

The Hodeidah Ceasefire: Light at the End of Tunnel?

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In 2014, Yemen was referred to as one of the success stories of the Arab Spring. But the takeover of the government in January 2015 by the Houthi rebels disproved that judgement. The internal conflict soon assumed a regional dimension with a Saudi-led coalition military intervention in March 2015 and Iran supporting the Houthis. The UAE, a key ally in the Saudi-led coalition has on the other hand pursued an independent policy to gain a strategic foothold in the country by arming and funding secessionist groups such as al-Hirak in Southern Yemen. While the political and institutional fragmentations allowed al-Qaeda and ISIS to expand their presence, the internationalisation of war resulted in the US and EU extending logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition.

In 2018, the situation in Yemen worsened as the Saudi-led coalition with help from the Southern separatist movement launched its largest military assault to recapture Hodeida, a vital port city overseeing the important chokepoint of Bab el-Mandab. Along with the military offensive, the coalition took a host of economic measures aimed at undercutting the Houthi rebels who control northern Yemen.

The battle for Hodeidah contributed to the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the economic collapse of Yemen. As the humanitarian crisis worsened, the

UN, through the Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, held fresh consultations to find a way to ease the humanitarian crisis. As a first step, Griffiths worked on halting the fighting in Hodeidah and bringing the Houthis and the Government of Yemen on the negotiating table. Finally, on November 19, 2018, both the parties announced their intention to freeze military operations and convene for negotiations at Rimbo, Sweden.

After four years of incessant fighting that created one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times, Yemen is looking towards prospects of extricating out of the civil war. On December 13, 2018, the representatives of the Government of Yemen and Ansar Allah, after days of consultations led by Martin Griffiths, signed a [ceasefire agreement for the port city of Hodeidah](#). The agreement in addition to the ceasefire provides for confidence-building measures including the evacuation of injured Houthi fighters to Oman for medical treatment, prisoner exchange, safe passage for the Houthi delegation to the Yemeni capital of Sanaa for talks, and a statement of understanding on ending the fighting in Taiz. The parties also agreed to support the formation of a deployment committee comprising representatives from both sides to chalk out a detailed plan for withdrawal and the limits of what will effectively be the demilitarised area

surrounding the Bab el-Mandab, including Port Salif and the Ras Issa oil terminal.

On February 18, 2019, the UN announced that both the parties have reached an agreement on [Phase 1 of mutual redeployment](#) of forces. Under the first phase, the Houthis will withdraw from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa. In turn, the coalition will retreat from the outskirts of Hodeida city, where battles raged before a ceasefire came into effect. This is a highly significant development given that the Hodeidah Port is the gateway for humanitarian aid into the country, where 90 per cent of basic goods and commodities come through imports. The UN can now work without risking the security of its personnel, attempting to relieve the suffering of the Yemeni population.

This marks the first time the Houthis have agreed to withdraw from Hodeida, which is their command headquarters and hub for vital military installations. The port is also important for Houthis for tactical reasons. It was from this port town that the Houthi rebels were able to target coalition vessels passing through the Red Sea, as they did in 2017 when they launched missiles on [Saudi](#), [UAE](#) and the [US](#) vessels passing through the Bab el-Mandab.

The Hodeidah ceasefire is a major breakthrough for peace in Yemen. However, in addition to compliance with the agreement, the UN will now have to work with the leaders to expand the scope of the ceasefire and work towards finding a lasting solution in Yemen. For any resolution, it is important that the various factions are impressed upon to

cease use of force. The second step should be to start a process of UN-mediated consultations to address the major sticking points including Houthi control of Sana'a and other major cities in the north. For any lasting political settlement, all parties – especially the President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led government and Abdul-Malik Badereddin al-Houthi-led Ansar Allah – will have to show flexibility and agree to compromise on some of their key demands.

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