

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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COLOMBIA FACES MIXED FUTURES IN NEGOTIATIONS WITH FARC AND ELN

Jacob Zenn

In 2016, Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) concluded a peace deal that has led to a reduction of violence in the last five years. However, one FARC faction consisting of approximately 2,500 members has not accepted the peace deal. Based in the country's northern Caribbean region and specifically the Montes de María (Maria's Mountains), this faction is headed by a militant named Miguel Botache Santillana, known as Gentil Duarte, and was responsible for setting fire to a UN vehicle in October 2020. It further recruits child soldiers and engages in drug trafficking and illicit gold mining (semana.com, March 12).

Colombia is upping the pressure on Duarte's faction and on March 1, the air force struck his faction's base in Calamar with a missile (eltiempo.com, March 2). The strike generated some controversy, however, because among the 10 FARC 'dissidents' who were killed were several youths. One of those youths was a teenage girl who had gone to the countryside to visit her grandpar

ents, but, according to her parents, was forcibly recruited into Duarte's organization and then killed in the airstrike. Her parents further stated there was little that could be done to prevent her recruitment because FARC dominates Calamar's rural areas and, in this case, it appears the girl's boyfriend was involved with FARC and recruited her into Duarte's group. Two other FARC teenagers who survived the airstrike with injuries were brought to register with the Unit of Victims (*la Unidad de Víctimas*) to explain their recruitment and become rehabilitated (eltiempo.com, March 11).

Duarte is joined in opposing peace with the Colombian government by the National Liberation Army (ELN)'s Jesus Santrich, who called upon Duarte and the ELN to join forces in March, despite both of their differences (pulzo.com, March 9). Unlike FARC, which originated as a rural movement, the ELN grew out of Communist university students in urban areas. Thus, although they have similar ideologies, they have historically contested each other, and the ELN avoided peace talks with the Colombian government after 2016. Nevertheless, since 2016, signs of a thaw in the ELN's relations with the government have emerged, such as when the ELN re-

leased Colombian soldiers who it had held as hostages in a humanitarian gesture in 2018 ([Bogota Post](#), September 5). Moreover, in April 2020, the ELN called for a ceasefire as a result of the coronavirus, but canceled it once Colombian military offensives continued against ELN formations ([colombiareports.com](#), April 30, 2020). Despite this, the ELN released a total of eight police officers and civilians it kidnapped again as a goodwill gesture in 2020 ([nationalpost.com](#), June 14, 2020).

The ELN, for its part, is increasing the territory under its control. However, civilians also increasingly view it as a predatory and occupying force, and ELN recruitment has been dwindling ([indepaz.org](#), January 2021). Furthermore, the ELN has experienced internal conflict among its leaders ([el tiempo.com](#), February 7). These may be among the factors driving ELN's leaders to consider some form of peace talks with the Colombian government even while Santrich urges its fighters to persist in combating the government. Bogota seemingly perceives it can continue to wait until the ELN is further weakened and sow the seeds of its own destruction. At that point, the government can negotiate on more favorable terms some time further down the road. What is also clear is that the FARC and ELN are both factionalizing under pressure from combat and the enticement of peace talks.

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

MASSACRES IN MOZAMBIQUE DEMONSTRATE CONTINUING RESILIENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE IN GREATER SAHARA

Jacob Zenn

On March 15, Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) massacred 58 civilians in a village in Niger near the border with Mali, stole large amounts of grain, and destroyed some vehicles and seized several others ([France24](#), March 16). On the same day, in Mali, ISGS also attacked Malian soldiers and killed 33 of them ([lemonde.fr](#), March 17). Both of these attacks were among the largest respective killings in Niger and Mali this year and point to the continued lethality of ISGS, despite its ongoing clashes with al-Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate, the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), and pressure from French and national militaries.

ISGS has not claimed the massacre, which distinguishes the group from its Nigerian-based counterpart, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). ISWAP, in contrast, has claimed massacres of civilians on grounds that those civilians have supported anti-ISWAP militias ([aljazeera.net](#), June 14, 2020). Although ISGS is considered part of ISWAP in Islamic State (IS)'s organizational structure, the two groups rarely, if ever, communicate or coordinate and the Nigerian-based ISWAP more frequently claims and carries out attacks. In fact, between January 1 and March 17, 2021, ISWAP claimed more attacks than any other IS province, including IS in Syria. Only IS in Iraq has more attack claims (162) than ISWAP in Nigeria (112) ([Twitter.com/Mister_Q](#), March 19). ISGS may not have claimed this massacre in Niger because its communications with IS have been severed or the group's violence, especially in the massacre in Niger, would be a liability in the terms of the group's attempts to win local support.

The ISGS massacre non-claim resembles that of Islamic State in Central Province (ISCAP)'s branch in Mozambique, which continues its terrorist campaign and reportedly decapitated civilians in a recent attack ([Diário de Notícias](#), March 17). While ISCAP's branch in Mozambique remains active, it has not claimed any attacks since October 2020. It is possible that the jihadists in Mozambique are aware of the increasing level of international attention on them and therefore are keeping a lower profile by not releasing any new videos or pho-

tosets, unlike in 2020 when it frequently did so. The United States has recently designated the ISCAP leaders in Congo and Mozambique, respectively, Seka Musa Baluku and Abu Yasir Hassan, as terrorists. U.S. special forces Green Berets are reportedly already training local forces in Mozambique to combat ISCAP ([state.gov](https://www.state.gov), March 10; [Dailymaverick.co.za](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za), March 17).

The United States, for its part, designated ISGS leader Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi as a terrorist in 2018 ([rewardsforjustice.org](https://www.rewardsforjustice.org), May 16, 2018). Despite ISGS' rise to become even more lethal than JNIM by the beginning of 2020, the intensity of French, JNIM, and national armies' pressure has caused ISGS to be on the decline, especially relative to JNIM by 2021. Had ISGS not publicized its various attacks and massacres throughout 2020, it is possible that France would not have labeled ISGS as the number one security threat in the Sahel in January 2021, which preceded the prioritization of combatting ISGS compared to JNIM and contributed to the IS province's relative decline ([France24](https://www.france24.com), January 15, 2021). It is, therefore, also possible that ISCAP in Mozambique's silence on attack claims reflects its interest in avoiding the type of fate that ISGS faced in 2020 and that ISGS's own recent muteness on its massacre reflects its own interest in maintaining a lower, or less brutal, profile. In contrast, with little regional or international support coming to Nigeria's aid, it is clear ISWAP has few qualms in releasing attack claims, photos, and videos of its ongoing attacks and occasional massacres throughout northeastern Nigeria.

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

The Shia Fatemiyoun Brigade: Iran's Prospective Proxy Militia in Afghanistan

Sudha Ramachandran

In December 2020, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif offered the Afghan government use of the Iranian-backed Shia militia, Fatemiyoun Brigade, to fight Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-K) in Afghanistan. In an interview with the Afghan English daily, *Tolo News*, Zarif described the Fatemiyoun fighters as "the best forces" to fight Islamic State and said that Iran is "prepared to help the Afghan government regroup these forces under the leadership of the Afghan National Army in the fight against terrorism." Zarif added that Iran was "supporting" the Fatemiyoun in Syria, but it was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad who "was making [operational] decisions and implementing them." Likewise, in Afghanistan, Iran is "prepared to support" the Fatemiyoun "under the leadership of the Afghan government," Zarif said ([Tolo News](https://www.tolonews.com), December 21, 2020).

Iran's Fatemiyoun Foot Soldiers

According to noted Afghan journalist Sami Yousafzai, Fatemiyoun is "already very active in Afghanistan and its influence is expanding in Shiite areas." [1] This has serious implications for the conflict in Afghanistan as it will generate a new sectarian dimension. That could become a major threat not just to Afghanistan's security but also to the region, and could deepen the involvement of regional Sunni and Shia countries and militias.

Recruited, armed, and trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Fatemiyoun Brigade has been deployed to Syria since 2013 and has fought alongside al-Assad's forces, first against U.S.-backed Syrian opposition militias and subsequently Islamic State. Fatemiyoun fighters are mainly Afghan Shia Hazaras. While some of them came from Afghanistan to fight in Syria, the majority were recruited from the large Afghan migrant and refugee population in Iran. At the peak of the Syrian civil war, Fatemiyoun fighters comprised around 20,000 individuals. The group is said to have fielded an estimated

50,000 fighters in its ranks over the roughly decade-long Syrian conflict ([Tolo News](#), February 7).

Pursuit of geopolitical objectives underlies Iran's decades-old strategy of arming, training, and deploying Shia militias in various conflict zones, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In Syria, Iran's objective in deploying Fatemiyoun fighters was to support the al-Assad government, which is an Iranian ally, against U.S. attempts to topple it ([Alarabia News](#), September 22, 2016). Having strengthened al-Assad's control over power and with the Syrian conflict winding down, these militias are returning back to Iran from Syria. However, Fatemiyoun's use to Iran may not be over, as Tehran can now use the brigade in other Gulf States like Bahrain and Yemen in addition to Afghanistan ([Salaam Times](#), April 23, 2019; [Middle East Eye](#), September 26, 2020).

What Role for Fatemiyoun in Afghanistan?

Apprehensions that Fatemiyoun will turn its guns toward Afghanistan soared in the wake of the U.S. assassination of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 in Baghdad, Iraq. It was widely believed that Iran would strike back against the U.S. by mobilizing Fatemiyoun to target American interests in Afghanistan, where some 13,000 U.S. soldiers were stationed at that point ([Gandhara](#), February 7, 2020). Although this scenario did not eventually unfold, concerns over Iran's possible use of the militia in Afghanistan persist. Indeed, Zarif's comments have further fueled such fears, especially in the context of American troops likely remaining in Afghanistan and the worsening security situation there ([Pajhwok](#), March 19).

The Iranian government has been engaging the Taliban with a view to safeguard its interests in case the Taliban forms or becomes part of a government in Kabul. However, should the Taliban go back to being hostile toward Iran as in the past, Tehran is keen to have a fallback position. Additionally, Iran "is worried" about the Taliban "getting close" to the United States. It "does not want to be unprepared," according to Sami Yousafzai. Fatemiyoun is a useful asset in this context. Should Fatemiyoun emerge as an organized force in Afghanistan, it would complicate the already complex conflict in the country. The Afghan conflict is largely an ethnic one, featuring Pashtun-led Taliban fighters versus ethnic Tajiks, among others, but there is a danger of the

conflict turning sectarian, with the Shia Fatemiyoun setting its guns on the Salafist-Sunni IS-K and Deobandi-Sunni Taliban. This would result in Afghanistan becoming a Sunni versus Shia war zone, drawing in forces and militias backed by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf powers.

Hazaras, who are Afghanistan's third largest ethnic group and account for 10-15 percent of the predominantly Sunni country's population, are mainly Shia and have suffered persecution for centuries. Thousands of Hazaras were massacred under Taliban rule and in recent years by IS-K, which has repeatedly targeted members of the community ([Gandhara](#), November 16, 2018). In 2020, IS-K carried out several suicide attacks and bombings in predominantly Hazara Shia neighborhoods in Kabul and other towns ([India Today](#), October 24, 2020).

Understandably, Hazaras are insecure and angry. Poverty, desperation and insecurity in Afghanistan drove many Hazaras to flee to Iran. Those same reasons prompted their youth to join the Fatemiyoun ranks in Syria ([Salaam Times](#), March 13, 2020; [Diyaruma](#), December 25, 2020). Thousands of Fatemiyoun fighters are returning now to Afghanistan. They are still poor, unemployed and insecure. Importantly, they are now battle-hardened. They may not be averse to picking up arms again, only this time in Afghanistan. According to Rahmatullah Nabil, a former chief of Afghanistan's main intelligence agency, the National Directorate of Security, around 2,500 to 3,000 Fatemiyoun fighters have returned to Afghanistan. He said, "At this stage it seems they are not in a position to pose an immediate threat to Afghanistan's national security... [as] they are not organized but scattered in different parts of the country." But they could pose a threat should they "establish a central command" ([Gandhara](#), February 7, 2020).

Zarif's Warning

With Zarif's offer of the Fatemiyoun to Afghanistan to fight against IS-K, the Iranian foreign minister has sent a "clear message" regarding how "actively involved Iran is in Afghanistan," according to Sami Yousafzai. [3] The message is aimed at not only the Afghan government, but also the Taliban and the U.S. Should Iranian interests in Afghanistan be threatened, Tehran is ready and willing to unleash the Fatemiyoun in the war-ravaged neighboring country of Afghanistan.

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Notes

[1] Author's Interview, Kabul-based Afghan journalist, Sami Yousafzai, March 21, 2021.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

Pakistan's Dual Counter-Terrorism Challenges: Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's Merger and Cross-Border Campaign from Afghanistan

Syed Fazl-e-Haider

On February 26, Nooristan, known as Hasan Baba, was killed by Pakistani security forces. He was a commander of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), who had been involved in the murder of more than 50 security forces personnel since 2007. His death represented one of Pakistan's landmark achievements in its war on terrorism.

An improvised explosives device (IED) expert and trainer, Hasan Baba joined the TTP's Baitullah Mehsud faction in 2007 and carried out several terrorist attacks in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. These included the rocket attack on Shakai military camp that killed seven soldiers in 2009; an ambush on a military convoy that killed six soldiers in 2010; and another ambush on the Pakistani Frontier Corp (FC) convoy using an IED that killed three in 2011 in the Khaisura area of North Waziristan ([Dawn](#), February 26).

The TTP itself has carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks across Pakistan and had killed over 80,000 Pakistani civilians and soldiers since the beginning of the insurgency to 2014. The operation Zarb-e-Azb launched by Pakistan's armed forces in 2014, however, successfully reduced the footprint of the TTP and allied terrorist groups from the country's northwestern tribal areas bordering Afghanistan ([Pakistan Today](#), June 17, 2020). Despite this, Pakistan has increasingly shown concern about the growing TTP presence in neighboring Afghanistan, where the TTP took refuge to escape counter-terrorism actions by the Pakistani security forces under the Zarb-e-Azb operation ([Dawn](#), July 29, 2020).

TTP Merger Increases Threat to Pakistan

The TTP has also emerged as a greater threat to Pakistan as a result of the merger of its splinter groups in Afghanistan, which the UN monitoring team mentioned

in a February 3 report. The TTP accordingly carried out more than 100 cross-border attacks in a three month period between July and October last year ([Dawn](#), February 7). The merger, which led to the TTP restarting activities inside Pakistan, included Jamat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) and Hizb-ul-Ahrar (HuA).

Pakistan alleged that the reunification of TTP, JuA, and HuA was backed by Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) and India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Islamabad claimed that NDS and RAW intervened in August 2020 to break the deadlock in the merger talks among the three groups ([Express Tribune](#), August 19, 2020). According to Pakistan, Ehsanullah Ehsan, the former TTP spokesman, confessed to authorities that the TTP held financial links to NDS and RAW, which were financing the group's terrorist attacks ([The News](#), February 16, 2020). Last year, Pakistan claimed in a dossier that it had "proofs of Indian financial and material sponsorship" of not only JuA and TTP, but also the Baluchistan Liberation Army ([Dawn](#), November 15, 2020). Such "proofs" do not, however, appear to have been presented publicly for evaluation.

JUA had broken away from the TTP in 2014 after infighting over the succession of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud. HuA, for its part, was a splinter group of JUA. Both JuA and HuA are believed to be based in Afghanistan's eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar and Khost. ([Dawn](#), August 18, 2020). The most notable attack attributed to HuA was the May 2018 attack on Data Darbar (meaning shrine) in Lahore, which killed at more than a dozen people ([Dawn](#), November 30, 2019).

Pakistan's Counter-Terrorism Challenges

The writ of the Pakistani government has been restored in areas bordering Afghanistan, especially compared to past years when the TTP conducted attacks on a daily basis ([Times of Islamabad](#), June 12, 2016). Despite this, the escape of Ehsanullah Ehsan from military custody last year raised serious questions of the capacity and competency of Pakistan's security agencies. The Pakistani army, however, carried out an investigation into the matter and held some military officers accountable for the escape of the former TTP spokesman ([BBC Urdu](#), February 24).

Critics nevertheless have questions about the entire episode starting from Ehsanullah Ehsan's arrest in 2017 to his escape in January 2020 from military custody ([Dawn](#), February 26). The drama has been shrouded in controversy, and the military establishment has not shared with the public the names and ranks of those who were responsible for the escape. This is notable considering Ehsanullah Ehsan has claimed major terrorist attacks in Pakistan, including the killing of 132 innocent schoolchildren in the Army Public School attack in Peshawar in December 2014 ([Dawn](#), December 17, 2014).

What is clear is Ehsanullah Ehsan escaped from the military custody due to a serious security lapse on the part of security agencies, if not some other conspiracy. It is generally believed that he was being pampered by the authorities even while in his custody. Ehsan, for example, was allowed to give interviews to Pakistani TV channels ([SAMAA TV](#), February 16). Such a security lapse, moreover, puts a question mark on the country's ability to undermine the TTP altogether.

Conclusion

Pakistan still needs to track down elements within the military establishment that have been acting as facilitators for the militant groups, like those responsible for Ehsanullah Ehsan's escape. Bringing such elements to justice would make the country's counter-terrorism operations against TTP and other militant groups more credible and possibly lead to further success. Peace and stability in Afghanistan, meanwhile, is key to the success of any Pakistani counter-terrorism agenda in Pakistan as well.

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Yemen's Emerging Political Coalitions: A First Step Toward De-escalation?

Michael Horton

Politics in Yemen are best described as kaleidoscopic. Loyalties, alliances, and linkages within and between factions and parties shift with every rotation of the cell. Most of Yemen's ever-increasing number of factions and armed groups defy easy categorization. As with all political and armed groups, cost-benefit calculations are ongoing.

Yemen's interlocking wars have, in many respects, fundamentally altered the country's political landscape. Yet some aspects of politics in Yemen are consistent. Yemen's tribes, the north-south division, and networks of patronage remain drivers of both instability and stability—often at the same time. These wars have also spawned new and emergent elites while sidelining many members of the *ancien regime*. Yet, just as there is a constancy with drivers of instability and stability, many of those elites who have long been a part of Yemen's political scene remain active and potentially important for de-escalation efforts.

In what may be a hopeful sign, some indications show that Yemen's established and emergent elites are more willing than they have been for years to set aside old grievances. Old enemies are talking with renewed seriousness about coming together to help stabilize the country—or at least parts of it. The driving force behind these moves to reinvigorate political processes is the recognition that the Houthis (a.k.a. Ansar Allah) are not going to be defeated militarily. Thus, the Houthis' influence and grip on northwest Yemen must be dealt with politically, if it is to be dealt with at all.

The Return of Yemeni Politics

Since 2015, many of Yemen's political elites have viewed kinetic military action as more expedient than politics. In light of the Houthi takeover of northwest Yemen, many had little choice but to fight. At the same time, outside powers, like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi

Arabia, have armed and funded proxies in their battle against the Houthis and other groups that they deem to be a threat. The flow of funds and weapons from foreign powers have helped sustain a war economy and fed the growth of armed factions in Yemen.

In June 2019, the UAE began withdrawing most of its forces from Yemen ([al-Araby](#), February 11, 2020). Tensions with Saudi Arabia, international fallout from the UAE's involvement in Yemen, and changing regional dynamics all contributed to the UAE decision. While the UAE remains involved in Yemen as a key supporter of the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), the country's leadership has adopted a lower profile role in the war and reduced the amount of money and materiel that it provides.

Saudi Arabia is keener than ever to extricate itself from its costly involvement in Yemen. Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen has cost the Kingdom several hundred billion dollars (at one point the Saudis were spending five billion dollars per month on their war in Yemen). [1] The war, along with the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, has also done serious damage to international perceptions of Saudi Arabia.

Most critically, the Kingdom's intervention has achieved none of its aims. The Houthis are now, more than ever, the preeminent military power in Yemen and their once limited relationship with Iran has deepened. At the same time, the Houthis, who absorbed many of the Yemeni Army's most capable officers and engineers, have further developed their ability to build and launch a range of missiles, rockets, and drones. Iran, which initially invested little in the Houthis, has increased its support over the last two years in particular. This support includes technical help, the provision of specific components for missiles, rockets, and drones, and money ([Arab News](#), June 30, 2020). The return on Iran's investment in the Houthis has been exponential. At most, the Iranians invested two hundred million dollars in the Houthis over the last six years. [2] In exchange, Iran's chief regional foe, Saudi Arabia, allowed itself to be drawn into a financially draining war it cannot win.

The Kingdom's slow realization that it must end its direct involvement in the war along with unfavorable shifts in U.S. foreign policy, are driving it to taper support to its

proxies in Yemen. While the Houthis' most recent offensive on the city of Marib, which is the de-facto capital of Yemen's internationally recognized government (IRG), has slowed this diminishment of support, the trend remains ([Terrorism Monitor](#), February 26).

Yemen's elites, including those emergent and established, sense that the country is moving toward a new transitional phase where politics rather than war-making predominate. This is not to say that armed conflict will cease. At least at a low-level, conflict will persist for years to come. However, the possibility of amassing political and material gains through the reliance of armed conflict alone will be more limited.

Instead, those elites who form durable coalitions, compromise, and deliver security, stability, and economic opportunity will be the chief beneficiaries during this transitional phase. A re-emergence of politics, coalition building, and Yemeni-style deal making are the only viable way of whittling away the Houthis' influence and control of northwest Yemen. A re-emergence of some kind of incipient nationalism—one seated within federalism—will also contribute to undermining Iranian influence.

The Rise of Regional Political Coalitions

The formation of the Southern National Salvation Council (SNSC) was announced in September 2019 in Yemen's easternmost governorate, al-Mahrah ([Middle East Monitor](#), September 4, 2019). The SNSC brings together tribal and political elites from a number of southern governorates, with a predominance of Mahri elites. The SNSC members have coalesced around the belief that Yemen must be free from foreign intervention, specifically intervention by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia is particularly active in al-Mahrah where it has stationed soldiers and set up a military base. The Saudis argue that they are in al-Mahrah to combat cross-border smuggling via Yemen's border with Oman.

In reality, Saudi Arabia's interest in al-Mahrah goes well beyond countering smuggling ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 5, 2020). [3] Mahris have demonstrated against the continued Saudi presence in their governorate and against Saudi efforts to encourage Salafists to settle in the area. Beyond demanding the restoration of Yemen's

sovereignty, the SNSC, which has the backing of members of Yemen's internationally recognized government, supports the resumption of a national dialogue. The SNSC is calling for a unified Yemen that safeguards regional and southern rights and identities under a revised federal system ([al-Masdar](#), April 27, 2019).

On the west coast of Yemen, the National Resistance, an armed umbrella group, announced the launch of a political wing ([Yemen Press Network](#), March 24; [Yemen Details](#), March 25). [4] Brigadier General Tariq Saleh, who is the nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, is the driving force behind this new political wing. Tariq Saleh's forces, known as the Guardians of the Republic, are backed by the UAE and are vehemently anti-Houthi. What is most notable about the announcement from the National Resistance is that it intends to pursue political solutions in conjunction with its military actions.

Launching a National Salvation Front

Moves are also underway to launch a new national level political movement called the National Salvation Front. The groundwork for the front has been laid over the course of the last year by a diverse mix of political actors from the General People's Congress (GPC), Yemen's former ruling party, Islah ("Yemeni Congregation for Reform" and also Yemen's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood), Hirak (The Southern Movement). More groups are also expected to join. [5]

The chief organizers of the National Salvation Front are Hamid al-Ahmar, Ahmed Saleh al-Essi, and Ahmed al-Maisari. Hamid al-Ahmar, who resides in Istanbul, is the brother of Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, the head of the al-Ahmar family and leader of the Hashid tribal confederation. Following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in September 2014, the al-Ahmar family lost much of its influence within the confederation. Hamid al-Ahmar, who also oversees a multi-billion-dollar business empire, was forced to flee Yemen in 2014. In addition to being a businessman, Hamid al-Ahmar was a member of parliament and played significant roles in Yemen's opposition parties: Islah and the Joint Meeting Party (JMP), a coalition of opposition parties.

Ahmed Saleh al-Essi is a longtime senior adviser to IRG President Abd Raboo Mansur Hadi and deputy head of

the Presidential Office. Al-Essi is also chairman of the Alessi Group, a conglomerate that includes companies focused on shipping and logistics. In May 2018, al-Essi, who is from Abyan, helped launch the Southern National Coalition (SNC). The SNC was formed as an alternative and counterbalance to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is dedicated to the re-creation of an independent south Yemen. In contrast to the STC, the SNC, much like the proposed National Salvation Front, draws on a broad political base that includes members of a nascent southern GPC, Islah, Hirak, and Nasserists, all of whom support a unified Yemen.

Ahmed al-Maisari is the IRG's Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister. Al-Maisari, who is from Abyan, has been a prominent critic of the UAE's involvement in Yemen. In 2018, al-Maisari demanded that the UAE turnover control of Beir Ahmed prison in Aden after an Associate Press report claimed that detainees were being tortured. Al-Maisari, who survived an assassination attempt in October 2019, has acted as a key intermediary between the IRG and the STC during negotiations leading up to the 2019 Riyadh Agreement ([Middle East Monitor](#), October 28, 2019).

While the three chief architects of the National Salvation Front are politically prominent, the front itself will be composed of a wide-range of emergent elites drawn from across Yemen, especially southern Yemen. They are also from historically under-represented governorates like al-Mahrah. The front will further include a number of elites who were once enemies. [6]

The front has yet to publicly release its political platform, but it will be dedicated to the restoration of a unified and sovereign Yemen. [7] The front's primary backers have all been vocal in their criticism of Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's ongoing involvement in Yemen. Antipathy toward foreign interference in Yemen—be it from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other countries—is growing and crosses all political lines. The other core tenet of the front will be the restoration of state institutions within a federal framework.

Federalism will be a critical component of national level dialogues in Yemen. A return to the kind of centralized control that late President Ali Abdullah Saleh and his government exercised from Sana'a is not going to hap-

pen. Six years of war have permanently altered Yemen's governorates and their relationship with former centers of power.

Outlook: Fighting the Houthis Through Politics and Peace

Recognition that military action will not defeat the Houthis is driving the formation of Yemen's new political coalitions. If the Houthis cannot be defeated, they have to have a role, and likely a prominent one, in national dialogues or any future national government. While the soon to be announced National Salvation Front and other groups will be—and are—anti-Houthi, they will have to adopt a long-term political approach to dealing with the Houthis if they want to counter the Houthis' influence.

The leadership of the Houthis is not without internal divisions. Dissatisfaction with Houthi rule and abuses in many parts of northwest Yemen increases every month. [8] If the fighting stops, the Houthis no longer have an excuse for serious shortcomings like non-functioning state institutions and little or no economic opportunities for Yemenis. They will have to show that they cannot only fight but are also able to govern and provide for Yemenis living under their control. If the Houthis fail to do this, their authority will erode, albeit gradually. To begin rebuilding, the Houthis have to cooperate with national level political parties and regional and international powers. In turn, this cooperation will slowly loosen the Houthis' grip on power in northwest Yemen.

Yemen's transition from a nation at war with itself to one that is relatively stable will be protracted. The process will take years to work out and will be subject to periodic returns to fighting. However, if Yemen's internal political processes—both informal and formal—can begin functioning again, the country could emerge from its current crisis intact. The alternative is a divided Yemen that will never be stable or sovereign.

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Notes

[1] See: "Saudi Arabia eyes the exit in Yemen, but Saudi-Houthi talks alone won't resolve the conflict," Middle East Institute, April 15, 2020.

[2] Interview with Yemen based analyst, March 2021; see: "Could the Houthis be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement," Rand, 2020.

[3] Saudi Arabia views al-Mahra as a possible outlet to the Gulf of Aden that would allow it to bypass the Strait of Hormuz. Speculation about a possible pipeline from the Saudi border to the Gulf of Aden via either al-Mahra or the neighboring governorate of Hadramawt has existed for years.

[4] The armed wing of the National Resistance includes the Giant Brigades, the Guardians of the Republic, and the Tihama Resistance Forces.

[5] Author interview with a former Yemeni official, March 2021.

[6] Interview with a senior member of the GPC, March 2021.

[7] Author interview with a former Yemeni official, March 2021.

[8] Tribal discontent in the areas that the Houthis control is simmering. To consolidate their control over many of northwestern Yemen's tribes, clans, and families, the Houthis removed established sheikhs and elders who would not support them. The Houthis replaced many of these sheikhs with others who would be loyal to them. The forced alteration of power structures is a major grievance that will, at some point, come to the fore.