

Yemen Peace Accord Appears Increasingly Possible

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Brief Analysis

A deal would leave the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in control but allow the Saudis to disengage from a costly and intractable war, potentially opening up further diplomatic possibilities.

The past week has seen new signs of an emerging compromise in Yemen. On February 26, the Houthi-controlled Red Sea port of Hodeida received its first general cargo ship since 2016 after securing clearance from the UN. Two days earlier, Rashad al-Alimi—the Saudi-based head of Yemen’s notionally governing Presidential Leadership Council—praised the latest talks between Riyadh and the Houthis in a prominent Saudi-owned newspaper.

The direct talks to which he was referring have been facilitated by Oman, in parallel with the longstanding UN-led effort to replace the current informal ceasefire (which has lasted since April 2022) with a formal truce. If the Omani track proves fruitful, inclusive political negotiations could eventually follow, though officials involved in the talks are reluctant to discuss them for fear of jeopardizing emergent areas of agreement.

According to a February 25 report in the *Economist*, the Saudis “are negotiating a deal that would allow them to withdraw,” and this accord could be signed in the “coming months—perhaps in the holy city of Mecca around the Ramadan holiday,” which starts in late March. Notably, however, the deal “would not remove the Houthis from power, nor end Yemen’s messy internal civil war.” What Riyadh is apparently looking for “are assurances that the Houthis will stop lobbing drones and missiles across the border.”

In reality, any imminent agreement would be an admission of defeat for Saudi Arabia, which intervened militarily in 2015 after Houthi tribesmen from northwest Yemen expanded their control from the capital Sanaa to Aden. At the time, newly appointed defense minister Muhammad bin Salman—who has since become the kingdom’s crown prince and de facto leader—made the call to launch this intervention as a coalition campaign called Operation Decisive Storm. Yet it quickly proved less than decisive, and the prince curtailed his high-profile visits to forward

bomber bases amid reports of Saudi pilots causing civilian casualties and the kingdom losing control of a long stretch of the southern border. At its peak, the fighting was costing Riyadh an estimated \$1 billion per week.

In 2019, key coalition member the United Arab Emirates reduced its major military operations in Yemen after advancing as far as Hodeida but failing to wrest control of the port from Houthi forces. The UAE remained committed to combating local elements of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Yet it also arguably complicated international peacemaking efforts by supporting the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist movement based in Aden. Indeed, Abu Dhabi's current position on a potential Saudi-Houthi deal is probably similar to that of the STC, which rebutted Alimi's recent praise of the process by stating that he "showed a lack of seriousness."

From the U.S. government's perspective, such a deal would be a positive step toward alleviating Yemen's ever-present humanitarian crisis, which affects an estimated two-thirds of the country's 28 million residents. It would also help improve Washington's relations with Riyadh, whose bombing campaign initially received U.S. logistical support but soon faced major opposition in Congress.

To be sure, leaving Yemen in the hands of the Houthis—whose official slogan prominently features the phrases "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews"—would be a painful outcome in other strategic respects. Most important, Washington needs to assess how a deal might affect its efforts to limit Iran's hostile influence, especially since the missiles Tehran supplies to the Houthis may soon have [the range to hit southern Israel](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-southern-hezbollah-implications-houthi-missile-and-drone-improvements) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-southern-hezbollah-implications-houthi-missile-and-drone-improvements>). Iranian leaders initially saw the Houthi offensive as simply another side issue worth backing, but the group has since grown into [a more potent tool](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-jihad-council-command-and-control-other-hezbollah) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-jihad-council-command-and-control-other-hezbollah>) for threatening the Persian Gulf states, Israel, and the vital Bab al-Mandab Strait between the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, among other objectives. That said, even an imperfect agreement in Yemen may be helpful in the incremental diplomatic path toward peace, and could include some reduction in Houthi links with Iran to boot.

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