

Protecting Yemen's Peace Process from Houthi Ceasefire Violations

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Jan 8, 2019

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

Amid mounting evidence that the rebels are trying to collapse the ceasefire, Washington should rally a multinational demarche to accelerate their withdrawal from key ports and urban areas.

A few days after the December 13 Stockholm Agreement, a ceasefire went into effect in Yemen's Hodeida governorate. But well-evidenced claims from the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition now suggest that Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have racked up many ceasefire violations, including over 300 unprovoked attacks, the large-scale prohibited fortification of urban areas, and a failure to meet UN withdrawal deadlines. While the government and its allies have not retaliated, their patience is wearing thin.

To save the fragile ceasefire, the United States should quickly investigate the coalition claims and, if substantiated, push the UN to send a stronger message to the Houthis—namely, that time is short, and the international community will view them as the defaulters on peace should the agreement collapse. Congress should then take note of all proven violations and signal that Washington may reassess its opposition to the Yemeni government's forcible liberation of Red Sea ports.

CEASEFIRE COMMITMENTS

Government forces are currently wrapped around the east and northeast edges of Hodeida city, only 4 km from the port and astride the direct road to Sana. Houthi forces hold the majority of the urban area and the port, setting up large numbers of trenches, barriers, and minefields within the city. The Stockholm Agreement and subsequent UN Security Council Resolution 2451 required the two sides to take the following steps:

- **Ceasefire from December 18.** The UN resolution called for “full respect by all parties of the ceasefire agreed for Hodeida governorate.”
- **Houthi withdrawal from Red Sea ports.** The UN resolution required the Houthis to evacuate the ports of Hodeida, al-Salif, and Ras Isa by January 1. A Houthi militia convoy departed Hodeida on December 29, but video suggests that some fighters were left behind dressed in coast guard uniforms, taking the place of prewar forces drawn from the local population.
- **Mutual redeployment outside Hodeida city.** The UN resolution calls for the withdrawal of forces to agreed areas outside the city by January 8, and for “a commitment not to bring any reinforcements” into the ports, city, or governorate. External to the resolution, Yemeni government forces will likely be asked to redeploy south of the Hodeida-Sana road within an undefined period, relinquishing strongpoints at the Kilo 8, 10, and 16 intersections northeast of the city.
- **Removal of fortifications.** The resolution also calls for “a commitment to remove any military manifestations from the city,” though without a cutoff date. Thus far, imagery provided to the UN by the coalition indicates that the number of Houthi fortifications in Hodeida actually increased by 57% from December 18 to January 2.

HOUTHİ ATTACKS DURING THE CEASEFIRE

The Yemeni government, supported by modern surveillance aircraft and radar from the coalition, has given the UN precise coordinates, times, and other details for numerous Houthi ceasefire violations. In all, the coalition has accused the rebels of launching 313 attacks between December 18 and January 2, inflicting 25 fatalities and 197 injuries on government forces. Key trends in the coalition data include the following:

- **Rural focus.** Only 59 of the alleged Houthi violations (18.8%) took place in Hodeida city versus 254 less visible attacks in rural areas south of the city. The rebels repeatedly struck the government’s main supply route near Tuhayta (62 attacks) and Duraymi (45 attacks), along with 80 attacks on coalition lines near al-Hays. While urban Houthi violations had dropped from 30 per day to 3 by January 2, rural violations increased from 8 per day to 24.
- **Heavy weapons.** Yemeni and coalition forces stated that they had been struck with mortars (usually 120 mm heavy mortars) 95 times as of January 2, along with 21 Katyusha rocket attacks and 4 howitzer attacks. A pair of Badr-1 heavy artillery rockets were reportedly fired at a coalition headquarters on December 21, a violation that would require the complicity of high-level commanders in charge of this strategic weapons system. The Houthis also reportedly mounted 55 attacks with 14.5 mm and 12.7 mm heavy machine guns, 12 with rocket-propelled grenades, 8 with 23 mm antiaircraft cannons, 4 with B-10 recoilless rifles, and 76 with sniper weapons and other gunfire.

If the detailed coalition claims are accurate, the Houthis were violating the ceasefire with an average of 19.5 attacks per day as of January 2. In contrast, the coalition claims that it launched no artillery, mortar, or airstrikes in Hodeida after December 18. This assertion seems credible given the paucity of Houthi claims regarding coalition attacks under the ceasefire—the rebels are normally quite assiduous about reporting coalition misdeeds. If return fire was withheld, this means the coalition chose to sustain the ceasefire by showing restraint in 313 cases instead of opting for preemption, retaliation, or self-defense.

HOUTHİ URBAN FORTIFICATION

The Houthis have also used the ceasefire period to substantially increase their fortifications in Hodeida city, contrary to the requirements of the Stockholm Agreement and Resolution 2451. Prior to December 18, there were 157 Houthi trenches in the city, but 50 new trenches been dug as of January 2—a claim supported by overhead imagery presented to the UN and seen by the author.

The Houthis have also installed numerous barriers inside the city, typically shipping containers. Before the

ceasefire, 118 such barriers were reported, but an additional 109 were installed as of January 2. Some of these obstacles have been protected with new minefields. At the same time, coalition engineering vehicles have been periodically targeted with antitank weapons, preventing from clearing rubble. Thus, the Houthis have not only defied the UN requirement “to remove any military manifestations from the city,” they have also impeded the coalition from clearing obstacles in liberated areas.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Convincing evidence presented to the UN indicates that the Houthis are flagrantly violating UN Resolution 2451, the Stockholm Agreement, and its subordinate Hodeida agreement. This is not a case of giving a ceasefire time to work: according to well-supported coalition claims, there were as many Houthi violations on January 1 as on December 22, and 7 times as many Houthi-caused casualties after the new year. This cavalier disregard for Resolution 2451 likely stems from the fact that the international community and the U.S. Congress have held the Houthis to a far lower standard of conduct than the Yemeni government and Gulf coalition. The initial days of the ceasefire seem to show that this double standard is harmful to the prospects for peace, and that while the coalition may be trusted to maintain the ceasefire, the Houthis seemingly cannot.

The United States needs to work as an honest broker to help the Hodeida-based UN Redeployment Coordination Committee quickly assess the evidence of Houthi misconduct, especially regarding rural attacks in areas inaccessible to the UN mission. If egregious ceasefire violations are proven, Washington should use its backchannel communications with the Houthis to relay that it will publicly back the right of Yemeni and coalition forces to defend themselves in the future, and will hold the Houthis responsible for breaking the ceasefire.

The rebel failure to leave Red Sea ports by January 1 or the city by January 8 is another serious threat to the credibility of the peace process. Washington should press the Houthis—directly and indirectly—to vacate these areas fully and immediately. Meanwhile, the UN should not extend the deadlines, and the Yemeni government should not be expected to withdraw from the Hodeida-Sana road until the Houthis leave the ports and city. Relief trucks might still pass through the government-held Kilo 8, 10, and 16 checkpoints, but the coercive pressure presented by Yemeni forces north of Hodeida city should be preserved until the Houthis reverse their reported bad-faith actions and fulfill their ceasefire terms. If the rebels prove unwilling to leave the ports and city by the end of January, the United States should communicate that it will no longer restrain a forcible liberation.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, visited Hodeida battlefronts twice in the past year. ❖

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