

# Taiz Is Key to Peace in Yemen: A Chance to Save Three Million People

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Dr. Olfat Al-Dubai is a lecturer in Social Studies at Taiz University. She was a member of the NDC's Transitional Justice working group and member of the Constitution Drafting Committee. She is member of the Women Solidarity Network and is a recipient of the Peace Track Initiative Feminist Leadership Fellowship. Dr. Al-Dubai is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

In his [briefing \(https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-un-secretary-general-yemen-open-session-security-council\)](https://osesgy.unmissions.org/briefing-special-envoy-un-secretary-general-yemen-open-session-security-council) on Yemen's peace process on October 17, the United Nation's Secretary General's Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, mentioned the importance of bringing peace to the currently besieged city of Taiz. Although the inhabitants of Taiz appreciate Mr. Griffiths' sentiments, we want more than his word. We need the international community to unite behind our cause and strongly support local peace initiatives by putting pressure on all parties to the conflict, in order to force them into committing to peace in this unfortunate city.

Taiz, my city located in southwestern Yemen, is home to more than three million people living under a [harsh siege \(https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38152428\)](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38152428) enforced on us by Houthis for over four years. The people of my hometown have suffered tremendous adversity as a result of the siege, particularly with the [prevention \(http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34920858\)](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34920858) of humanitarian agencies to adequately provide assistance to those who need it the most. Likewise, travel that used to take minutes before the conflict is now an excruciating hours-long journey through dangerous territories.

Since the early days of the conflict in Yemen, Taiz has been one of the cities most affected by the conflict because the city serves as a battleground for warring parties—and sometimes between the allies themselves. Consequently, the city's infrastructure and basic service facilities have been damaged, and civilians have been targeted by landmines and snipers without deference to international humanitarian law, which aggravated the humanitarian situation.

However, a new initiative presented by influential local figures advocating for a humanitarian corridor allowing safe passage of aid and civilians may offer a ray of hope for Taiz. Houthi leadership has reacted positively to the suggestion so far, stating that they are willing to open such passage, and the governor of Taiz—who is affiliated with the internationally recognized Hadi government of Yemen—has similarly expressed interest. In the past few days a committee composed of representatives of civil society organisations, and endorsed by both sides of the conflict, arrived from Sana'a in Taiz to support the negotiations for opening the safe corridor. While the citizens of Taiz, who have been dealing with the siege for years, may be inclined to question the Houthi force's true intentions—such an initiative should be taken seriously and forcefully supported.

This effort to create a humanitarian corridor in Taiz is not the first initiative of its kind, and I have personally been involved in several past initiatives aimed at breaking through the siege. However, there are lessons to be learned from previous failed initiatives to open a safe corridor in Taiz. At the top of the list, it is vital that the international community with the Arab Coalition, the P5, and the special envoy's office all unite behind this cause in order to make real progress in Yemen's peace process.

However, what is promising about this latest effort is that it comes at a time when the general public has reached a breaking point. For the inhabitants of Taiz, enough is enough, and now these citizens are putting real pressure on all decision makers to put an end to the current situation. Moreover, Houthis may be more inclined to cooperate given the recent [agreement \(https://www.ft.com/content/640c9150-f8ab-11e9-98fd-4d6c20050229\)](https://www.ft.com/content/640c9150-f8ab-11e9-98fd-4d6c20050229) between President Hadi's legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council in Aden to put their differences aside—which had boiled over into conflict in previous months—and focus on their common enemy of the Houthis. Given these converging factors, it seems that both the political and popular climate is favorable for such a proposal, and such an effort may actually be successful if it is done right.

Previous efforts to open safe corridors failed because the regional rivalry had fed into the local conflict in Taiz. The city became a bargaining chip for both warring sides: the Houthis conditioned lifting the siege to opening the Sana'a airport, while the Arab Coalition and legitimate government used deteriorating conditions in Taiz to showcase the Houthis continuous breaches of human rights rather than focusing on solutions to the situation.

To make matters worse, there were multiple communication channels operating simultaneously within the legitimate governorate side, which confused efforts and even led to internal conflicts. On many occasions, internal political rivalries led to conflict instead of progress as political parties competed for representation in the effort to form a safe corridor. During these past efforts, breaking through the siege of Taiz was handled as a purely political matter rather than a humanitarian one. These and other reasons led to the failure of all previous initiatives, which we must avoid at this stage.

As such, Taiz has not received its due share of the world's attention. For example, the latest [Stockholm agreement \(https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/23/issue/5/yemen-and-stockholm-agreement-background-context-and-significance\)](https://www.asil.org/insights/volume/23/issue/5/yemen-and-stockholm-agreement-background-context-and-significance) from last year vaguely pointed out to the need to create a "[joint committee \(https://osesgy.unmissions.org/taiz-agreement\)](https://osesgy.unmissions.org/taiz-agreement)" to explore solutions to the siege of Taiz, but left out any details as to how such a committee should operate. To this day, this committee has not even met once. Representation within the Committee was limited to specific figures and did not represent all of Taiz's political and social components, particularly youth, women, and civil society organizations.

Now all sides have a new opportunity to remedy past mistakes. I believe that Taiz is key to achieving peace throughout Yemen. The conflict in this city reflects the dynamics and complexities of the national conflict, albeit on a smaller scale. Therefore, if warring sides can reach an agreement on Taiz, it is likely that these efforts can open communication channels and help ease the way towards reaching an agreement throughout the entire country.

Practically speaking, the current initiative must be supported through serious efforts on four parallel tracks: challenges must be addressed through a political/diplomatic track, a humanitarian track, a social track, and a security track. In each of those categories, there are important local and international stakeholders who should work together and prioritize doing so in an organized and coordinated manner.

In terms of the political track, the Arab Coalition, P5, and UN envoy should lead the negotiations as they represent the guarantors for executing any local agreement. These actors can use the carrot-and-stick strategy to get the local negotiators in the Stockholm-joint committee to meet and support the current local initiative to reach an agreement to open at least one route into the city, which can serve as an initial step towards lifting the entire siege on Taiz.

The humanitarian side should be led by the international relief organisations, which can most effectively help build pressure towards ending the siege by bringing aid towards Taiz. By establishing a physical presence near the city, relief organizations can be on hand to enter the city immediately—if and when a deal has been reached.

The social track requires mobilizing socially influential and acceptable figures from both sides while ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, and civil society organisations to monitor the progress of opening these passages. The inclusion of these types of stakeholders ensures better transparency and representation of the society at large, while helping to facilitate the continuity of negotiations and mitigate potential political deadlocks. Such reformed local committees are best suited to ensure the execution of the political agreement to establish safe corridors on the ground and will be committed to keeping them open, standing against any elements who benefit from the siege. It is particularly important that international and regional actors pay attention to this local inclusion, as it is very likely those who benefit from the armed conflict will try to jeopardize the process.

Finally, the coordination of the security and military efforts must be done under direct supervision of both the local authority affiliated with the legitimate government and the Houthis who are the de-facto authority on the ground. Joint security committees should be formed to ensure smooth passage of aid and civilians as well as identifying and removing the landmines that were planted around the city.

Achieving peace in Taiz is a complex and difficult quest, as I have witnessed first-hand. Yet just because this is a difficult goal does not mean it should be abandoned. Instead of addressing symptoms of the conflict and focusing on the small fires here and there, the international community should pay attention to the major problems facing communities in Yemen, no matter how hard or complicated. Also, the failure of the previous initiatives should be interpreted into lessons-learned if we seek to achieve success.

The time has come to alleviate peoples' suffering and achieve peace in Taiz. And this will only be attainable through regional and international pressure, good intentions on the part of local political forces, as well as the inclusion of women, youth, and civil society organizations in the peace making process. ❖

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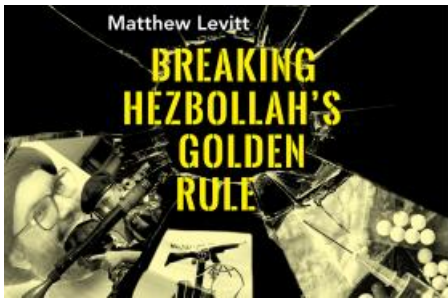
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