

The Coronavirus Pandemic Could Be the Key to Peace in Yemen

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After years of failed attempts at talks and ceasefires, COVID-19 may be enough to push the Saudis, Houthis, and Yemeni government to the negotiating table.

On March 23, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a global cease-fire amid the escalating coronavirus crisis. Two days later, he [singled out Yemen](#), urging an immediate end to hostilities and renewed negotiations. While ongoing fighting between Houthi forces and the Saudi-led coalition in the intervening weeks may have suggested such calls would go unheeded, the unprecedented unilateral Saudi cease-fire and the threat of the coronavirus pandemic may help push all parties into uncharted territory.

On April 9, less than two weeks after the Houthis sent a missile that was intercepted over Riyadh and the Saudis responded with their biggest aerial bombardment of Sanaa in years, Riyadh began a unilateral two-week cease-fire. While the Houthis have yet to agree, [saying](#) the coalition's blockade on Yemen must be lifted first, the announcement marks the first time that the coalition has agreed to a cessation of hostilities since 2016. It is its first unilateral cease-fire. Mere hours into the announcement, each side has already [accused](#) the [other](#) of launching attacks since the cease-fire began, but even if the Saudi concession can lead to a temporary de-escalation, it could help renew the U.N. process to end the five-year war, which has killed more than 100,000 people and led to the largest humanitarian crisis in the world. Likewise, the threat of the coronavirus may well provide the urgency, common interest, and face-saving opportunity for all parties to agree to the U.N.-sponsored cease-fire and a shared epidemic mitigation strategy—which could lay the foundation for eventual peace talks.

Riyadh's renewed pursuit of direct talks has been expedited by anxiety over the havoc the coronavirus may wreak in war-torn Yemen. Yemen already suffers from serious strains on its medical facilities, a lack of proper medical equipment and training, and a large population of people with underlying medical conditions, including malnutrition. A coronavirus outbreak could devastate the health care system and leads to tens of thousands of deaths. These fears spurred all three parties—the Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi government, Saudi Arabia, and the Houthis—to respond positively through official statements to Guterres's call for an "immediate global cease-fire." Now, Saudi Arabia has turned its rhetoric into action by announcing the cease-fire.

While Saudi Arabia's war strategy since 2015 has been to stay the course until victory, its actions more recently suggest it is seeking an exit. Notably, in late January, when the Houthis overran Yemeni government forces to take Nihm—a critical district that sits at a pivotal crossroad northeast of Sanaa—the Saudis [reportedly](#) did little to contest the advance. Moreover, the Saudi foreign minister [confirmed](#) his country's continuing commitment to a dialogue with the Houthis after the attack. This statement signaled a notable shift in the kingdom's strategy: Saudi Arabia prioritized its talks with the Houthis over preventing the first major Yemeni government military loss in years. Similarly, after responding to the missile attack that reverberated over Riyadh last month with retaliatory strikes on Sanaa, the Saudis again recommitted to hosting talks. This stance appears to reflect a new reality: The Saudis want out.

Saudi Arabia is right to prioritize a political solution that includes a bilateral settlement of terms with the Houthis. The alternative may be a *fait accompli* via a series of Houthi military victories that increasingly best the already weak Hadi government forces. In addition to taking Nihm district and much of al-Jawf province, including its capital, they are advancing in Marib, the economic heart of Yemen.

Marib represents a safe haven and the last real stronghold of the Yemeni government in northern Yemen. A battle for Marib would not be easy, nor is a Houthi victory inevitable. (In fact, pro-government forces and local tribes are pushing back, and Saudi Arabia is unlikely to take a hands-off approach there if a real battle commences.) But a Houthi victory there could spell an end to the already tenuous grasp of the Yemeni government in northern Yemen. Such a shift in the national balance of forces could radically alter the prospects for a peace agreement, as the Houthis may be less inclined toward a transitional government if they effectively control northern Yemen and think they can push into the south.

In short, the fight for Yemen's future is at a critical juncture. Saudi Arabia is signaling an unprecedented willingness to end the war; simultaneously, the Houthis are pushing on the war's front lines in a way that, if successful, could take the prospect of a transitional government off the table. As an unexpected silver lining, however, the threat of a devastating pandemic has created the conditions wherein all parties could agree to a

cease-fire without appearing to give in to their adversary. Already, the Saudis [cited](#) the coronavirus as one reason for their cease-fire initiative. If undeniable signs of the coronavirus begin to appear in Yemen, as is expected, the Houthis may well be incentivized to agree to the cease-fire as well.

In the event of mutual cease-fire talks, hosted either in Saudi Arabia or an acceptable third country, it is likely that two sets of negotiations will take place: Saudi-Houthi talks and Hadi-Houthi talks. For both sets of interlocutors, trust is wholly lacking, making a quick settlement unlikely. However, a number of interim confidence-building measures could be proffered to build trust.

The focus in Saudi-Houthi talks might begin with reversible steps: a de-escalation agreement at the Yemeni-Saudi border, a Houthi cease-fire banning the launch of projectiles into Saudi territory, and an extended coalition cease-fire over Sanaa. The Saudis were previously reluctant to agree to a cease-fire in Sanaa lest the Houthis use it to reposition weaponry and equipment, but their current unilateral cease-fire can serve as a test case for whether that behavior occurs. A mutual cease-fire over all of Yemen could be a goal in this stage.

If these measures progress, the two sides could move to more complex demands. The Saudis, for example, most want the Houthis to eliminate the Hezbollah and Iranian presence in Sanaa—a presence the Houthis have repeatedly denied. The Houthis, for their part, want the coalition blockade on Yemen lifted. Given the leverage the foreign allies and the blockade provide to each side, neither is likely to give in entirely on such major issues until a broader arrangement is in place with the Yemeni government on political and security arrangements. A phased approach is more likely.

Hadi-Houthi talks would almost certainly be more complex. The Hadi government would be entering talks on the military back foot, creating reluctance to negotiate. It will likely seek not only a cease-fire but a reversal of some Houthi gains. The Houthis have a long list of immediate demands, laid out in a recent [document](#), including opening Sanaa Airport, reducing clearance delays at Hodeida port, paying public sector salaries, and releasing prisoners. The United Nations hopes to turn some of these demands into confidence-building measures. These measures will require not only Hadi government accession but also Saudi acquiescence, yet both worry that the Houthis will use an open airport or better functioning port to receive supplies or weapons from Iran; take advantage of salaries to boost their reserves; and recruit released prisoners back into their military ranks. These are valid concerns that will require hard-nosed thinking from the U.N. to create an enforcement mechanism.

The idea of a transitional government, likely with a multiheaded presidency, has previously been accepted in principle by all parties. Yet past talks have failed because the parties tend to adopt maximalist positions, and they disagree on the [order of concessions](#): The Yemeni government wants to prioritize security arrangements, especially Houthi disarmament, while the Houthis want to prioritize political arrangements, especially their role in a transitional government. The parties' positions remain fixed; however, unlike past talks, this round will feature a heavier Saudi hand, potentially able to prod the Yemeni government to agreement given its reliance on the coalition for military support against the Houthis. There is the possibility that this round may also feature a heavier, but invisible, Iranian hand on the other side of the table, although what precise role Iran would play remains opaque.

The U.N. special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, [wrote](#) in a September 2019 op-ed: "Yemen's war has to end. And the secret is that the way it ends is no secret at all." Indeed, there is a clear way ahead, yet the road is likely to be long and periodically blocked by various parties acting to gain leverage. The best prospects for success lie in coordinating the two sets of talks to ensure one track buoys the other. Past confidence-building measures agreed in the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements were bogged down and never implemented. The idea that small wins snowball into big wins has not panned out in Yemen thus far, but this has been in large part because of a lack of political will.

In the most positive development, Saudi Arabia appears to be more highly motivated than ever to end the war. The Houthi political will is more difficult to nail down. They continue to engage their Saudi interlocutors but are simultaneously pursuing a ground campaign in Yemen. On the one hand, a peace deal would allow them to be a part of an internationally recognized, legitimate transitional government—providing the combination of a political voice and legitimacy that they have craved since the 1990s, when Hussein al-Houthi, the founder of the Houthi movement, became a parliamentarian in hopes of bettering his people's lot.

On the other hand, some within the Houthi movement likely do not mind the pariah status and would rather continue the military campaign than enter into a transitional government that limits their power. The Hadi government may be the most reluctant to seriously negotiate. While the Saudis can likely pressure the Hadi government for one-time decisions due to their leverage as the military power responsible for the Yemeni government's survival, as they did to sign the Stockholm Agreement, that approach is unlikely to bear enduring fruit in protracted negotiations—let alone a peace process that happens over an extended time period with many microdecisions made along the way.

The apparent unflinching resolve of Saudi Arabia to get out of a destructive war now in its sixth year could well prove to be the domino that triggers a real peace process. The terrible threat posed by the coronavirus, ironically, offers a way forward; it is critical that the parties take advantage of these unique, face-saving, and time-bound conditions to engage in talks and reach a lasting settlement.

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