

U.S. Officials Push for Yemen Talks

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Brief Analysis

Washington's abrupt change in tone could bolster the UN envoy's efforts to end the fighting and convene negotiations sooner rather than later.

On October 30, the U.S. government's public position on Yemen appeared to shift as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary James Mattis called for the parties to cease hostilities and begin peace talks in November. Mattis's remarks were made during a U.S. Institute of Peace webcast event, while Pompeo's were issued as an official State Department press release hours later.

Previously, the Trump administration's position centered on cautious support of Gulf coalition efforts against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels, with Pompeo recently certifying to Congress that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were working to reduce civilian casualties in the conflict. Specifically, the administration continued its predecessor's combination of air refueling support, intelligence sharing related to targeting, and advisory support to help defend against ballistic missile attacks.

The change in public positions comes in the wake of [the Jamal Khashoggi affair](#)

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-khashoggis-murder-tell-us-about-the-saudi-power-structure\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-khashoggis-murder-tell-us-about-the-saudi-power-structure), and amid mounting congressional pressure to end the war or halt U.S. support for the coalition. Adding to the urgency, Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, suggests the country

may face the worst famine the world has seen in a century by year's end.

Prior to yesterday's statements, senior U.S. officials had privately urged coalition partners to bring the war to a close before the United States was forced to publicly call for it. Washington is particularly concerned about the coalition's inability to conduct precision targeting with any consistency, resulting in heavy civilian casualties. Mattis emphasized this concern in his remarks, stating that the most important U.S. contribution in training coalition forces is to improve their targeting precision to the point where "they are not killing innocent people." He noted that the Royal Saudi Air Force was comfortable with the targeting delays that sometimes result from instituting better procedures. At the same time, he implied that the high standards and meticulous procedures set by U.S. and NATO forces might not realistically apply to others, admitting that this level of precision took decades to achieve. More important, he concluded by reemphasizing Washington's desire to see the war end, noting that "improved accuracy of bombs is still war."

Likewise, Pompeo's statement called for the cessation of "missile and UAV strikes from Houthi-controlled areas" into Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as the halting of airstrikes in Yemen's "populated areas." His careful wording did not appear to include Houthi attacks inside Yemen or coalition airstrikes on unpopulated areas. He also failed to mention Iran—an odd omission given that Tehran has enabled Houthi missile attacks through weapons smuggling and otherwise stoked U.S. concerns about its role in Yemen.

Mattis also referred to a "pull back" from the borders, while Pompeo suggested "demilitarization of borders" as a confidence-building measure. It is unclear if they were referring to the Yemen-Saudi border alone, or to maritime borders as well. Saudi Arabia and the Houthis created de-escalation committees in 2016 to discuss the land border, so they could be prepared to do so again. Another Pompeo suggestion—concentrating "all large weapons under international observation"—may be more difficult because the Houthis perceive any suggestion to disarm as tantamount to surrender.

Regarding the call for peace negotiations in November, that timeline fits with recent comments by UN special envoy Martin Griffiths, who adamantly pushed for talks within the next month during an interview on Al-Arabiya television last week. He suggested that he would be briefing the UN Security Council in mid-November, and that he wanted talks to be either underway or scheduled by that time. And in a statement issued earlier today, he welcomed the U.S. position and reiterated that he would be promoting three confidence-building measures: "enhancing the capacities" of Yemen's central bank, exchanging prisoners, and reopening Sana airport. During the Al-Arabiya interview, he suggested that all three proposals have been put down in writing and are underway; indeed, other recent reports indicate that some high-level prisoner releases are being carried out with Oman's help.

If U.S. support proves genuine and durable, Griffiths has a plausible chance of convening peace talks in the next month. Mattis claimed that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are "ready" for that step, though reports of a coalition troop surge in Hodeida suggest they have other plans in the immediate term. As for the Houthis, they failed to show up for the previous round of talks, claiming they did not have guarantees of safe passage. Griffiths stated that those issues are now resolved, so the Houthis cannot use that excuse again. If talks do convene, they would represent the first real effort to end the war since the Kuwait negotiations collapsed in 2016, so Washington and its partners should do what they must to seize this opportunity.

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