



 REPORT MIDDLE EAST

A Roadmap for Yemen Peace Talks

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On March 25, 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the beginning of military operations in Yemen. Nearly four years on that war has been a disaster: for Saudi Arabia, for the United States and, most of all, for the Yemeni civilians caught in the middle. The UN calls Yemen “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis,” a judgment that is made all the more striking by the fact that the crisis is entirely man-made. Yemen is a disaster of choice.

Saudi Arabia needed U.S. support to start its war in Yemen and it will need U.S. support to end it. No other country has sufficient leverage to influence Saudi behavior. President Trump has been clear that when it comes to Saudi Arabia he marches in lockstep with kingdom’s young crown prince and de facto leader, Mohammed bin Salman, which means it is up to Congress to impose limits and save Saudi Arabia from its own poor decision making. The UN special envoy to Saudi Arabia has the space and the talent to propose some creative diplomatic steps, but absent sustained and significant U.S. pressure these will be steps that come and go and the war will continue. It has happened before—in previous years with previous special envoys—and it can happen again.

There is, as has been clear for years, no military solution to this conflict. Saudi Arabia’s military options are limited: airstrikes alone are not going to uproot the Houthis, sending ground troops into the north Yemeni highlands would be as bloody as it would be foolish, and complete Saudi withdrawal—which would legitimize the Houthi coup—is something the Saudis refuse to contemplate.

The sad truth is that right now fighting is easier than making the difficult compromises necessary for peace. Neither side is under much domestic pressure to end the war. Saudi Arabia has lost relatively few soldiers in the fighting, and the lack of body bags coming back to Riyadh along with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s inability to stomach criticism has meant there is little in the way of an anti-war movement inside the kingdom. The Houthis, whose top leadership is largely insulated from the shortages associated with the war, believe themselves to be in a stronger position than the Saudi-led coalition. After all, they hold the territory. As one Houthi politician recently told Robert Worth of the *New York Times Magazine*: “We expect this war to be very long. It is a war of bone-breaking—they break us or we break them.”[†] The Houthi leaders don’t want to surrender diplomatically what they have gained militarily, so they are more than happy to sit back and wait the Saudis out.

The only thing that can offset the lack of domestic pressure is intense and sustained international pressure. The United States has been critically implicated in the Yemen war since the Saudis began fighting in March 2015. But wars that are easy to begin are notoriously difficult to end, and the fighting in Yemen, which is really three separate but overlapping wars,² is more complex than most. A clear understanding of the war’s historical roots is essential in order to plot a path to peace.

Deep Roots for a Long War

Depending on who you ask, the roots of Yemen's current war can be traced back to the Yemeni revolution of 1962, the Iranian revolution of 1979, the beginning of the Houthi wars in 2004, or the collapse of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime in 2011 and 2012. But no matter what origin date you prefer, the active fighting starts at the same time: July, 2014.³

That was when the Houthis moved out of their home governorate of Sa'dah, on Yemen's northern border with Saudi Arabia, overran a military base in Amran, and began their march on the capital city of Sanaa. What followed was a slow-moving coup d'état. By September 2014, the Houthis had taken control of Sanaa and forced the resignation of Yemen's prime minister. Several weeks later, in January 2015, they placed Yemen's internationally recognized president, Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, under house arrest.

Hadi eventually submitted his resignation before escaping Houthi control for the southern Yemeni port city of Aden, where he retracted his resignation and left for the safety of a Saudi exile, from which he has yet to permanently return. Once in Saudi Arabia, Hadi drafted a letter asking for military assistance to remove the Houthis from Sanaa.⁴

Saudi Arabia had never liked the Houthis, but for years it had viewed the group as a domestic Yemeni issue. When the Houthi wars began in June 2004, then-Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh had attempted to gain Saudi and U.S. support by saying the Houthis were an Iranian proxy. (The Houthis are Zaydi Shi'a, which is doctrinally distinct from the type of Shi'ism practiced in Iran). The only problem was that no one believed him. As late as 2009, after five separate rounds of war, the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, Stephen Seche, wrote a diplomatic cable back to Washington stating there was "no evidence" of Iranian support for the Houthis.⁵ The Saudis were similarly skeptical, telling one Yemeni tribal shaykh that "We know Saleh is lying about Iran, but there's nothing we can do about it now."⁶

But in November, 2009, in the midst of the sixth Houthi war, a group of Houthi fighters crossed into Saudi Arabia. Their purpose was to take control of some elevated ground inside Saudi Arabia, which they said the Yemeni army was using to outflank them. But as they crossed the border they encountered a Saudi patrol, and in the ensuing gun battle one Saudi guard was killed and another was wounded and later died.⁷

That small clash, which was quickly followed by several more, represented the beginning of the internationalization of the Houthi conflict. For years Saudi Arabia had spent lavishly on its military, building a well-equipped but poorly trained fighting force. The clashes with the Houthis were a national embarrassment. Barefoot Houthi fighters overran Saudi military camps, driving off in brand new military vehicles that they later displayed on YouTube. More than a thousand

miles away, Iran took notice of the Houthis' military prowess and Saudi Arabia's correspondingly poor performance. Indeed, over the past nine years, Saudi fears of Iranian involvement in Yemen have largely become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more Saudi Arabia acts in Yemen, the more Iran reacts, looking for ways to weaken its rival.

Five years later, when Hadi's resignation letter came through, things had changed in Saudi Arabia. The old, cautious way of doing things—soft words and a ready checkbook—was on the way out, and a bold new vision for engaging with the region was taking shape. Leading the charge for that new vision was a brash young prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who in 2015 had just been named minister of defense. He saw the war in Yemen as a way to do two things at once: restore Saudi Arabia's honor after a poor military performance in 2009 and 2010, and deal a blow to Iran, which had begun supporting the Houthis. If the war also helped him gain a better grasp on Saudi Arabia's military in preparation to one day become king, so much the better.

An Arabian War Is Launched—from Washington

Around 7:30 in the evening on March 25, 2015, Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Arabia's then-ambassador to the United States, called a press conference in Washington, D.C. "I wanted to meet with you," al-Jubeir said from behind the podium, "to inform you that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched military operations in Yemen."⁸

It was an odd way to announce the beginning of a war: through an ambassador in a foreign capital thousands of miles from the fighting. But it was also, in its own way, telling. Saudi Arabia needed U.S. support, or, at the very least, its acquiescence, to begin bombing in Yemen.

By early 2015, the U.S.–Saudi relationship, never warm under the Obama administration, had dipped to one of its lowest points. The Saudis didn't trust Obama, believing he had abandoned traditional allies like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt much too quickly during the Arab Spring protests. That decision and others like it, Saudi Arabia argued, had contributed to the post-protests chaos in the region. More recently, Saudi Arabia had grown increasingly concerned with the Obama administration's push for an Iran nuclear deal, which was nearing completion at the time. There was a "real deep sense of betrayal" from the Gulf countries, Dafna Rand, an assistant secretary of state in the Obama administration, recently told a Brookings audience.⁹ It "was on the tip of the tongue every time we had diplomatic meetings with these partners."

So when Saudi Arabia told the Obama administration in March, 2015 that the country was planning to start a war with Yemen and asked for U.S. support, Obama had to make a call: agree to an ill-conceived war or risk further alienating an ally?

The Obama administration, eager to limit opposition to the Iran deal, gave a tepid “yes, but” response to Saudi Arabia. It would support Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen, but it would not join the coalition. It would facilitate the fighting, but it would not itself take part in the fighting. This, according to Rand, was the United States’ “original mistake” when it came to the war in Yemen.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia had told the United States that the campaign to retake the Yemeni capital of Sanaa would take six weeks. But the United States never tried to hold Saudi Arabia to a schedule. It didn’t put a clock on its support. And for whatever reason, the Obama administration, which had come into office stuck in unwinnable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, failed to think through the implications and costs of signing up, even indirectly, for another open-ended war in the region.

Instead, on March 25, 2015, the same evening as al-Jubeir’s press conference, the United States announced that it was establishing a “Joint Planning Cell” in Saudi Arabia to coordinate “U.S. military and intelligence support.”¹¹

The United States was now involved. Its name was associated with the Saudi bombing campaign and, rightly or wrongly, it would be held responsible for military operations over which it had no control.

Operation Decisive Storm

Initially, at least, things went well for the Saudi-led coalition. They pushed the Houthis out of Aden, the southern port city that had fallen in mid-2015. But as the Houthis retreated north, the Saudi offensive started to slow. By early 2016, the battle lines had hardened. The Houthis held the capital of Sanaa, much of the northern highlands, and the Red Sea port city of Hudaydah, where much of Yemen’s food and aid enters the country.

The internationally recognized government, which was still mostly in exile, claimed the rest of the country. But in reality, what was left of Yemen had been parceled out among a variety of actors, few of which owed any allegiance to a central state.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) held the eastern port city of al-Mukalla for nearly a year, until April 2016 when they struck a deal to withdraw ahead of a United Arab Emirates (UAE) offensive.¹² The group now carries out attacks across parts of southern and eastern Yemen. ISIS, which is smaller and weaker than AQAP, has a small enclave in the central governorate of al-Baydha from which they launch attacks against all sides: the Houthis, the Yemeni government, and even, recently, AQAP.

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The governor of Marib, Sultan al-Iradah, is ostensibly loyal to President Hadi, but in reality runs his region more like an autonomous state. In 2017, the United States sanctioned his brother for supporting AQAP.¹³ The UAE has roughly 5,000 troops in Yemen, mostly stationed in and around Aden. But it has also funded and equipped a network of proxy forces in the south and east, which combat AQAP and the Houthis as well as, at times, troops loyal to President Hadi. At the same time, a group of former governors appointed by President Hadi have broken with his government to form the Southern Transition Council, which is calling for southern secession. Elsewhere, a variety of different militias—Salafi, tribal, and criminal—hold sway.

Yemen, as should be clear, has a Humpty Dumpty problem: the country has broken into several different pieces and is unlikely to ever be put back together again. Its three wars—a war on terror, a regional war, and a local civil war—are happening simultaneously and bleeding into one another.

With such a chaotic, seemingly hopeless environment in the country, the international community has, for much of the past four years, simply thrown up its hands and looked away. Humanitarian organizations have issued increasingly dire warnings, and UN panels have written sobering reports—but nothing has changed. The UN Security Council, the last stop for the world's unsolvable problems, has appointed three special envoys in four years. Each has operated under Resolution 2216¹⁴ and each, so far, has ended their term in failure.

The Khashoggi Effect

That trend of willful ignorance and diplomatic failure likely would have continued had it not been for Saudi Arabia's decision to murder Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S. resident and *Washington Post* columnist, in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2. That one gruesome act galvanized international opinion against Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Salman like no picture or story from the war in Yemen ever has. And the pictures had been impossible to unsee if one was willing to actually look: a hollowed-out and starving seven-year-old girl in the *New York Times*, for instance, who died days after

the photograph was taken.¹⁵ Photographs, also, of Yemenis eating leaves to survive,¹⁶ depleting what little savings they had, eating the seeds that would have been next year's crop. But none of it was enough to change the conversation until Saudi Arabia killed Jamal Khashoggi.

In the aftermath of Khashoggi's murder, both Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defense Mattis called for a ceasefire.¹⁷ A Senate resolution calling for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Yemen that had failed in February passed in December. And in December, the UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, convinced both the Houthis and the Yemeni government to send representatives to Sweden to meet for initial talks about a framework for eventual peace negotiations.

These are all positive steps, but even taken together they are likely to be insufficient to end the war in Yemen. After calling for a ceasefire within thirty days, both Pompeo and Mattis lobbied Congress not to end U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition.¹⁸ The Senate resolution, which passed on December 13, is more of a political statement than something with legal weight.¹⁹ The bill, which invokes the War Powers Resolution, put in place after the Vietnam War in order to check the executive's power to commit to armed conflict, calls on the United States to remove all troops from military operations in Yemen. But the position of both the Obama and Trump administrations has been that U.S. troops are not taking part in military operations in Yemen, they are only providing logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition.²⁰ Similarly, the Sweden talks are a beginning, not an end. Not even all the parties attended: Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of whom are driving this war, were absent, as were representatives from the Southern Transition Council and most other Yemeni groups. These talks, as was clear from the start, were never going to end the war. At best, they were a half step in the right direction.

Creative Diplomacy

What Yemen needs is creative diplomacy, and the sort of intense and sustained international pressure that can not only force all sides to the negotiating table, but keep them there. Getting the warring parties in Yemen to talk is the easy part; what's difficult is getting them to agree and then stick to their agreement. In Sweden, Special Envoy Griffiths succeeded in getting two agreements: a ceasefire and military withdrawal in Hudaydah, and a committee on de-escalation in Taizz. But these are agreements on paper that may prove difficult to implement on the ground. The Hudaydah agreement is littered with ambiguities such as who the "local security forces" responsible for the security of Hudaydah would be and which of Yemen's two central banks—one under Houthi control and one under government control—would receive the

funds from the port. In Taizz the Houthis and the government are only two of the myriad forces fighting in the city, and the only two to sign the agreement. These are the confidence building measures that the special envoy wants to build on for the next round of talks, currently scheduled for January 2019.

In Sweden, the special envoy also discussed the reopening of the Sanaa Airport, although the two sides could not reach an agreement on this. If there are problems with the Hudaydah military withdrawal and ceasefire this might be a solution. The Houthis want the airport reopened. The Saudis have air dominance over Yemen and have kept the airport in Sanaa closed since the early days of the war. This means civilian air travel in and out of the capital is impossible, and traveling out of the country to receive medical aid now involves a lengthy overland journey to get to government-held territory.

Saudi Arabia, despite little evidence, is convinced the Houthis are receiving smuggled Iranian ballistic missiles through Hudaydah (the more likely route is that the missiles come overland from eastern Yemen through government-held territory).²¹ Saudi Arabia also wants to deprive the Houthis of an outlet to the sea, which is why Hudaydah has emerged as such a flashpoint over the past year.

Both sides of the deal—reopening the airport and a Houthi pullback from the Hudaydah port—have risks. The Saudis are worried that the Houthis would receive smuggled weapons and material from Iran should the airport be reopened, and the Houthis worry that Saudi Arabia may try to tighten its economic blockade on the country if they withdraw from the port. Currently, ships going into Hudaydah, which already are facing high insurance premiums because of the war, are forced to undergo two separate inspections: one by the UN verification and inspection team (UNVIM) and one by the Saudi-led coalition. This should stop. It creates needless delays; drives up the price of goods (as does illegal Houthi taxation on the material coming into the country), thereby contributing to famine; and does nothing to stop the flow of weapons into the country. Instead, the Saudis should allow the UN inspectors to do their job, while also arranging for similar UN inspectors at the airport in Sanaa. This would do two things at once: first, it would give both sides something they desperately want; second, and more importantly, it would ease the Saudi blockade on the country, which has caused the famine-like conditions in Yemen. (The UN has been unable to call what is happening in Yemen a famine because, as Samuel Oakford points out, data collection has been so difficult amidst the war—and by the time a famine is declared it is usually too late for an international response to have much impact.)²²

Resolution 2216 also calls for the complete disarmament of the Houthis. That is almost certainly a non-starter. Instead, the special envoy should work on “transitional arms control.” In such a scenario, Saudi Arabia would agree to cease all airstrikes in Yemen in exchange for the Houthis placing all their ballistic missiles under lock and key. The Houthis,

however, would keep the key. Should they feel threatened or should the Saudis break their deal and continue to bomb in Yemen, the Houthis would be able to access their ballistic missiles. This is a confidence building measure that stops the fighting but doesn't require a final peace deal.

Finally, the most important thing that the special envoy can do is to convince Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Yemeni government to once again pay salaries to civil servants in areas controlled by the Houthis. Early in the war, the Saudi-led coalition and the Yemeni government decided on a two-tiered approach: military strikes and economic pressure.²³ The idea was that airstrikes would weaken the Houthis and the economic depravations would stir domestic unrest and create internal security issues for the Houthis, essentially forcing them to fight on two fronts simultaneously. That has not happened. Instead, Yemen's starving civilians, who are under aerial bombardment, have largely given the Houthis a pass on governing.

The airstrikes have done little to dislodge the Houthis, while all too frequently killing civilians. Similarly, economic decisions, like not paying salaries²⁴ and splitting Yemen's central bank,²⁵ have done little to weaken the Houthis' hold on power. Instead they have created the atmosphere for economic instability, famine, and the world's worst humanitarian crisis. As the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen wrote in its last report: "This has had the effect of using the threat of starvation as an instrument of war."²⁶ This is wrong, and it should stop. The Houthis are brutal in their own right—recruiting child soldiers and torturing prisoners²⁷—but they are not the ones suffering the most from the Saudi coalition's decisions. It is the Yemeni civilians who are paying the price for this war, and who are being used as human pawns by all sides.

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International Pressure

These diplomatic steps, however, will only happen if there is sustained international pressure. Without it, the sides will sit down and negotiate, but they won't compromise, and they won't come to an agreement. Yemen has been here before. In 2016, there were more than 100 days of peace talks in Kuwait, but the sides couldn't, or wouldn't, come to an agreement, and the war kept going. Two years later, the sides are in a similar position. Not much has changed militarily since then. The battle lines are still largely the same today as they were in 2016, and the war is still a stalemate. But thousands more civilians have died since the last time there were peace talks—some by war, some from starvation, and

some from a lack of medicine.

There wasn't much international pressure in 2016. The sides sat, talked, and left. That can't happen when the sides next come together in January, 2019. The Trump administration has shown it is unwilling to use its leverage to force Saudi Arabia to compromise. That means the only real option is for Congress to explicitly forbid U.S. logistical and intelligence support to Saudi Arabia for its war in Yemen, while also shutting off the resupply of spare parts to the Saudi Air Force. That is a different bill from the one the Senate passed this month, but it is the only one that will have any real impact on the war.

The Senate bill will not become law, at least not this year. In the House, the Farm Bill passed with a rule stating that the provisions of the War Powers Resolution "shall not apply" for the rest of the year with respect to Yemen.²⁸ This means that this Congress will not do anything to further limit U.S. support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. And that means—with President Trump unwilling to apply pressure, and Congress unable to do so—the war in Yemen will continue, at least for now, regardless of what future concessions the special envoy is able to secure.

Any change in U.S. policy will have to wait for the new Congress, which begins in January, 2019. It is far from certain that the new Congress will take up where this one has left off. But what is certain is that U.S. leadership and sustained pressure is essential to ending the war. The United States is complicit morally, and perhaps legally, in what is happening in Yemen. America acquiesced to Saudi Arabia's decision to go to war; now it needs to help Saudi Arabia end this war.

Notes

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