

Seven Years Later: Is the War in Yemen Nearly Over?

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Several developments might encourage an arrangement that could lead to a different dynamic in Yemen. Chief among them are the establishment of a presidential council, an overall ceasefire, and the partial lifting of the air and sea blockade imposed on Yemen by Saudi Arabia. The recent territorial losses recorded by the Houthis, which prompted heightened attacks on Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, helped push the parties to a ceasefire. However, experience teaches us that the chances of reaching a long-term political settlement are not good.

A set of military and political developments appears to be opening the way to a settlement that could lead to the end of the war in Yemen, which began in March 2015. Among the most significant of these developments is the departure of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his deputy Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar from the political stage, and the transfer of their powers to the transitional presidential council. In addition, the Gulf states announced a plan to provide aid for the reconstruction of Yemen; large scale prisoner exchanges have begun; and the ceasefire (hudna) that came into force in early April 2022 at the start of Ramadan continues to hold. This article describes the challenges facing any long-term settlement, possible scenarios in the context of the war, and the implications for Yemen and the region.

The most important development is the establishment of the presidential council. This move, which was arranged at a meeting in Riyadh of foreign ministers of the Gulf states, included considerable pressure on Hadi to fire his deputy, and then to resign. Hadi, who was the deputy of previous Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, has been in office since 2012 and was perceived as an obstacle to a settlement. His deputy, Ali Mohsen, a military officer and close ally of Saleh, was also considered an obstacle to an agreement. Ali Mohsen is identified with Muslim Brotherhood elements in Yemen, headed by the al-Islah party; these are considered terrorist

organizations by the United Emirates, notwithstanding their partnership in the coalition against the Houthis. The appointed head of the anti-Houthi council is Rashad Alimi, a former interior minister and advisor to Hadi, who is close to the Saudis. The eight members of the presidential council, divided equally between representatives from the south and from the north, include a representative of the southern separatists in the Southern Transitional Council (STC), who are supported by the UAE, and a representative of al-Islah.

A two-month UN-sponsored ceasefire was announced between a coalition headed by Saudi Arabia and Yemeni government forces on the one hand, and the Houthi rebels on the other hand, with an option to extend. This is an important step, which includes an undertaking by the parties to cease military activities within Yemen and from Yemen. The UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, defined the ceasefire as important but fragile. Evidence of this was supplied by recent violent incidents, particularly around the town of Mareb, one of the main focuses of the fighting in recent years. Another aspect of the ceasefire deals with easing the air and sea blockade imposed by Saudi Arabia on the Houthis almost at the start of the war. In this respect, Saudi Arabia has already permitted oil tankers to enter the port of Hudaydah, and the Sana'a international airport will open for commercial flights (under supervision and with limited flights) to Cairo and Amman.

Along with the significant reduction in the fighting and the partial lifting of the air and sea blockade on Yemen, contacts between the sides have led to prisoner exchanges. This deal will be accomplished in stages, and includes the exchange of hundreds of prisoners between the Houthis and the ousted government, among them a number of Saudis (and brothers of President Hadi) and Sudanese citizens. The first, modest stage of the deal was completed on April 7. Following these moves, the UN envoy expressed hope that the parties could return to the negotiating table within a few weeks and agree on opening access routes and humanitarian corridors to other areas of fighting, including Taiz.

The moves toward reconciliation, however fragile, herald temporary calm after an escalation of warfare inside and outside Yemen – in Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and are even supported by Iran, the ally of the Houthis. This calm was preceded by fierce fighting around Mareb and Shabwah, both oil-rich cities, and UAE intervention of the changes in the internal balance of forces in Yemen, which led to Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi and Dubai this past January. Although the UAE withdrew all its troops from Yemen by February 2020, local forces – who became loyal to the UAE during its years of direct involvement in the war – damaged the efforts of the Houthis and blocked their military achievements in areas where they sought control, Shabwah and Mareb, and advanced on the fighting fronts in Taiz and around al-Jawf in northeast Yemen. Responsibility for these territorial losses was ascribed to the Emirates, which in turn led the Houthis to attack the UAE. Saudi Arabia and the UAE responded with massive aerial shelling, mainly over Sana’a and other areas in northern Yemen, while the Houthis attacked in Jizan, close to the Saudi border. In late March the attacks hit electrical, water, and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia and caused a major fire in Jedda, at a facility of the Saudi oil company Aramco.

However, the history of efforts to achieve reconciliation and truces with local and international mediation from the start of the war indicate that the chances of success of the current moves are not good. Moreover, it appears that the confidence-building measures and compromise proposals, such as an eased blockade and the prisoner exchanges, are neither new nor more far-reaching than past efforts. Examples can be found in the Saudi proposals to the Houthis a year ago and in the Stockholm agreement of 2018, which show that the road to a ceasefire in Yemen is paved with agreements and understandings that were not realized. Long before the outbreak of the war, Yemen was already the poorest Arab country and rated lowest on the index of vulnerable states, alongside Somalia. The war has only worsened its situation, and according to UN estimates, it is the site of the worst humanitarian disaster since the Second World War and has cost almost 400,000 lives, mostly children.

What has now led the parties to agree on a ceasefire under the current conditions? International criticism of the Saudi role in the humanitarian tragedy in Yemen has a decisive influence on its desire to end the war. This joins the increasing Houthi attacks on strategic targets in the kingdom, particularly given its difficulty of setting up an effective defense system against the rockets and UAVs. The Saudis have now agreed to most of the Houthi demands, above all the limited opening of the capital's international airport and the eased movement of goods through the main lifeline, the Hudaydah port, both under Houthi control. Notwithstanding past and present Houthi demands for a full lifting of the blockade, it appears that the Houthis are accepting the Saudi concessions for now, and even participated in the first exchange of prisoners since the end of 2020. However, they claim they will not recognize the new presidential council as a legitimate body to conduct negotiations, a claim that was used against them by the Saudis since the Houthis took over the government in late 2014 and in early 2015.

Nevertheless, the readiness of the parties for a ceasefire is due to a combination of factors, including contacts between Tehran and Riyadh, their inability to reach a military resolution of the war, and the international criticism they have received for their part in creating the humanitarian disaster. The immediate cause was the defeat suffered by the Houthis to forces loyal to the UAE around Mareb, and the Houthi attacks on the Emirates and Saudi Arabia in recent months, which left their mark on both sides. In the absence of a military decision, the attractiveness of the diplomatic route grew stronger. It is also possible that increases in food prices due to the war in Ukraine, which hurt the Houthi-controlled population, forced them to accept the ceasefire.

Hadi's resignation, the end of attacks by the Arab coalition, the relaxation of the blockade, and the promise of \$3 billion of Gulf aid, are evidence of Saudi motivation to bring an end to the fighting. These developments, and above all the establishment of the council that unites most of the sources of power in Yemen, could bring the Houthis, who perceived their bargaining power as superior, back to the negotiating table. However, it is not

impossible that they will exploit the ceasefire to build up their strength, and once it ends they will renew the attacks on oil-rich Mareb, unless a political solution is found to share the country's resources. If the ceasefire collapses, members of the presidential council will be required to function as a war coalition. The Saudis hope that the political unification of anti-Houthis forces will give them their first advantage in the talks with the Houthis, and if the talks collapse, the unity will help their war effort against the Houthis. The council's ability to engage the full cooperation among its members is a challenge in itself, since they represent a variety of factions that have in the past fought each other, and each has a different vision for the future of Yemen.

Iran's influence on the Houthis is limited compared to its influence on Hezbollah, for example, but with its help the Houthis have become an important actor beyond Yemen, while improving their military capabilities to an extent that enabled them to stand against two regional powers – Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. The Houthis also threatened to attack Israel, which they claim is working against them. While Iran welcomed the ceasefire, it is able to harm the chances of achieving a settlement that will bring the war to a close. As Iran sees it, the aid to the Houthis is effective leverage for exerting pressure on its neighbors-rivals while it simultaneously conducts a dialogue with them: it allows it to threaten their critical water routes as well as their symbols of government and strategic facilities. At the same time, the link with the Houthis helps Iran by enabling it to put pressure on the West, which hopes to achieve a nuclear deal, while also bringing the war in Yemen to a close.

To the Gulf states, a renewed nuclear agreement would benefit Iran's power and resources, while damaging their own security situation. A long-term settlement in Yemen with the Houthis, which has the potential of driving a wedge between them and Iran, is therefore a clear Saudi interest. On the other hand, it will be hard for Iran to withdraw its support from the Houthis entirely, even if a settlement is achieved, and it will be hard for the Houthis to give up their links to this important ally, certainly in view of the extensive Saudi influence on politics in Yemen.