Nu’man’s relationship with the UAE. At the same time, the Nasserist Party has an increasingly tense relationship with Islah. Some Nasserists accused former Governor Al-Ma’mari, a longtime GPC member, of working too closely with the Islah Party and allowing the party to take control of the governorate.⁵⁴ Since 2015, the Islah Party has been able to appoint many of its members to key leadership positions in the governorate, which some have called a monopoly of power.

<http://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/topics/97953/20/11/17.html>

53 Mohammed, Wisam. [Ar] “The tax of internal conflict in Taiz.” Al-Eshteraky, June 2017, 11.

<http://aleshteraky.com/pgbaj-h-cbajij/item/-14987ojibq-adnjar-adhagdi-ai-crk>

54 Other political parties viewed Al-Ma’mari’s working relationship with Islah as necessary and productive.

The GPC lost much of its political and military influence in the governorate at the outset of the war, as most prominent GPC members sided with Saleh and the Houthis or travelled outside the country.

Another changing power dynamic in Taiz has been the rise of local Salafi influence. Many of the Salafi fighters currently in Taiz came after a separate conflict with the Houthis displaced them from the city of Dammaj, in Sa'ada governorate, in early 2014.⁵⁵ Some of these Salafi fighters rapidly gained influence during the war because the Coalition provided them—more than any other party or group—with funding. Multiple political leaders in Taiz in competition with the Islah Party have sought to build alliances with Salafis, mainly with the most powerful faction among them, led by Abu Al-Abbas. In December 2016, Deputy Governor Gamel announced an alliance between the GPC with Abu Al-Abbas' Salafi fighters, forming what was called the "National Joint Meeting."⁵⁶ Likewise, under the leadership of Secretary General Nu'man, the Nasserists also struck an alliance with Salafis. These alliances, however, are understood to be temporary and pragmatic, the result of having common enemies and a shared external source of funding, rather than similarities in stated political or religious orientation.

Despite these shifting power dynamics, political parties have at least made attempts to agree on a common agenda. On September 23, 2017, a wide variety of Taiz city-based political parties signed an agreement to form a coalition to unify their efforts to liberate the city and reinstate government and security institutions throughout the governorate.⁵⁷ Signatories included the Islah, Socialist, and Nasserist parties, the pro-Hadi GPC, the Baath Party, the Popular Forces Union, the Yemeni Rashad Union, Justice and Building Party, and the Salafi faction included in the National Joint Meeting. While this meeting offered some optimism that an internal political consensus in Taiz could emerge, follow up discussions have yet to translate into an agreement. Governor Mahmoud's approach to politics going forward, particularly in regard to the Islah Party, will play a key role in determining whether these parties improve their coordination on the ground. At the same time, Abu Al-Abbas, who attended the September meeting to represent his Salafi faction, undoubtedly complicates the ability of parties to continue working with him in an official capacity because of his recent international designation as a terrorist.

55 Al-Sakkaf, Nasser. "Salafis forced to flee Dammaj, government forces unable to protect them they say." The Yemen Times, January 2014, 15. <http://www.yementimes.com/en/1747/news/3365/Salafis-forced-to-flee-Dammaj-government-forces-unable-to-protect-them-they-say.htm>.

56 Aden Al-Ghad. "New political alliances in Taiz: Yemeni Salafists enter the scene." December 2016, 30. <http://adengd.net/news/237694/#.WGZSADKZPow>; Also see Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. January 2016, 4. <http://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/news90895.html>.

57 Al-Islah Net. [Ar] "Taiz: Declaration of the political forces alliance to support the legitimate government." September 2017, 23. http://alislah-ye.net/news_details.php?sid=636.

5.2 The War's Impact on the Local Economy

The war has nearly collapsed the local economy in Taiz governorate. Fighting has at least in some way damaged about 95 percent of businesses in Taiz and forced many well-established ones to close down and lay off employees.⁵⁸ The Taiz-based Hayel Saeed Anam Group, the largest private sector conglomerate in Yemen, has laid off about 40 percent of its employees and reduced the salaries of other employees by at least 25 percent.⁵⁹

Businesses in Taiz have also struggled to cope with a loss of customers and their purchasing power. This is a result of the large number of people displaced by fighting and an exodus of middle and upper class Yemenis who have fled the country for safety abroad.⁶⁰ Unpaid government salaries, private sector lay-offs and pay cuts, as well as price hikes have also stifled the general population's ability to keep dollars flowing into local businesses.⁶¹ Businesses have also suffered from a limited ability to import and export goods because of the country's liquidity crisis, the critical scarcity of foreign currency and a fluctuating exchange rate. Despite this, some businesses have learned to survive by providing goods such as solar panels, power generators and batteries to combat Yemen's unrelenting power outages. Other companies have relocated either to more secure parts of the country or moved their operations abroad.

Even businesses located in the relative safety of non-active conflict zones throughout the Taiz governorate struggle to stay afloat because of unregulated taxation and extortion practices. Nearly three years on, the duration and intensity of the fighting in Taiz has shaped a local economy that incentivizes various parties to remain factionalized.⁶² Businesses in both Houthi and resistance-controlled areas say they are unfairly and illegally forced to pay fighters who demand fees from them. In August 2017, a member of the Houthi Revolutionary Committee,⁶³ Sadeq Abu Shawareb, demanded large companies in Taiz and Hodeidah governorates fund the Houthi fighters' salaries in exchange for protection.⁶⁴ Some businesses have tried to circumvent fees levied on them at Houthi checkpoints by taking alternative routes to and from Taiz city. But this practice can backfire because it puts drivers at risk of having their cargo outright looted. In August 2017, the Houthis ransacked the Al-Barh cement factory, a major company in the governorate.⁶⁵

58 Small and Microenterprises Promotion Service (SMEPS) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). "Rapid business survey: Impact of the Yemen crisis on the private sector activity." Nov 2015, 16. http://www.ye.undp.org/content/yemen/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/undp-smeps-rapid-business-survey.html.

59 AbaBelNet. [Ar] "Hael Saeed Anam conglomerate succumbs to the extortion of the Houthi militias." May, 15 2016. <http://ababiil.net/yemen-news/87260.html>.

60 Supra note 57.

61 Ibid.

62 Salisbury, Peter. "Yemen and the business of war." The World Today, August and September 2017. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/yemen-and-business-war>.

63 The Houthi Revolutionary Committee served as the interim governing body in Sana'a between the resignation of the Hadi government in January 2015 and the formation of the Houthi/GPC Supreme Political Council in August 2016. The Revolutionary Committee continues to exist to support Houthi activities nationwide.

64 Barakish Net. [Ar] "Houthis threaten Taiz businessmen officially: Pay the salaries of the employees or your money will be plundered." August 2017, 21. <http://www.barakish.net/news02.aspx?cat=12&sub=23&id=493894>.

65 Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. [Ar] "The militia of the coup plundered Al-Barh Cement Factory West of Taiz." January, 4 2017. <http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news106621.html>.

On the anti-Houthi resistance side of the conflict, several factions in Taiz are known to be profiting from the government's inability to establish and enforce a regulated and centralized system for tax collection. This leaves ample room for corruption. Residents report fighters thought to be working on behalf of local officials demanding payments, sometimes called "protection fees," from qat dealers, local shops owners and those passing through checkpoints along cargo routes. In early October 2017, about 200 truck drivers went on strike and organized a protest against what they say had become systematic extortion of drivers at the roughly 54 checkpoints erected on the main road to Aden.⁶⁶ At some of these checkpoints, locals are charged as much as 30,000 YER, approximately \$62.76 USD. On average, checkpoints charge commercial trucks (and sometimes even from passenger cars) between 500-5,000 YER, approximately \$1.05-\$10.5 USD. Armed men linked to military brigades and powerful political figures in Taiz are in charge of the majority of these checkpoints.⁶⁷ Local sources specifically identified that the "tax collectors" at checkpoints are affiliated with Deputy Governor Gamel, the Islah Party, the 35th Armored Brigade commanded by Adnan Al-Hammadi, the 17th Brigade commanded by Abdul Rahman Al-Shamsani, and the 22nd Brigade commanded by Sadeq Sarhan. Many local officials interviewed said the majority of taxes collected in Taiz have illegal links to local officials and army units. In response to the truck driver strike, the commanders of the Taiz Axis and the 35th Armored Brigade gave instructions to field units to remove all illegal checkpoints.

A large number of the clashes between different anti-Houthi factions arise over the "right" to collect taxes at local markets. For example, fighters in the Abu Al-Abbas Battalions have repeatedly clashed with Ghazwan Al-Mikhlafi, an infamous young gang leader who is now in jail, over taxation control of the DeLux Market in Taiz city. This market produces about 1.5 million YER, approximately \$3,138 USD, a day. Likewise, the commander of the 22nd Brigade, Sadeq Sarhan, has clashed with fighters loyal to Abu Al-Abbas on several occasions over the collection of local taxes.

There have been some tax reform efforts, but they have largely failed. In April 2017, former Governor Al-Ma'mari directed around 100 Ministry of Finance employees to organize the local revenue collection process and prevent armed groups from illegally amassing them. Despite Al-Ma'mari's intentions, the vast majority of locally collected taxes and revenue are still not managed by the Ministry of Finance's Taiz branch. According to the director of this branch, the office only supervises seven percent of collected revenue, while the other 93 percent—about 60 billion YER a year, approximately \$125.5 million USD—makes it to the hands of powerful figures in Taiz⁶⁸.

66 Letter sent from truck drivers to the commander of the Taiz Axis and the governors of Taiz and Lahj. Barakish Net. [Ar] "Truck drivers strike on Taiz-Aden road in protest against the proliferation of checkpoints of extortion" October 2017 ,2. <http://www.barakish.net/news02.aspx?cat=12&sub=23&id=495841>.

67 Al-Mushahid. [Ar] "Stoppage of 200 locomotives that were loaded with food supplies, which were on their way to Taiz, at the south of the city and here is the reason." October 2017 ,2. <https://www.almushahid.net/?p=19068>.

68 El Mahaya, Hisham. "%93 of Taiz tax revenues go to private accounts." Al-Mushahid, August 2017 ,21. <https://www.almushahid.net/?p=17977>; Also see El Mahaya, Hisham. [Ar] "A campaign to collect taxes in Taiz by intimidation and [the use of] bullies and the Director of Finance [in the city] denies the arrival of any tax revenues." Al-Mushahid, October 2017 ,4 <https://www.almushahid.net/?p=19126>.

Before the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) branch in Taiz reopened in October 2017, taxes and revenues collected by the local authority in the governorate went to several different bank accounts, including one under the governor's name and another under Deputy Governor Gamel. The official government account for Taiz was in the Ahli Bank in Aden.⁶⁹ During a visit to the city in late September, early October, then Deputy Prime Minister Abdulazeez Jubari⁷⁰ demanded that the different actors deposit the money they collect from taxes into the Ahli Bank in Aden but that still has to materialize.⁷¹

Clearly, the local war economy in Taiz has undermined efforts to establish security. A senior police official in Taiz said political and armed factions in Taiz want to maintain the current security vacuum in order to continue extorting local businesses.⁷²

5.3 Security and Rule of Law

Local security officials and civil society activists interviewed for this report commonly identified a weak central government presence as the biggest obstacle to improving security within the nominally Hadi-controlled areas of Taiz.⁷³ It wasn't until mid-2017⁷⁴ that a national government official visited Taiz city, and one of the security officials interviewed described the national government as being in a state of hibernation with regards to Taiz. Some youth activists have said political will is needed to successfully implement security sector improvements.⁷⁵ This political will was on display when then Deputy Prime Minister Abdulazeez Jubari visited Taiz in late September 2017. The increased deployment of security forces in the city for him led to a pause in clashes, which quickly stabilized the local security situation. However, conditions and fighting returned to "normal" as soon as the deputy prime minister and his delegation left.

Currently, a Security Committee that includes representatives from all the military brigades, the military police, the security department and intelligence agencies, is in charge of improving security in Taiz. The representatives meet to coordinate their operations and plans. The governor heads the committee. Khaled Fadhel, commander of the Taiz Axis, is in charge in the governor's absence.

Since the beginning of the war, local leadership has struggled with its limited resources to improve security. After former Governor Shawki Hayel Saeed resigned in March 2015, there was an administrative vacuum in Taiz until Al-Ma'mari assumed the governorship

69 An interview with a local authority official conducted in August 2017.

70 Abdulazeez Jubari resigned from his post as deputy prime minister and minister of civil service and insurance on March 2018, 19.

71 Elwehda. [Ar] "The government demands all parties in Taiz to deposit the governorate revenues to the central bank." <https://www.elwehda.com/Al-Wtn-Al-Rby/2467056/html>.

72 Al-Salimi, Wajdi. "Loose security in Taiz divides the legitimate government forces." The New Arab, June 2017, 18. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/18/6/2017/>

73 Interview with local officials, Taiz city, August 2017.

74 Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. "The first minister to wander in Taiz's streets and to check upon its status." September, 26 2017. <http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news109190.html>.

75 Interview with a civil society activist, Taiz city, August 2017.

in January 2016, holding the position until December 2017. During his tenure, Al-Ma'mari sought to restructure the security sector and restore a degree of functionality to government institutions by appointing security sector leaders. The success of such efforts was limited however, in part due to a lack of financial support from the Hadi government. Al-Ma'mari faced budget constraints and the lack of funds to pay public sector salaries. Internal local power struggles (*as explained in section 5.1*) also limited Al-Ma'mari's ability to restore security.

The Police Department in Taiz is lacking infrastructure, equipment, vehicles and an operational budget.⁷⁶ About 3,000 members from resistance forces have been enlisted in security and police forces, but there is not enough funding to train them.⁷⁷ Local police forces are also undermined by non-state armed groups running their own make-shift police stations and prisons without the oversight of formal security institutions.⁷⁸ Although the Police Department in Taiz documented over 600 criminal cases in the second half of 2016 and 1,200 during the first half of 2017, cases are stalled because of a collapse of the judicial system. As of October 2017, there was only one operational court in Taiz, the East Taiz Primary Court, and it does not process criminal cases.⁷⁹ After then Deputy Prime Minister Jubari met with security officials and judges in Taiz in the fall of 2017, Jubari promised funding to rehabilitate the local court system and the central prison and requested local judges return to work.⁸⁰ While Jubari's promises were encouraging, they have yet to materialize.

There have been some gains in the security sector. In 2016, Al-Ma'mari advocated for the government to restore the local military police and Special Security Forces (SSF). The military police began operations again last year with 800 troops, mostly former soldiers with a background in counterterrorism. In early October 2017, an additional 200 members joined the force.⁸¹ The military police have launched several campaigns in Taiz to increase safety and cut down on the number of assassinations targeting soldiers and military and security officers inside the city.⁸² Military and security personnel assassinations have skyrocketed in Taiz, with 75 instances between January and September 2017, compared to 16 cases during the second half of 2016.⁸³

76 Al-mawqea Post. "The spokesperson of Taiz Police to 'Al-mawqea Post': We face a lot of challenges and the various entities affected our performance." September 2017 ,20. <http://almawqea.net/interviews/#23305.Wc1mT0yZOb8>.

77 Interview with a security official in Taiz, August, 2017.

78 Interviews with security officials in Taiz, August, 2017.

79 Interview with a member of the Lawyers Syndicate in Taiz, Oct 2017 ,3.

80 It is worth noting that salary payments to judges and prosecutors have not been affected by the salary crisis like other government employees. See Almasdar Online. [Ar] "The government approves commissioning a medical committee to treat the wounded [from] Taiz and agrees to activate the security institutions." October 2017 ,4. <http://www.almasdaronline.com/article/94447>.

81 Figure gathered from local sources; Also see Yemen Akhbar. "Taiz: Graduation ceremony of the military security new cohort." October 2017 ,1. <https://www.yemenakhbar.com/1087275>.

82 Al Hekmah Net. "Taiz: Graduation of the second cohort of the military security." October 2017 ,1. <https://www.al-hekmah.net/news1932.html>.

83 Supra note 71.

The SSF also resumed functioning last year with a body of about 500 members. A majority of the 500 were former SSF (or Central Security Forces) personnel who had already received at least some training in counterterrorism tactics and how to protect important people and facilities. The SSF are based in Taiz city but are mainly responsible for monitoring highways. They are also expected to provide backup for police and security forces inside the city.⁸⁴ While progress made with the SSF indicates a government will to improve security in Taiz, the Hadi government and Coalition will need to offer sustained financial support to ensure these modest gains can continue.

Despite some of Al-Ma'mari's success improving local security,⁸⁵ he resigned as governor in September 2017. President Hadi kept him in the post until current Governor Mahmoud assumed the position in December. Initially Al-Ma'mari said he resigned after the Aden-based CBY denied his request to pay government employee salaries in Taiz despite clear payment instructions from President Hadi to do so.⁸⁶ In a later statement, Al-Ma'mari said the issue with salaries was only the tip of the iceberg. He said he also resigned because of frustrations with the scarce allocation of resources to Taiz and general neglect, placing blame—albeit indirectly—on the Hadi government and the Coalition.⁸⁷

5.3.1 SECURITY AND EXTREMISM

Prior to Yemen's current war, Taiz governorate was relatively unaffected by Islamic extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISIS-Y). However, the outbreak of conflict and the ensuing security vacuum has provided room for militant extremists to establish a presence in Taiz. Local sources say AQAP and ISIS-Y leaders in Taiz come from outside the governorate, primarily from southern areas. Early in the war, fighters associated with these groups assisted in the battle against the Houthis. But they soon shifted their focus to local recruitment efforts, assassination campaigns and destroying religious shrines.⁸⁸ There are also recorded instances of some extremist groups robbing stores and murdering civilians. However, many believe those involved in these crimes are not ideological members of an extremist group but rather individuals seeking to undermine local security efforts and falsely claiming affiliation with a group. Most local officials interviewed believe that at least some of these extremists claiming affiliation with AQAP or ISIS-Y had ties to former President Saleh and were paid to disrupt security in the city. According to several interviewed local sources neither AQAP nor ISIS-Y have a well-established presence in Taiz yet and could

84 Al-Mushahid. "The graduation of the first cohort of the special forces in Taiz after receiving intensive training." October 2017 ,5. <https://www.almushahid.net/?p=19163>.

85 Al-Ma'mari was widely criticized for spending the majority of his time outside of Taiz in Aden. Al-Ma'mari defended his stays in Aden, saying it allowed him to rally government and Coalition support he would have not had access to if he stayed in Taiz.

86 Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. "The first senior government official to present his resignation in a public speech in the center of Taiz city." September 2017 ,26. <http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news109795.html>.

87 Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni. "Breaking: An important statement issued by the Governor of Taiz Ali Al-Mamari." September 2017 ,27. <http://almashhad-alyemeni.com/news109890.html>.

88 The New Arab. [Ar] "Youth is a precious prey for ISIS and Qaeda in Taiz." April 2017 ,4. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/3/4/2017/>.

easily be disbanded if formal security forces were empowered to do so.⁸⁹

This narrative, however, has been complicated by the designation of Abu Al-Abbas (Adel Abdu Fare'a) as an AQAP and ISIS-Y affiliate. On October 25, 2017, the Terrorist Financing Targeting Center (TFTC), a counter-terrorism partnership between the US and the GCC member states, listed Al-Abbas as a terrorist.⁹⁰ "[Fare'a], in his role as a prominent military instructor with AQAP, reportedly commanded an armed AQAP-associated group made up of approximately 2,000 fighters," the US Treasury said in a press release, adding that Fare'a "also served with ISIS-Y in Taiz governorate." The designation caught many by surprise because Abu Al-Abbas has for long been the Coalition's primary contact in Taiz for the distribution of funds and military equipment. The TFTC designation alleges Abu Al-Abbas was involved with ISIS-Y as early as June 2016 and "made payments to various Sunni militants and ISIS-Y affiliates in Taiz...in late October 2016." This means he was allegedly already an ISIS-Y member before he attended the September 2017 political convention in Taiz.

The Abu Al-Abbas Battalions have clashed repeatedly with military units under the 22nd Brigade and with other security forces. They seized the headquarters of the Political Security Organization (PSO) in Taiz city and the central prison after an intense battle with security forces in January 2017, in which a few soldiers were killed. Abu Al-Abbas' fighters then blew up the PSO building.⁹¹ Abu Al-Abbas later denied responsibility for the incident, accusing Commander Sadeq Sarhan of handing over areas in Taiz to Islah Party control that his faction had liberated.⁹² While some of Abu Al-Abbas' grievances may be legitimate, it is believed that the support he has received from the UAE has encouraged him to work against local authorities and the Taiz Axis military structure. As of January 2018, Abu Al-Abbas continues to maintain control of territory within Taiz city where he collects taxes.

In interviews conducted for this research, local sources claim that there are extremist individuals with ties to several local leaders, including Abu Al-Abbas, deputy Governor Gamel and members of the Islah Party. This research did not uncover evidence to support or deny any of these claims, although this was not a major component of the research. In August 2017, the 22nd Brigade, with the help of other security forces, launched a campaign to crack down on AQAP after the group allegedly carried out a number of assassinations. However, local officials interviewed believe without a targeted approach and improving the overall security situation in the city, the local threat of these extremist groups will likely increase.⁹³

89 Interviews with local security officials, Taiz city, August 2017.

90 The US Department of Treasury refers to Abu Al-Abbas as "Adil Abduh Fari Uthman al-Dhubhani." See US Department of the Treasury. "Treasury collaborates with TFTC member states to designate ISIS-Y and AQAP leaders, financiers, and facilitators." October 2017, 25. <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0187.aspx>.

91 Barakish Net. [Ar] "Abu Al-Abbas militants blow up the political military [building] in Taiz city." January 2017, 25.

92 Yemen Akhbar. [Ar] "Abu Al-Abbas Brigades issue a statement accusing the Islah party of controlling government buildings." January 2017, 27. <https://www.yemenakhbar.com/702946>.

93 Interviews with local security officials, Taiz city, August 2017.

5.4 Civil Society's Function

In large part due to import restrictions imposed by the Coalition, international humanitarian and development NGO's have had an extremely difficult time accessing and operating in Yemen.⁹⁴ This has made the local civil society sector more important than ever in Taiz. Local organizations are better placed than their international counterparts to identify civilians' needs and are operating based on their unique understanding of the situation in Taiz.

Nascent civil society organizations and informal community youth groups began springing up at the beginning of the war. Many have organized voluntarily to provide much needed humanitarian relief, such as the delivery of food, water and medicine. Volunteers often are forced to cross frontlines to reach the most in-need civilians, placing themselves in acute danger. As part of their work, some local organizations and youth groups have taken up the dangerous job of documenting human rights violations across the governorate, including tracking unexploded land mines. Many are also continuously lobbying the Yemeni government and international organizations to draw more media attention to the plight of civilians. With very limited resources at their disposal, organizations are relying heavily on Yemeni expats and local businesses for donations to continue their work.

Outside of humanitarian relief, some civil society organizations are tackling issues of governance. Several groups have met with and lobbied local officials and leaders of armed factions to take action to improve security such as closing illegal private prisons. Advocates and officials say the war has engendered grass-roots civil society engagement at unprecedented levels. Some groups are actively working to build trust between security forces and civilians. For example, in January 2017, the local "Youth Transparency, Building, and Watch Team," organization hosted a listening session for government security officials and resistance leaders to receive feedback from local activists, journalists and academics on how to improve the mounting security challenges in Taiz. However, according to an interview with the head the watch team, the results of this exercise have yet to be implemented.

Activists have successfully used social media as a tool to draw attention to war-time violations against citizens and enact change on several occasions. For example, in response to a social media campaign documenting instances of armed resistance fighters extorting drivers for money at informal checkpoints along the highway between Taiz and Lahj, security officials dismantled a majority of these stations (*see section 5.2 for more on the checkpoints*). In the same vein, another social media effort exposed a number of public facilities, including schools, that armed groups were illegally occupying, prompting government officials to order their evacuation. Although many facilities remain occupied, a few have been cleared. While these efforts have received little attention outside of Taiz, the grass-roots civil society sector is undoubtedly making incremental gains towards increased government accountability in the governorate.

⁹⁴ Liautaud, Alexa. "Saudi Arabia eased its blockade on Yemen 30 days ago but the crisis is still getting worse." January 2018, 20. https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/kzn9a9/saudi-arabia-eased-its-blockade-on-yemen-30-days-ago-but-the-crisis-is-still-getting-worse.

PART 6: POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

The ability to anticipate future developments in Taiz is complicated by the myriad of armed groups jostling to gain the upper hand locally as the fighting spills into its third year. Given the strategic importance of Taiz, local developments will be subject to change based on national-level dynamics between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, President Hadi, and the Islah Party. Local fighting will also be affected by possible shifts in the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance, which is in a state of uncertainty following Saleh's death. It remains unclear how the alliance's strategy in Taiz may evolve as a result of the former president's demise. The potential scenarios outlined below assume no major shifts in the above national or regional dynamics and instead focus on developments that could be driven by local actors. The scenario outlined in 6.4 is an exception and is based on a national-level change.

6.1 The Houthi/GPC-Sana'a Alliance is Pushed out of Taiz City Militarily

In this scenario, the Hadi government and the Coalition dedicate military resources to fully liberate Taiz city and force Houthi troops to retreat north into rural areas of the governorate. This would break the siege around the city and ease the flow of both people and goods in and out of the city. Then the Yemeni government and the Coalition could take further steps to restructure local military and resistance forces in order to improve local security. These steps include expanding the security department's capacity, enhancing the role of the SSF and rehabilitating the court and prison system. In this scenario, to prevent a security vacuum and increased in-fighting, the recently appointed governor would need to work with all armed actors to ensure the various forces and departments in the security sector are comprised of qualified, well-respected leaders.

The above would likely markedly improve the security situation. As a result, the local economy would improve, and businesses would be more inclined to return to the city. A degree of instability during the military integration and restructuring process can be expected. In many cases, individual brigade commanders and resistance field commanders may maintain local allegiances beyond the formal military hierarchy. They may compete for control over specific territory and the inclusion of their fighter names on salary distribution lists, which could threaten a smooth transition process. Clashes will likely continue intermittently between different armed groups. However, the frequency and intensity of these clashes will be greatly reduced from current levels.

6.2 Controlled Chaos

In this scenario, the siege on the city remains in place, but the Hadi government and the Coalition pursue the same steps outlined in the above scenario, albeit to a more limited degree. Efforts to restructure local military forces and improve security by empowering the security department, strengthening the SSF and rehabilitating the judicial system would return a degree of normalcy and order to daily life. However, this would take place in the context of the larger conflict, and civilians would remain susceptible to regular shelling and other attacks. Continued fighting across the governorate would render attempts to restructure the military forces inside Taiz city more difficult, as local leaders who have been empowered by the conflict, such as Abu Al-Abbas, would have even less incentive to comply with such reforms. Such fractures between local actors would also reduce the likelihood of a local peace deal.

6.3 Deterioration

In this scenario, the siege remains in place, and the fighting between the Houthis and local resistance forces continues unabated. The Hadi government does not take any serious steps to liberate Taiz city or empower the military and security apparatuses. Governor Mahmoud's actions could potentially play a huge role in this scenario. Since the UAE originally nominated him, he could make decisions that prioritize their interests over those of the Hadi government or local authority. This would likely cause relations between political parties to deteriorate, especially for the Islah Party, which could feel threatened by the UAE's growing influence. In such a scenario, the formal Yemeni military structure may be undermined by the creation of a UAE-aligned paramilitary unit similar to the Security Belt Forces. Such forces might technically fall under the purview of the Taiz Axis but would be answerable in whole or in part to the UAE. Infighting between local actors is expected to escalate in this scenario, and the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance may be able to exert more control over rural areas.

As both a potential cause or consequence of deterioration, extremist groups are a fundamental part of this equation. Abu Al-Abbas and his fighters pose the clearest risk to deterioration in Taiz city. As of October 2017, the US Treasury labeled his battalions "an armed AQAP-associated group made up of approximately 2,000 fighters."⁹⁵ It is widely understood that progress on security-related issues will require buy-in from all local armed actors. However, following Abu Al-Abbas' terrorist designation, his inclusion in local dialogues and official agreements is problematic, if not impossible. If the Abu Al-Abbas Battalions are not properly integrated into the Taiz Axis—where they would adhere to the military hierarchy and receive official salaries—there is an acute risk many of these fighters would continue to operate outside of state control and hinder the Hadi government's ability to govern.

95 Supra note 84.

6.4 The Siege Ends and National Reconciliation Follows

In this scenario, an agreement is reached with the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance to lift the siege on Taiz city. Such an agreement would likely have to be negotiated at the national level because the armed Houthis blockading the city take orders from their national leadership, rather than being directly influenced by local tribal or political figures. Although those fighting the Houthis have a more local chain of command, any major negotiation would also need the blessing and input of higher-ups outside of Taiz. An agreement could come in the form of a specific confidence-building measure or as part of a comprehensive settlement and would also require buy-in from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Because Taiz is such a strategically important governorate, national and international actors will still want to exert a degree of control over the city, both politically and militarily. These actors will likely endeavor to maintain armed proxies within the framework of the formal military restructuring. In particular, the UAE and the Islah Party can be expected to compete for influence in the army and political institutions.

This is the best-case scenario to improve the humanitarian situation in the governorate, even if fighting in certain areas is expected to continue. Constraints on road access would be removed, allowing for goods and services to move freely to areas in dire need. However, internal competition between national actors and their local proxies is likely to fester in the security sector. Furthermore, several districts of Taiz outside the city that remain under full or partial Houthi/GPC-Sana'a control would continue to experience pockets of conflict even after the siege is lifted.

PART 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the host of competing internal and foreign interests in Taiz render developments in the governorate unpredictable and subject to sudden change, there are steps that can be taken to improve the local humanitarian situation and pave the way for a sustainable peace in the governorate. As the relationship between the Houthis and the Sana'a-based GPC finds a new balance following the December 2017 death of Saleh and with the appointment of the new UN Special Envoy for Yemen,⁹⁶ the timing is more opportune than ever for stakeholders to agree on a way forward in Taiz. Based on the analysis and findings of this report, and with input from key local civil society actors and officials, the following actions are recommended:

- **End the siege on Taiz city.** The UN and the international community should pressure the Houthi/GPC-Sana'a alliance to end their siege on the city of Taiz in order to ease and begin repairing humanitarian conditions for the civilian population. Allowing the free flow of residents and goods in and out of the city would also immediately begin improving the local economy both in the city and rural areas connected by the road network.
- **Establish a stronger government presence.** The security vacuum in Taiz city is exacerbated by the absence of strong and unified leaders who could begin restoring government services, particularly those dedicated to improving security. The Hadi government should seek to foster an environment of inclusion and cooperation between the newly-appointed governor and all established political parties in the governorate. Senior governorate-level officials, including Governor Mahmoud, should as much as possible reside inside Taiz city, and national-level officials should visit the city regularly. Former Deputy Prime Minister Jubari's visit to Taiz at the end of 2017 was well received by local activists. Locals specifically celebrated his efforts to improve security and re-open the Central Bank. A more stable government presence will also send a signal to the disparate local actors that reforms are progressing and that they will be held accountable for participating in activities outside of their authority, such as tax collection. The first, and perhaps most effective, action the Hadi government and Coalition should take, is to allocate more funds to the governorate to pay lapsed public sector employee salaries and to resume in full essential local government functions, such as reopening schools.
- **Hold a dialogue between local actors in Taiz.** The Coalition and donors should facilitate a dialogue between political parties and other actors in Taiz city in order to help improve communication and reduce tension among these armed groups.

⁹⁶ On January 2018, 22, incumbent UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed announced he would not continue after his mandate expires in February. See Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen. "Yemen envoy decides not to continue his mission after the end of his present mandate." January, 22 2018. <https://osesqy.unmissions.org/yemen-envoy-decides-not-continue-his-mission-after-end-his-present-mandate>. Martin Griffiths replaced Ould Cheikh in March 2018.

These talks should focus on charting a path forward to re-establish governance and improve security. Rather than starting from scratch, a locally-focused dialogue can build on the progress achieved at the September 23, 2017 convention held in Taiz where representatives from major political parties signed an agreement to unify their resistance efforts and reinstate government and security institutions throughout the governorate. There was broad representation at this meeting. Attendees included voices from the following parties: Islah, Socialist, Nasserist, the pro-Hadi GPC, Ba'ath, Popular Forces Union, Rashad Union and the Justice and Building Party (*see section 5.1 for details on the meeting*). Abu Al-Abbas also participated in the dialogue. The consensus about the parties' mutual objectives reached at this meeting can serve as the foundation for a follow-up convention.

- **Complete military and security forces restructuring.** The Hadi government should work with local political and resistance leaders to restructure the armed forces, building on the former governor's progress in this sector. Importantly, the government should address allegations that the practice of enlisting resistance fighters into the formal military structure unfairly favors political allegiance rather than merit. The government should not fall into political traps but should rather integrate fighters into the military using a transparent and objective process. More than merely place resistance groups under the umbrella of the Taiz Axis, the restructuring process should reshuffle the composition and leadership of troops so they are not dominated by a certain political or religious group. Without assurances of a fair and straightforward enlistment plan, resistance factions and other armed groups will be more likely to defy restructuring efforts and undermine the mission to unify fighters. At the same time, given the large number of civilians who have taken up arms during the conflict, the restructuring should also include a program to reintegrate a portion of resistance members back into civilian life by providing alternative work opportunities, especially for skilled professionals.

The relationships between the Coalition member states and individual units within the military or resistance forces in Taiz are also deserving of greater scrutiny. Coalition members, most applicably Saudi Arabia and the UAE, should not bypass the Yemeni government and directly provide funds or military equipment to armed factions fighting the Houthis in Taiz. All resources the Coalition provides, including salary payments, should be channeled through a transparent process monitored by a local authority in Taiz. This would help limit opportunities for corruption. Likewise, attempts by Coalition member states or other actors to create parallel security forces that operate independent of the security department and the Taiz Axis should be actively discouraged.

- **Empower the security forces and restore the justice system.** The Hadi government and the international community should provide more targeted support for the Taiz SSF and other security-related bodies operating under the auspices of the Interior Ministry. More resources for these entities would help combat organized crime and curb the spread of extremist groups in the governorate. It is important to keep in

mind that a sustainable improvement in local security is unattainable without restoring the functionality of the courts and prisons. The government and donors should build on the progress achieved thus far in rehabilitating these facilities and provide the requisite equipment and training necessary to restore these institutions. As part of its efforts to strengthen the security forces, the government should also assign a special unit to protect judges and legal facilities.

- **Support civil society.** Donors should capitalize on the progress civil society organizations have made during the war and continue to empower them by promoting accountability and better governance in Taiz. Support programs for the organizations should include English language courses, capacity building training, as well as implementing activities that will engage communities and civil society in local governance. Donors should take care to recognize and learn from what civil society organizations have already accomplished during the war and build on that.



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