

The corona pandemic and ceasefire in the war in Yemen

Shaul Shay

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzeliya (IDC) and former Deputy Head of Israel National Security Council)

Copyright: Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)
Publication date: 20 April 2020

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS)

The Houthis rebels, backed by Iran took Sanaa by force in 2014, overthrowing President Hadi and heading south and east, with the assumption they could take over the whole country. Saudi Arabia and the coalition forces launched a war in March 2015 to uproot the Houthis from Sanaa and restore President Hadi to power. The conflict, widely seen in the region as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. After five years of fighting, neither the Hadi government and the Saudi led coalition nor the Houthi insurgents have accomplished their original goals.

Saudi Arabia announced a two-week unilateral ceasefire starting on April 9, 2020, amid an escalation in fighting between the warring parties, days after the UN called for calm. The coalition's spokesman, Turki al-Maliki said, the ceasefire may be extended if the Houthis respond "positively" to the gesture.¹ Maliki added that the move was aimed at creating "favorable conditions" for a permanent ceasefire in Yemen.

The supreme national emergency committee for the COVID-19 disease in Yemen said the country has recorded its first case on April 10, 2020. The announcement came a day after a nationwide ceasefire prompted by the coronavirus pandemic began on April 9, 2020. Aid groups have warned that a COVID-19 outbreak in Yemen would be catastrophic because of the damaged health system.²

Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik, warned that the coronavirus will not discriminate between legitimate and Houthi forces and will leave an impact on the people and the country's economy. ³

The Saudi initiative was welcomed by Arab and international powers. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised the coalition's "constructive response to the UN Secretary General's call for the parties to focus on countering the COVID-19 pandemic". UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab stated the Saudi-led coalition's move is "an important step towards the permanent ceasefire Yemenis need".⁴

The coalition said the decision comes after an initial announcement on March 25, 2020, to endorse the internationally recognized Yemeni government's decision to a ceasefire following a call by UN Secretary General Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths for warring parties to lay down their weapons.⁵

The United Nations has issued a global call for armed groups to stand down during the corona pandemic. Given Yemen's weak health system, amid the outbreak of the coronavirus across much of the world, experts have encouraged the country's warring factions to stop fighting to allow health workers to divert efforts to preventing the spread of the disease.⁶

The UN's Yemen Envoy Martin Griffiths called upon Yemeni parties to convene for an urgent meeting to discuss the ceasefire. "I am calling the parties to an urgent meeting to discuss how to translate their stated commitments to the Yemeni people into practice. I expect the parties to heed Yemen's desire for peace and immediately cease all military hostilities," Griffiths said in a statement on March 24, 2020.⁷

Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni legitimate government and the Houthi rebels had all welcomed the appeal from UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for an "immediate global ceasefire" to help avert disaster for vulnerable people in conflict zones.

All parties are expected to meet under Griffith's supervision to discuss his proposals on steps and mechanisms for a permanent ceasefire in Yemen,

steps to build humanitarian and economic confidence, and the resumption of the political process between the Yemeni parties to reach a political solution in Yemen.⁸

But hours after the coalition announcement, Yemen's information minister said the Houthis had targeted Hodeidah and the central city of Marib with missiles.

While the Houthi insurgents have not announced any official position on the ceasefire initiative in Yemen, a militia commander, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, described it as “a political and media maneuver.”⁹

Another Houthi official, Mohammed al-Bukhaiti dismissed the Saudi offer as a ploy by the kingdom to boost its international standing, while a spokesman for the Houthi rebel forces accused the coalition of several attacks after the ceasefire began.

The Arab Coalition supporting the legitimate government in Yemen said on Sunday that the Houthi militias committed in 48 hours 241 violations of the ceasefire. The Coalition said the violations included aggressive military action using all kinds of light and heavy weaponry and ballistic missiles.¹⁰

The Houthi condition for ending the war ¹¹

On April 8, 2020, shortly before the Saudi announcement of the ceasefire, a senior Houthi official, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, posted a detailed, eight-page plan to end the war on his Twitter account.

The document lays out the conditions under which the Houthis would accept a ceasefire. Except for participating in ceasefires and retrieving landmines, the eight-page document puts the entire burden of ending the war onto the Saudi-led coalition. The document has three headliner sections:

Ending the war and implementing a ceasefire - in the first section it calls for an immediate ceasefire, to include stopping the movement of forces and weapons and ending all attacks on Yemeni and Saudi soil. It also calls for establishing “brotherly relations,” ending all negative media statements, and avoiding any activities that might undermine the ceasefire. In addition,

the section repeatedly refers to ending all foreign interference in Yemen. According to the document, various joint commands will oversee the ceasefire in cooperation with the UN, whose coordinating role is stated in very explicit terms.

Ending the coalition blockade and alleviating the humanitarian situation - ending the coalition's air, land, and sea blockades on Yemen. It calls for reopening the airport in Houthi-controlled Sanaa to "direct" flights, the demilitarization of border crossings and that the "foreign presence" in Yemen's ports must end.

The Houthis say the coalition must provide compensation to all those affected by the war and restore all buildings damaged by the fighting.

The second section goes on to discuss a potential joint body for confronting the coronavirus pandemic, though it says the UN and coalition would be wholly responsible for providing equipment, medicine, and all other related needs.

Reaching a political settlement - the third section stating merely that the UN should launch intra-Yemeni talks toward a political settlement after consultations with both sides. The only specific request is, again, that there be no foreign intervention in these talks, perhaps referring to Saudi influence over the Yemeni government. The last sentence states that any political settlement should go to a national referendum.

Most notably, the proposed agreement is with the Saudi led coalition, not the Hadi government. The document is not formulated as a basis for negotiations but as a list of unilateral requirements of the Houthis.

Summary

The war in Yemen has killed more than 100,000 people and even before the coronavirus pandemic, the United Nations described Yemen, the Arab world's poorest nation, as the world's worst man-made humanitarian disaster. Aid groups have warned that a COVID-19 outbreak in Yemen would be catastrophic because of the damaged health system.

In the past, informal and secretive talks took place inside Saudi Arabia and Oman between the Houthis and Saudis. Both sides blamed the failure of the talks on manipulation by Saudi Arabia or Iran.

The Saudi announcement is the first major breakthrough since the United Nations convened the warring parties in late 2018 in Sweden, where they signed a ceasefire in the Red Sea port city of Hodeidah. The current Saudi step aims to create the appropriate conditions for the implementation of the UN envoy's call for a meeting between the Yemeni government, the Houthis and a military team from the coalition to discuss the mechanisms to implement the ceasefire in Yemen. But the cease-fire's success mainly depends on compliance by the Houthis.

The Houthi forces have been making gains against Saudi-backed Yemeni forces in recent months. The Houthi rebels captured control of al-Jawf in March 2020 and launched new offensive in the oil-rich Marib province.¹²

Based on the scale of the Houthi offensive in Yemen, the missile and drone attacks against targets in Saudi Arabia and Houthi breaches of previous agreements and truces, the proposed truce would not last. The Houthis have used every truce and agreement they had with others before to refuel, regroup and launch military offensives.

The latest military achievements may make the Houthis hesitant to give concessions and the Houthis may use the "corona truce" to push into the oil rich Marib province.¹³

Notes

¹ Saudi-led coalition declares 2-week coronavirus ceasefire in Yemen amid escalating violence, the new Arab, April 9, 2020.

² Yemen Announces First Confirmed Coronavirus Case, Asharq Al Awsat, April 10, 2020.

³ Exclusive - ceasefire in Yemen tests Houthi commitment to peace amid coronavirus threat, Asharq Al Awsat, April 11, 2020.

⁴ UK, US join UN in supporting Saudi-led ceasefire in Yemen amid coronavirus pandemic, the new Arab, April 10, 2020.

⁵ Coronavirus: Arab Coalition declares Yemen ceasefire, says Saudi Press Agency, Al Arabiya, April 8, 2020.

⁶ Yemenis meet truce calls with both hope and skepticism, Arab news, March 28, 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Coronavirus: Arab Coalition declares Yemen ceasefire, says Saudi Press Agency, Al Arabiya, April 8, 2020.

⁹ Griffiths Sends Yemeni Parties Revised Proposals on Peace, Asharq Al Awsat, April 11, 2020.

¹⁰ Arab Coalition in Yemen says Houthis committed 241 ceasefire violations in 48 hours, Al Arabiya, April 13, 2020.

¹¹ Elana DeLozier, Houthis release their list for ending the Yemen war, Policy Alert, The Washington Institute, April 9, 2020.

¹² Yemen's Houthi rebels strike Marib oil facility despite UN ceasefire efforts, the new Arab, April 5, 2020.

¹³ Yemenis meet truce calls with both hope and skepticism, Arab news, March 28, 2020.