

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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IS AL-QAEDA'S NIGERIAN AFFILIATE ANSARU BEHIND AHMAD GUMI'S NEGOTIATIONS WITH BANDITS?

Jacob Zenn

On February 5, Nigerian Islamic scholar Ahmad Gumi negotiated with bandit leaders in northwestern Nigeria to bring security to a region that has been ravaged by conflict between bandits, local communities, and the government (pulse.ng, February 5). Suspicions are growing that the bandits are linked to Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau-led faction, which is based in northeastern Nigeria. Shekau had claimed responsibility for bandits' kidnapping of more than 300 schoolboys in Katsina, northwestern Nigeria, in December 2020. The schoolboys were released after several days in custody ([Telegram](https://t.me), December 20, 2020). It is unclear why Shekau lambasted Ahmad Gumi in a subsequent January 6 audio, but it was possibly related to Gumi's impending negotiations with northwestern Nigerian bandits. This audio was the first time that Shekau had denounced Gumi since 2012 ([Telegram](https://t.me), January 6).

Besides Shekau's faction, Ansaru, which al-Qaeda formally considers its Nigerian affiliate, operates in northwestern Nigeria and likely has a stronger foothold there than Shekau's loyalists ([HumAngle](https://humangle.com), February 14; [Terrorism Monitor](https://terrorismmonitor.com), July 28, 2020). In May 2011, not long after Ansaru carried out its first ever kidnapping in northwestern Nigeria of two British and Italian engineers, who were later killed in a rescue attempt, the al-Qaeda-affiliated requested *Desert Herald* newspaper editor Tukur Mamu to deliver a treatise to Gumi and other prominent Nigerian Salafist scholars. Mamu, who serves as Gumi's representative when Gumi is away residing in Saudi Arabia, later became Ansaru's main media contact when it wanted to release statements ([Desert Herald](https://desertherald.com), June 2, 2012). This was presumably because Mamu shared several aspects of Ansaru's ideology, including identifying with Nigeria's Fulani population, and *Desert Herald* and Ansaru were both based in Kaduna in north-central, Nigeria ([Desert Herald](https://desertherald.com), December 2, 2017).

It is, therefore, notable that Mamu accompanied Gumi when he met with "top commanders" of bandit groups ([Desert Herald](https://desertherald.com), January 20). Also notable was that Gumi claimed the bandits were seeking anti-aircraft missiles

because Ansaru used such weapons against Nigeria's air force in Kaduna in January 2020 (punchng.com, February 13; vanguardngr.com, February 5, 2020). Ansaru also would need anti-aircraft weapons because Nigeria's air force has continued launching airstrikes on "Ansaru bandit" camps in the northwest, including Katsina (prnigeria.com, November 20, 2020). One bandit leader also reminded Gumi during negotiations that "This is how Boko Haram started, Nigeria underestimated us and the problem" (Dailypostng.com, February 4).

Ansaru and, to an extent, Shekau's faction are certainly in northwestern Nigeria. The historical connection of Gumi, Tukur Mamu, and Ansaru should also raise new questions about whether the al-Qaeda affiliate is operating behind the scenes of the ongoing negotiations between Gumi and bandits in northwestern Nigeria, with Mamu also playing some sort of mediating role. The fact that one bandit leader with whom Gumi met, Dogi Gide, has reported Ansaru ties further suggests the group's hand in the negotiations (Sahara Reporters, February 19; HumAngle, June 9, 2020).

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ETHIOPIA BREAKS UP ISLAMIC STATE CELL IN OROMO, BUT QUESTIONS REMAIN

Jacob Zenn

On January 31, Ethiopia reported that it arrested a group of jihadists in its Oromo region bordering Somalia that was inspired by Islamic State (IS) (borkena.com, January 31). This was surprising because IS has rarely featured Ethiopia in its propaganda and Ethiopians have not been prominent among IS or even al-Shabaab members in neighboring Somalia. Also unusual about these reports are that the cell allegedly had "connections" with al-Shabaab, which is an al-Qaeda affiliate and enemy of IS. Further, the timing of the arrests amid Ethiopia's ongoing war against rebels in Tigray in the country's north could mean whether or not the cell was truly affiliated with IS, the announcements about the arrests may have been inflated to divert attention from the conflict in Tigray (Terrorism Monitor, December 17, 2020).

At the same time, Ethiopia's military released a video of weapons and money captured from the IS suspects that appeared authentic (HCH24 Djibouti, January 25). Also featured were apparent confessions from the IS members and the wives of the suspects, who all wore face coverings. Ethiopia evidently considered it among the most important of the counterterrorism operations that the country has conducted in recent years. Previously, in September 2019, the Ethiopian government warned that IS and al-Shabaab would target hotels in Ethiopia (africanews.com, September 23, 2019). However, no such attacks have taken place since then.

In the near future, it is likely the reported arrest of IS or al-Shabaab members will remain a one-off affair. IS has not traditionally focused on Ethiopia, and al-Shabaab is also focused more on Kenya than Ethiopia in terms of external operations. Moreover, Ethiopia's conflict in Tigray is forcing the army to reduce its military footprint in Somalia (Somaliaffairs.com, November 15, 2020). This would make it less likely for al-Shabaab to conduct attacks in Ethiopia that could compel Ethiopia's army to redeploy to Somalia.

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Antifa's 'J20' Campaign: Anarcho-Communist Actions Since the New Year

Angela Ramirez

The new year brought about a noticeable shift in the tactics and goals of Antifa groups nationwide. After President Joe Biden's January 20 inauguration, Antifa cells in the Pacific Northwest, northern California, and Colorado simultaneously broadened their focus from anti-police rhetoric to condemnation of the United States as a whole. This adjustment in Antifa's publicized ideology increased the transparency of the movement's end-goals and shed light on their experimentation with alternative 'direct action' tactics, which began with Antifa cells' launching on Inauguration Day a series of coordinated protests and marches marketed as Antifa's "J20 [January 20]" campaign.

Antifa's Inauguration Day Campaign Exposes New Agendas

From 2016 to 2020, Antifa protests almost exclusively expressed contempt of former President Donald Trump, his administration's Mexican border immigration policy, and the police's use of force. However, on President Biden's Inauguration Day, Antifa cells in cities such as Portland, Seattle, and Denver took to the streets for coordinated marches and riots called "J20." One day afterward, they bragged about their activities on the Antifa website, itsgoingdown.com ([It'sGoingDown](https://itsgoingdown.com), January 21). The messaging at all the rallies was harmonized around anti-American sentiment and a rejection of the United States' political and economic systems as a whole.

One difference between various "J20" Antifa actions was that rioting was widespread on the West Coast, while rallies in the Rocky Mountain region remained lawful. In Seattle, for example, which regularly witnesses Antifa actions, a late afternoon march transitioned into a riot when black-bloc Antifa activists smashed the windows of an Amazon Go store and a Starbucks store and sprayed anarchist graffiti on the walls of multiple commercial buildings. Meanwhile, in downtown Portland, Antifa conducted a 'direct action' attack on the local

Democrat Party office ([Twitter.com/PDXZane](https://twitter.com/PDXZane), January 20). The building's windows were shattered and anarchist graffiti was left on the office exterior. Rioters also marched with signs stating "We don't want Biden, we want revenge for police murders, imperialist wars, and fascist massacres" and "We are ungovernable" ([Twitter.com/ByMikeBaker](https://twitter.com/ByMikeBaker), January 20).

Further south, in California's Bay Area, an Antifa-organized march saw graffiti sprayed on the San Mateo county courthouse's sign and probationary building ([Antifasac.Blackblogs.org](https://antifasac.blackblogs.org), January 15). Marchers also chanted anti-American messages such as "No prisons, no walls, no USA at all" ([Twitter.com/Srodd_CPR](https://twitter.com/Srodd_CPR), January 20). In Denver, the "J20" rally organized by a local Antifa group called "Denver Communists" remained non-destructive. However, the rhetoric in speeches made by Antifa activists shed light on anarcho-communist ideology. One speaker asserted the United States, "cannot be reformed, the solution is to abolish America" ([Twitter.com/Scatsots](https://twitter.com/Scatsots), January 20). Another speaker exclaimed that the U.S. flag is a symbol of slavery and genocide and shortly afterwards a large U.S. flag was burned by an Antifa black-bloc militant ([Twitter.com/Scatsots](https://twitter.com/Scatsots), January 20; [Twitter.com/JoshWhitston](https://twitter.com/JoshWhitston), January 20).

New Tactics in Antifa's Toolshed

Antifa in the Pacific Northwest has begun leveraging the homelessness crisis to promote their property use demands. In multiple instances, Antifa's activism for the homeless has transitioned into militancy, however. In Olympia, Washington, for example, a mixed group of Antifa and homelessness activists from Olympia Housing Now forcibly occupied Red Lion Hotel armed with hatchets, knives, batons, and tactical gear, including helmets and gas mask ([Olympiawa.gov](https://olympiawa.gov), February 3; [Facebook.com/OlyHousingNow](https://facebook.com/OlyHousingNow), January 31). Olympia Housing Now then released its list of demands that included ending homeless sweeps (forced disbanding of homeless encampments on public property), implementing city-funded housing vouchers to allow homeless individuals to reside in hotels and motels without paying out-of-pocket, and imposing "impact taxes" on all commercial and luxury buildings in the downtown district ([Twitter.com/RebeccaforWA](https://twitter.com/RebeccaforWA), January 31). As SWAT and local police responded to the Red Lion Hotel

occupation, hotel guests were forced to shelter in place in their rooms while staff hid in the building's basement. The occupation in Olympia mimicked tactics used by Portland Antifa in December 2020 during the occupation of a Travelodge motel, which indicated organizational learning between Antifa cells ([Twitter.com/TacHousing](https://twitter.com/TacHousing), December 28, 2020).

On January 22 in Washington state, which has seen significant Antifa-related activity, Antifa also broke into Bellingham city hall, where they stole a U.S. flag and robbed a journalist's recording microphone after throwing a hot drink on him ([Twitter.com/DeeDeeKIRO7](https://twitter.com/DeeDeeKIRO7), January 22). That same day, Antifa activists assaulted the co-founder of a local homelessness non-profit, HomesNow, for filming them on his cell phone ([Youtube.com/HomesNow](https://youtube.com/HomesNow), January 22). Following numerous confrontations between Antifa, the public, and city officials, the camp in Bellingham was scheduled for a sweep. However, upon discovering Bellingham Antifa requested backup from neighboring Antifa cells as far away as Portland to disrupt the sweep, the city was forced to expedite their operations to avoid a potentially dangerous situation ([Twitter.com/ChoeShoe](https://twitter.com/ChoeShoe), January 28). The sweep was conducted successfully. However, officers met resistance from local Antifa activists, who formed defensive lines in the road while brandishing wooden pallets as makeshift shields ([Twitter.com/ChoeShow](https://twitter.com/ChoeShow), January 28).

Three days before the Bellingham 'direct action,' on January 19, Antifa conducted another 'direct action' attack on a San Francisco Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facility that involved shattering windows and spraying anarchist graffiti throughout the building exterior ([Kron4 News](https://kron4.com), January 19). The following day, an anonymous article claiming credit for the vandalism was published on the anarchist news website indybay.com ([Indybay.com](https://indybay.com), January 19). The author claimed that 30 "anti-racists" vandalized the building ([Itgoingdown.com](https://itgoingdown.com), January 24; itgoingdown.com, November 7). The writer also stated the goal of the attack was to incite "a series of break-ins and breakouts from prisons and detention centers" nationwide.

Antifa's Next Steps from Supporting Black Lives Matter to Social Media Adaptation

On February 3, Antifa's "Denver Communists" grouping held a Zoom conference on the subject of Marxism and Black Liberation. The meeting's special guest was co-founder of the Long Beach Black Lives Matter chapter, Michael Brown ([Facebook.com/DenverCommunists](https://facebook.com/DenverCommunists), February 3). On February 11, Antifa then marched in Seattle after an officer-involved shooting resulted in the death of Greg Taylor, who was being pursued by police officers after shooting two individuals, one of whom died. Body cam footage showed Greg Taylor attempting to shoot at police officers. Antifa and Black Lives Matter-aligned groups organized a protest ([Twitter.com/PNWRAC](https://twitter.com/PNWRAC), February 10; [Twitter.com/MrAndyNgo](https://twitter.com/MrAndyNgo), February 11). Antifa's continued focus on immigration, policing policies, and racial issues runs parallel to the goals of Black Lives Matter. Thus, it is likely Antifa groupings will continue to support the Black Lives Matter movement throughout 2021.

In August 2020, Facebook purged several Antifa webpages ([Washington Times](https://washingtontimes.com), August 20, 2020). In January 2021, Twitter also removed well-known Antifa accounts, including "The Base" and "It's Going Down" ([Twitter.com/MrAndyNgo](https://twitter.com/MrAndyNgo), January 21). Antifa groupings and news websites have since begun moving to a new social platform called "Kolektiva.social" ([Mic.com](https://mic.com), November 10, 2020). That website was designed by anarchists to support their communications and news dissemination and is still in the early phases of adoption, but has attracted well-known groups such as Pacific Northwest's Youth Liberation Front, It's Going Down, and Antifa International ([Kolektiva.social](https://kolektiva.social), September 2020).

The shift in U.S. political leadership following Joe Biden's January 20 inauguration has triggered Antifa cells to adopt a broadened set of Marxist-aligned demands while continuing to call for police abolition, open borders, and general anarchy. It can be expected Antifa cells nationwide will operate both autonomously and in alignment with Black Lives Matter as they continue to utilize riotous 'direct action' and experiment with militant homelessness and other new advocacy tactics.

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Islamic State Khorasan Province Attack on Hazaras Endangers Pakistan's Baluchistan Province

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

On January 3, 11 coal miners from the minority Hazara Shiite community were killed in Pakistan's western Baluchistan province, reflecting the increasing security challenge in the restive province bordering Afghanistan and Iran. The attack also fuels sectarian tensions in Pakistan and raises concerns about the growing Islamic State (IS) presence in the province and banned Sunni sectarian militant outfits like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Jundullah merging with IS. Such a lethal merger also threatens the security of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Islamic State in Khorasan Province's Allies in Pakistan

Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) claimed responsibility for the massacre of the Hazara miners ([Express Tribune](#), January 3)([Express Tribune](#), January 3). The group released a graphic image that showed two armed men standing next to the bodies of the miners with the black IS flag seen. The Hazara community has been bearing the brunt of suicide bombings and targeted killings carried out by militant groups for the last two decades. LeJ, for example, claimed two major attacks in the Baluchistan provincial capital of Quetta in January and February 2013, which killed at least 180 Hazara people ([Samaa TV](#), January 5)([Samaa TV](#), January 5).

Meanwhile, Jundallah is a Sunni militant outfit fighting for the rights of the Sunni Baluch population of Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province, which borders Pakistan's Baluchistan province. The group, which is believed to be based somewhere on the Pakistan-Iran border, has also been implicated in killing Hazaras on sectarian lines ([rferl.org](#), February 21, 2013). Jundallah and LeJ actually joined hands with IS in 2015, according to the Baluchistan government's intelligence report warning about growing IS footprints in the province. It stated that IS had asked those sectarian groups to merge

([Newlinemagazine](#), September 2015). ([Newlinemagazine](#), September 2015).

Former members of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has orchestrated numerous high-profile attacks in Pakistan, have also joined IS-K ([Dawn](#), July 26, 2020). Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, meanwhile, accused India of backing IS-K in order to fuel unrest in Pakistan, especially Baluchistan. Khan, who visited Hazara communities a week after the January 3 IS-K attack, said, "Now this [attack] that has been claimed by ISIS...the opinion of all of us [and] our security agencies is that India is backing ISIS" ([Dawn](#), January 10).(Dawn, January 10).

Pakistan, India, China, and Threats in Baluchistan Province

Last year, Pakistan's political and military authorities made public a dossier containing "proof" of Indian sponsorship of terrorism in the country. The dossier was also shared with the United Nations (UN) and Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Pakistan's Director General of the military's media wing alleged Indian intelligence agencies relocated 30 Indian IS militants from India to various camps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border in a move to establish the "IS Pakistan wing." These militants were allegedly handed over to IS Commander Abdul Rehman Muslim Dost ([Dawn](#), November 15, 2020).(Dawn, November 15, 2020).

India is frustrated over the potential withdrawal of U.S. troops under the U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed in February 2019 and the re-emergence of the Taliban as a stronger and politically more powerful group that could dominate war-torn Afghanistan ([Al-Araby](#), July 7, 2020). Furthermore, India is currently engaged in simultaneous border disputes with China in the Himalayas and with Pakistan in Kashmir ([Dawn](#), May 29, 2020). New Delhi has also been opposed to CPEC, particularly its operations in the territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, which is claimed by India as part of the Kashmir dispute ([The News](#), October 12, 2020).

CPEC represents the convergence of both China's strategic interests. China is engaged in constructing CPEC to connect its westernmost Xinjiang province through a network of highways, railways, and energy pipelines to the strategically located Arabian Sea port of

Gwadar in Baluchistan. China has largely built and will operate the port. Unrest in Baluchistan, however, not only affects China, which is the biggest investor in the province, but also discourages other local development activities. Destabilization in the province disrupts Chinese-funded development projects worth over \$60 billion.

Chinese workers, engineers and projects have already become the targets of Baluch separatists, who have orchestrated several attacks in the past decade. For example, in 2018, Baluch rebels attacked the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, which was foiled by Pakistani security forces. Similarly, the separatists attacked a five-star hotel in Gwadar in 2019 and killed five people ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 12). With IS-K's Hazara killings in Baluchistan, the threat to the Chinese personnel their CPEC investments have increasingly posed a challenge for Pakistani forces.

Conclusion

Jihadist and separatist/sectarian militant outfits in Baluchistan province are a significant security threat against Pakistani security and Chinese development projects. The simmering situation in Baluchistan province could also convert the province's insecurity into a regional affair involving Pakistan, China, and India. Moreover, the province is already emerging as a conflict zone, attracting IS militants from throughout the region.

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Yemen's Fate Hinges on The Battle for Marib

Michael Horton

In early February, Yemen's Houthis—also known as Ansar Allah—began a renewed push to capture the oil and gas rich Marib governorate and its capital of the same name ([Arab News](#), February 9). After four weeks of intense and costly fighting, Houthi forces have encircled Marib city on three sides. To the west of the city, Houthi forces are now less than 11 kilometers from Marib's outskirts.

On February 21, the Houthis also stormed Marib city's prison and secured the release of prisoners held by the internationally-recognized government (IRG) of Yemen ([Hournews.net](#), February 22). The operation, which was carried out by the Houthis' rapid reaction force, indicates both the proximity of Houthi forces to the city and the city's permeability to small groups of well-trained fighters.

The strategic importance of Marib to the Houthis, the IRG, and the whole of Yemen cannot be underestimated, and the stakes could not be higher for all parties involved in Yemen's interlocking wars. If the Houthis succeed in taking Marib governorate and its capital, the IRG will be dealt a blow from which it may not recover. The IRG's further diminishment will fundamentally alter the political terrain in Yemen at a time when other important regional political shifts are underway. The fate of Marib will, in many respects, decide the fate of Yemen for years to come.

Military Overreach in Marib

The election of Joseph R. Biden as U.S. president has already shifted U.S. policy in the Middle East and, most specifically, in Yemen. The Trump administration's close relationship with Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, Muhammad bin Salman, has been replaced with a less permissive policy under the Biden administration. On February 4, President Biden, as part of a broader foreign policy speech, said that the war in Yemen must end and indicated that the U.S. would scale back its support for Saudi Arabia's offensive operations in Yemen ([al-Jazeera](#), February 4). The Biden administration also reversed the Trump administration's last-minute designation of the

Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) ([Arab News](#), February 13). These moves, along with the Biden administration's desire to restart negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program, have emboldened the Houthis and their primary regional ally, Iran.

While capturing Marib has long been a priority for the Houthis, the Biden administration's policy and changing regional dynamics altered the cost-benefit equation for the Houthi leadership. The Houthis previously circulated an offer to the IRG on Marib in lieu of a renewed offensive. The offer, which included nine points ranging from the IRG agreeing to not use Marib as a base for military operations to revenue sharing from oil sales, was refused by the IRG months ago. [1] Now that the offensive is underway, the Houthis have replaced this formal offer with more traditional ad-hoc negotiations through tribal elites.

The Houthi leadership believes that if the Houthis take Marib city and most of the governorate, their position as the preeminent political and military power in Yemen will be secure ahead of anticipated negotiations. However, substantial risks accompany the offensive in Marib. Since taking up positions on the outskirts of Marib city, the advance of the Houthis has slowed or become static in many areas. This is despite the fact that the Houthis now occupy mountains near the Marib dam that look down on the city. While the Houthis are consolidating control of their gains, they also face devastating airstrikes by the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF). [2] The airstrikes, combined with fierce and well-planned counter-attacks by a range of religiously inspired Salafist militias, tribal militias, and other forces loyal to the IRG, are taking a toll on the Houthis. The accuracy of the airstrikes, something RSAF has up to now struggled with, indicate that there is greater coordination between ground forces and the RSAF.

The Houthis use small highly mobile units of fighters, which makes them difficult to target from the air. However, the size of Marib city (which is home to two-million people) and the abundance of relatively flat terrain have made Houthi forces easier to target. Taking the city of Marib also requires the Houthis to amass men and arms in a way that makes them more vulnerable than they have been in previous campaigns. Casualties on all

sides, but especially for the Houthis, are increasingly heavy.

Houthis' Shortages of Men and Money

The Houthis face two primary obstacles, both of which are being exacerbated by the fight for Marib: first, they cannot replace fighters fast enough; and, second, their revenue and cash shortages are severe. The shortage of fighters, especially well-trained ones, is acute, and has become even more so over the last six months. The Houthis have long used conscription to fill their ranks, but the most recent conscripts are younger, receive less training, and are paid, if they are paid at all, far less than they were six months ago. As a consequence, conscripts are far more inclined to flee from battle when they get the opportunity ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), February 24). To make up for the conscript shortfall, the Houthis are recruiting, often forcibly, more foreigners, including those fleeing the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region ([al-Anba Online](#), February 19). [3]

The Houthis' financial woes are equally difficult for them to address. Despite collecting 'taxes' from Yemeni businesses, businessmen, and tribal elites, the costs of the war far outstrip revenue. Instead of paying government employees and providing basic services, the vast majority of the taxes collected by the Houthis go toward the war. Conscription and the ad-hoc and often arbitrary collection of taxes both feed growing discontent with the Houthis and their government. A prolonged battle for Marib will make the Houthis' demands for money and men more rapacious, thereby exacerbating growing discontent. [4]

More significantly, a protracted battle for Marib will weaken the Houthis' southern and western fronts. The Houthis have already redeployed fighters from these fronts to Marib for the offensive there. The fighters that are left to defend positions in the south and west are primarily young recruits, who often have minimal training. Most of the Houthis' seasoned fighters have been re-deployed to Marib. [5] However, thus far, despite these vulnerabilities, the Houthis' southern and western fronts have not been attacked by rival forces.

Yemen's Internationally Recognized Government's Last Stand

As Marib is the de-facto capital of Yemen's internationally recognized government, the loss of Marib would be a fatal blow for IRG President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government. While the IRG has contingency plans, including a retreat to parts of the Hadramawt governorate to the east, the loss of Marib could precipitate sweeping shifts in loyalty. Yemenis from all sides of the conflict would recognize that the pendulum of power has swung decisively in favor of the Houthis. This could prompt a recalibration of loyalties when Yemeni elites act to protect their long-term economic and political interests. These pragmatic calculations are what the Houthi leadership is counting on.

While the Houthis are best known for their formidable skills on the battlefield, they are also adept at making deals—at least domestically. They have often used a carrot and stick approach to secure the grudging loyalty of many of Yemen's elites and tribes. Even with their military acumen, the Houthis could not rule as they do without the tacit support of many of Yemen's powerful northern tribes.

The Houthis are not the only force in Yemen that would benefit from the demise of the IRG. Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC) is locked in its own intermittent battle with the IRG as it tries to assert control over southern Yemen. On Yemen's west coast, the Tihama Resistance Forces are fighting for greater autonomy and are not loyal to the IRG. Saudi Arabia has little influence over the Tihama Resistance Forces or the STC. Instead, its regional ally and competitor, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), wields influence over both forces.

While the STC is not directly involved in the fight against the Houthis in Marib, the battle is attracting Salafist militias from the south. These militias and their commanders are loosely allied with the STC. Their motivation to fight the Houthis stems more from a religious antipathy to the Houthis as Zaidi Shi'a than it does to any loyalty to the STC or the IRG. [6] Salafi-inspired militias, many of which have some overlap with more radical groups like AQAP, have long been welcomed by those tribes battling the Houthis.

Some indications also exist that Tariq Saleh, the nephew of Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is providing limited support to the IRG in its fight to retain Marib. Tariq Saleh commands the National Resistance Forces that are based near Taiz and in parts of Yemen's west coast. The National Resistance Forces are well-led and equipped thanks to Emirati support. However, moving significant numbers of forces to the frontlines in Marib is all but impossible over the short-term due to a lack of cooperation with rival militias.

If coordination between Yemen's anti-Houthi forces increases, the IRG and its tribal allies may hold Marib city. While the Houthis are still the most formidable fighting force in Yemen, they are in danger of being militarily over-extended. Despite their efforts to conscript and recruit as many men as they can, the battle for Marib is taking a serious toll on their forces, especially with conscripts routinely abandoning their positions and Houthi supply lines becoming stretched and frequently targeted by the RSAF. [7] Resupply issues now plague many of the Houthis' forward positions. If the IRG is able to rally support from anti-Houthi forces, and, more particularly, if some of those forces engage the Houthis on their southern fronts, the momentum in the battle for Marib will likely shift to the IRG.

Yemen's Outlook

While their enemies and regional foes have consistently underestimated their military capabilities, the Houthis may be in danger of overestimating their own abilities. The offensive in Marib is pushing the Houthis up against their limits with respect to military and political power. The shift in U.S. policy has, however, emboldened the Houthis, and likely contributed to their decision to renew their offensive in Marib. This may be a miscalculation because if the Houthis do succeed in taking Marib, there will be dire humanitarian costs. Marib is home to roughly eight hundred thousand internally displaced persons (IDPs). The Houthis' mismanagement of a humanitarian crisis that will be largely of their own making may cause the international community, and the United States in particular, to be less supportive of inclusive negotiations.

As the Houthis grapple with a humanitarian crisis caused by their offensive, they will be hard pressed to maintain consistent control of Marib. Even if they are able to

make deals with some tribal elites, many tribes will continue to fight. The Houthis may then face an insurgency within an insurgency at a time when they have drawn down their reserves of men and financial resources. Additionally, the Houthis will likely struggle to secure the governorate's critical oil and gas infrastructure. Armed groups who oppose Houthi control will target these facilities as a way undermining the Houthis and blocking them from extracting revenue. [8]

The most likely scenario for the battle in Marib is a stalemate between the Houthis and the IRG. The Houthi offensive, which appeared to be unstoppable a week ago, is now static. While elite Houthi units have penetrated the outer defenses of Marib city, close coordination between the RSAF, tribal militias, and IRG forces have stopped—at least for now—a large-scale advance on the city.

A stalemate may be the best-case scenario for now. The IRG can claim to have fought off the Houthis and saved the city, which is as important for the IRG as it is for Yemen as a whole. Marib city is one of the places in Yemen that point toward a viable future. The IRG, local government, and tribal elites have worked together to build and re-build functioning state and local institutions from the ground up.

For their part, the Houthis may be forced to realize that there are limits to their military capabilities. The leadership might learn that compromise must be a part of their political and strategic toolkit if they want respect from the international community.

Notes

[1] Interview with a former Yemeni government official (February, 25, 2021).

[2] It is not clear if it is only the RSAF conducting air strikes in Marib. The tempo of operations, which is likely beyond the RSAF's capabilities, suggests other coalition members are aiding the RSAF and or participating in the airstrikes.

[3] Some of those fleeing the war in Ethiopia's Tigray region already possess significant military training as a result of conscription and service in Ethiopia's Federal Forces and regional militias. These men are specifically targeted for recruitment by the Houthis. However, mi-

grants from numerous African countries routinely make their way through Yemen, where many fall prey to recruitment, forced or otherwise, by the Houthis and other armed groups operating in Yemen. See: <https://www.almashhadalaraby.com/news/207712>; <https://khlaasa.net/616478.html>

[4] Interview with a former member of the Yemeni government (February 23, 2021).

[5] Interview with a Yemen based security analyst (February 23, 2021).

[6] Interview with a senior member of the Southern Transitional Council (February 24, 2021).

[7] Interview with a former Yemeni government official (February 24, 2021).

[8] The ongoing maintenance of critical oil and gas handling infrastructure by Yemeni engineers and technicians is one area where the Houthis and IRG have cooperated. Yemen's pipelines and pumping stations all require ongoing maintenance and repairs even though many are not in use. It was erroneously reported that the IRG would blow up Marib's oil and gas facilities if it lost the city to the Houthis. This report was vociferously denied by IRG officials who know that such an action would damn them in the eyes of many Yemenis. Such facilities take years, and even a decade in some cases, to build. The destruction of these facilities would have a severe impact on Yemen's reconstruction and redevelopment.