

Yemen: The View from Riyadh

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In a conflict with no viable path to peace -- and in which the Yemeni people are threatened by violence, famine, and cholera -- the Trump administration and regional players must bring a sense of urgency to diplomatic efforts.

Meetings in Riyadh last week with senior Yemeni and Saudi officials offered little hope that the war that has wracked Yemen for over two years and spawned one of the world's worst humanitarian crises is anywhere near its end. Admittedly, the picture we were able to develop is incomplete. Still, some themes emerged from our conversations with these senior officials that may prove useful to U.S. policymakers wrestling with options the Administration can pursue to bring Yemen's destabilizing war to a conclusion.

Today, there appears to be no viable path to peace in Yemen. While our interlocutors all agreed that only a political solution will end the war, they also seemed determined to continue fighting, arguing that sustained military pressure is needed to bring the Houthi insurgents back to the negotiating table. Meanwhile, the UN-sponsored peace process seems to have completely stalled.

Senior officials in the Saudi capital assess that Yemeni forces and their Saudi-led coalition partners are grinding out modest progress in several areas -- in Taiz, along the Marib road east of the capital, Sana'a, and on the Red Sea coast (Yemen's western border). Yet the Houthis continue to control much of the country's strategic and populous highlands. The Saudis -- now led by Major General Fahd bin Turki bin Abdul Aziz -- are focusing on clearing their border and establishing a buffer zone inside Yemen. The Yemeni officials we met asserted that their ground forces

have moved west from Marib and are now 30 miles from the capital, within artillery range. Similarly, they underscored progress in encircling Hudaydah port, Yemen's lifeline to the outside world, on the Red Sea coast.

Yet next steps in each case are deeply problematic. An assault on Hudaydah would likely accelerate the famine that is now gathering momentum in the country. Similarly, an attempt to liberate Yemen's capital of nearly 2 million people could lead to calamitous bloodshed, although Yemeni officials continue to make longstanding arguments that popular dissatisfaction with Houthi rule inside Sana'a is ever growing and weakening the rebels' grip on the city.

Further complicating the situation, both sides of the conflict are fraying internally -- in particular, the Houthi alliance with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. There was consensus in Riyadh that Saleh is at his weakest point yet in this conflict, and some asserted that army units once loyal to him have defected to the Houthis. Yet Saleh seems unable to act against the Houthis or exit the alliance. He remains driven to guarantee his family's continued influence in Yemen's political life.

Meanwhile, the alliance of Yemeni, Saudi and Emirati governments is also under considerable stress and, in May, a trilateral committee was formed in an effort to minimize discord and coordinate decision-making. Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen chairs the group, which includes Saudi General Intelligence Presidency deputy Ahmed Asiri and Ali bin Hamad al-Shamsi, the Deputy Secretary General of the UAE's Supreme National Security Council.

Not surprisingly, Saudi and Yemeni officials repeatedly claimed that the unwillingness of the Houthi insurgents to engage in serious negotiations is the principal obstacle to ending the war in Yemen. These officials complained that the Houthis' religious zealotry and fealty to Iran make political compromise all but impossible. Whether or not these assessments are fair, the Houthis have never clearly defined their political demands, nor have they honored any of their major political commitments -- including even their power-sharing arrangements with Saleh.

Before the war started, the Houthis sought greater representation in Yemen's government and access to the Red Sea. However, during the negotiations, the Houthis left largely untested the Yemeni and Saudi governments' claims that they could play a significant role in a new national government. The Houthis' only significant credible act was to endorse the UN Roadmap for Yemen as a basis for negotiation. However, President Hadi rejected the UN Roadmap, and thus this effort foundered.

Given our conversations in Riyadh, we recommend the following to restart the peace process:

Re-energize the UN mediation process. The UN is focusing on a plan to have a neutral third-party operate Hudaydah port. However, a broader and re-energized UN peace process is needed, one that benefits from the active engagement of as many nations as possible with an ability to influence the parties in the conflict.

In this regard, the United States needs to view Yemen as more than simply a theater in which its anti-Iran and counter-terrorism campaigns can be waged. The Trump Administration must bring a sense of urgency to diplomatic efforts to end the conflict. Recent steps by the U.S. House of Representatives to limit U.S. military support for the war point to growing concern over its humanitarian impact and reinforce the need for effective U.S. diplomacy. This could include further exploration of a deal that accelerates the break-up of the Houthi-Saleh alliance through diplomatic statecraft.

Increase pressure on the Houthis. Additional political and military pressure on the Houthi and Saleh-aligned forces is necessary. However, military efforts must be directed against targets that minimize humanitarian risks to the civilian population (i.e., not Hudaydah or Sana'a). In addition, more frequent but more targeted efforts to interdict the flow of Iranian arms to the Houthis should be undertaken so that Saudi-led Coalition naval operations do not impede the flow of humanitarian assistance.

Clarify the parameters of a peace deal. Consensus is building in favor of a loosely confederated Yemen, and ongoing

developments in the south only reinforce this likelihood. This may provide an opportunity to offer the Houthis more compelling terms in a peace deal, including a greater measure of autonomy in northern Yemen, and UN-monitored Houthi control of the Red Sea port of Midi.

Right now, the Yemeni people are being held hostage by leaders who have abdicated their responsibilities. They are threatened by violence, famine and cholera. The instability threatens Yemen's neighbors and, in several respects, U.S. national security interests as well. It is past time that all parties press for peace with the same determination they have brought to waging the war.

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