

THE TRUCE IN YEMEN: A RAY OF HOPE OR ANOTHER FAILED OPPORTUNITY?

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Introduction

Yemen has been roiled by conflict since 2014 when the Houthis, an Islamist movement that emerged from Northern Yemen in the 1990s, led protests against the then president Abdur Rabi Hadi Mansour.¹ The protests were motivated by the rising fuel and food prices as well as the unstable administration that had just replaced long time president Abdullah Ali Saleh due to the corruption during his tenure. This led to conflict between the Houthis supported by Saleh on the one hand, and President Mansour and his armed forces on the other.²

Due to the Houthis following the Zaydi sect of Shi'ism, Iran began to support the Houthis with arms and finances. In response to this, Saudi Arabia which has long considered Yemen as within its sphere of influence began arming the government and launching air strikes against the Houthis in a bid to ensure its influence in the nation.³

Eight years and several failed peace talks later, the war has created one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world. Yemenis face endemic issues like food shortages and malnutrition and the number of Yemeni refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP's) has reached the millions, creating an enormous challenge for aid agencies.⁴ Against this backdrop and after a long history of failed truces, a new truce has managed to hold creating hopes for a light at the end of the tunnel, as stated by Hans Grundberg, the United Nations (UN) Special Envoy to the country. This article examines the truce, the factors that led to it and the future of the conflict in Yemen.

Locating the Contours and Challenges

The two-month long truce that has been agreed between the Houthi Rebels and the Yemeni Government led by former president Mansour (in exile in Saudi Arabia) had several conditions attached to it. According to the terms of the agreement, international flights in and out of the capital city Sana'a would resume, albeit only to Egypt and Jordan. This would be done in conjunction with the Yemeni Government and the coalition of Gulf nations fighting the Houthis, including even Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who had previously enforced a no-fly zone of sorts over Yemen. In addition, the coalition agreed to also lift an embargo on fuel entering the Houthi-controlled seaport of Hudaidah.⁵

As part of the agreement, president Mansour ceded his powers to an eight-member council comprised of representatives from various groups. As reported by various news outlets, this was done at the behest of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.⁶ Nonetheless, it is an important step given that Mansour was largely seen as an incompetent head of state by the Houthi rebels and was becoming increasingly ostracized even within his own support base.⁷

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These then formed some of the contours of the truce engineered with the help of the UN. In support of these moves, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates injected three billion dollars into the Yemeni economy to meet the country's urgent economic needs.⁸

Yet the agreement coming to fruition was not a predictable outcome. The UN has long been pushing for a truce to coincide with the holy month of Ramadan. However, both the Houthis and the Yemeni government had far more maximalist demands than the current truce seems to have accommodated. For instance, the Houthis previously insisted that the lifting of the embargo would include all commodities (and not just fuel) and also wanted the coalition to allow flights to travel to all parts of the world. Moreover, the government and the coalition had continuously expressed their desire to see the Houthis withdraw from all their positions around the oil-rich, strategic town of Ma'arib.⁹ Thus, the current truce came as something of a surprise for uninitiated observers. The causes that led to the truce are unpacked in the next section.

Setting up the Truce: Local and International Factors

Several factors led to the truce's success. These factors can be classified along the lines of local military dimensions, regional political drivers and global geo-political developments. *Local Military Factors:* Until 2021, the Houthis seemed to be advancing on key locations in Yemen after already taking over many government-controlled areas around Ma'arib. Had it not been for a push backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2021, Ma'arib would have also likely fallen to the Houthis.¹⁰ This would have proven significantly problematic for Saudi Arabia since not only would the rebels obtain access to oil (thereby increasing their coffers), but they would also control the deserts bordering Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Control of Ma'arib therefore would make it easier for the Houthis to launch cross-border attacks and threaten the rich Gulf nation's security. The UAE and KSA-backed efforts however, thwarted these ambitions and blocked the Houthis' expansion. This loss was likely a contributing factor to bringing the Houthis to a standstill.

Regional Political Exhaustion in UAE and Saudi Arabia – Another major factor that led to bringing the government and coalition side to the table was the regional political updates. For Saudi Arabia, its involvement in the war has long been criticized by Western nations due to its bombings including civilian targets.¹² In 2021, US president Biden pledged to place curbs

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on arms sales to Saudi Arabia, thereby weakening its position in Yemen.¹³ In addition, the war has also caused a huge drain on the Saudi treasury and hampered its ambitions to become oil independent as well.¹⁴ Moreover, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have faced several drone and missile strikes from Houthi controlled areas running up to the 100's for their involvement in the Yemeni conflict.¹⁵ These attacks have shaken investor confidence in Saudi Arabia which has been vying for new foreign investments. They furthermore shocked the domestic population in the United Arab Emirates and reduced the ruler's appetite for engaging too intensively in the war.¹⁶

Global Factors: Another aspect to consider in bringing the truce to fruition was the Russian invasion of Ukraine which has gone on for more than two months now. The war resulted in two major effects on the Yemeni conflict. First, the cost of wheat and other food products (which are exported by the two nations) have skyrocketed,¹⁷ creating more problems for the Yemeni populace and a higher risk for the Houthi rebels governing the north of Yemen. Second, apart from food, the price of fuel has also increased significantly, making the Houthi's war efforts more costly.¹⁸

Benefits and opportunities

Technically speaking, a truce is not a long-term end to conflict, but merely a temporary cessation of hostilities that gives both sides the time to assess the damage they sustained as well as take care of their dead and wounded and bring in the necessary emergency supplies.¹⁹ If such an agreement holds long enough, it can then be taken to the next level whereby the warring actors are once more brought to the negotiating table to discuss a longer ceasefire and possible de-escalation of hostilities – a rare but welcome end to the war.

Against this background, a few positive factors seem to have taken place since the start of the truce. First and most importantly, the truce has lasted for more than three weeks, already longer than most of the truce attempts in the Yemeni conflict. This signals a sense of commitment from both sides meaning that there is hope for the peace to last longer.

Second, UN agencies have also reported that the Houthis have pledged to stop the recruitment and use of child soldiers on the battlefield, even promising to release and re-integrate children back into society within six months.²⁰ This is a big step demonstrating their commitment to

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relinquish what would otherwise be manpower for their war. Moreover, in a country where more than 10,000 children have been killed or injured and about 3,500 have been used in battle, re-integrating them into society will reduce the generational impact of violence and possibly enable them to be peacemakers rather than armed actors in the future.²¹

Spoilers for the Truce

Several factors threaten the truce and make it difficult to maintain. Firstly, for the agreement to hold, its conditions must meet the satisfaction of all parties. For example, the Houthis have accused the government and coalition of not actually sending commodities such as fuel to the Hudaida port. This accusation creates the conditions for the peace to break.²²

Second, it is also wholly possible that the Houthis are using the time to regroup. Reports of Houthi attacks on the city of Ma'rib have also emerged, breaking another condition of the deal. As some have argued, the Houthis will have likely used the opportunity to recuperate its forces and come back with stronger offensives against government positions. This is similar to when a truce in 2016 to stop Saudi-led attacks on the Houthis created a similar response.²³

Third, there are also other actors such as transnational terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State (although this group is not as powerful as AQAP). Such actors often act independently of the war and use the conflict as cover to expand their own ranks. AQAP which has its power base in the southern and eastern parts of the country has always invited military action, especially by UAE-backed forces.²⁴ A recent jail break by 10 prominent AQAP members in the eastern city of Seiyun led to a manhunt by government forces.²⁵ Should such incidents persist, it is possible that the Houthis could depict the military actions taken by government forces as acts of aggression, leading to retaliation.

Fourth, statistically, ceasefires in different warzones across the world have often resulted in failure. A 2016 academic study on ceasefires noted that close to 85% of them fail.²⁶ In fact, the failures were often followed up by even more severe offensives, thus exacerbating the problems of the conflict. In Yemen alone, seven out of nine truces before 2016 failed and led to further attacks.²⁷ Thus, while there remains hope for a continued peace, it is also important to keep this history of failed truces in mind.

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Scoping out future outcomes

Given all these aspects, a few outcomes can be seen for the Yemeni truce. In the most positive scenario, if the truce holds strong, then it is a chance for the Houthis and the government side to negotiate a better power sharing agreement, which could form an important step towards a more permanent solution. On the other hand, if there are ceasefire violations, the truce could collapse and lead to a resumption of conflict. However, a third scenario would be if negotiations between the different parties do not materialize in a way that is satisfactory to all parties, leading to an extension of the truce beyond the stated two month period. This would leave more scope for a longer lasting peace.

A few other factors also weigh in on the peace process in Yemen. For instance, one factor is the negotiations on renewing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iranian nuclear deal, whereby Iran would be re-included into the international economic system in exchange for scaling down its uranium stockpiles (and other conditions). For instance, if the JCPOA negotiations succeed, it would give more impetus to Iran to cut down on its arms fundings to the Houthis and ensure that peace is maintained in the region. This could further be bolstered by the thawing of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia which are being discussed right now.²⁸

Another aspect is the legitimacy of the presidential council. While the council is comprised of leaders from different parts of Yemen, the Houthis were not entirely satisfied with the members given that they were chosen by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The fact that the council made visits to the two Gulf nations also demonstrated their closeness to the two nations, resulting in the Houthis refusing to negotiate with the presidential council.

Ultimately, Yemen is in a dire situation with the rest of the world having long turned its back on the conflict-ridden nation. This truce that came as a surprise has lasted longer than observers could have hoped for and has even provided a distant hope that the end of the war might be on the horizon. Against this backdrop, many factors could threaten the shaky truce. Nonetheless, international actors including the UN should take this as an opportunity to ramp up as many positive confidence building measures to help de-escalate tensions.

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