



Crisis Group

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Yemen Conflict Alert

Last Chance to Prevent a Destructive Hodeida Battle

The fate of Hodeida hangs in the balance as UAE-backed Yemeni forces poise for what will be a prolonged and destructive battle to expel Huthi rebels. A real but fleeting opportunity exists to avert catastrophe through a UN-mediated solution that safeguards all sides' interests.

The battle for Hodeida is reaching the point of no return. UAE-backed Yemeni forces are poised to begin operations to take this Red Sea port and city of 600,000 from Huthi rebels. This is the final, fragile moment in which it may still be possible for UN-led negotiations to prevent a destructive fight that is likely to exacerbate dire humanitarian conditions and further delay broader negotiations to end the war.

Both the Huthi rebels who control Hodeida and the Saudi-led coalition that is backing an assault to wrest it from them say they want to avoid a battle for the port and city centre, but their negotiating positions remain far apart. Hopes now lie with the newly appointed UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, who is attempting to find a middle ground. Griffiths has a real but limited opportunity to succeed due to three converging dynamics. First, the Huthis, under military pressure, have for the first time expressed openness to UN management of Hodeida port, Yemen's largest gateway for imports. Second, the UAE, which is leading the military push on behalf of the Saudi-led coalition, would prefer to avoid urban combat that would almost certainly see its forces suffer considerable losses and prompt intense international scrutiny for aggravating an already dire humanitarian situation. And third, there is

growing concern among international stakeholders, including the U.S., that a pitched battle for the port and city could have devastating humanitarian and longer-term political consequences.

Finding a solution means bridging the sides' competing positions. The Saudis and Emiratis accuse the rebel movement of using the port to smuggle weapons into Yemen and diverting customs revenues to their war effort. They want the Huthis out entirely. For their part, the Huthis have offered to turn over management of the port to the UN and jointly manage security, but have said they will not fully withdraw from Hodeida. The Huthis and the coalition will both have to compromise. Their respective allies should vigorously press them to accept a negotiated settlement for the port and city as the best and only tolerable option.

The stakes are about as high as they could be. Successful UN mediation toward a mutually acceptable solution that safeguards all sides'

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vital interests regarding Hodeida could be the basis for a settlement not only for the port, but also for the wider conflict between the Huthis and the coalition. Conversely, failure would not only seriously undermine prospects for such talks, but also – once fighting enters the city – render

a consensual deal over the Huthis’ presence in the port and the question of how it will be managed largely impossible. Hodeida can either prove to be the beginning of the end to Yemen’s war or the start of a new, likely more destructive phase.

The Road to Hodeida

The UAE launched its campaign to seize Hodeida after growing increasingly frustrated with a nearly three-year-old stalemate in which front lines changed only marginally. In the Emiratis’ view, the Huthis – who seized the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, in September 2014, with the backing of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh – were becoming more and more entrenched in the country’s highlands, benefitting in particular from a burgeoning war economy. Emirati officials have long seen Hodeida’s capture as key to shaking up the status quo and forcing the Huthis into the kind of settlement the coalition desires: a withdrawal from Yemen’s cities; guarantees of cross-border security; handover of heavy weapons, especially the ballistic missiles the Huthis have been firing into Saudi Arabia; and cutting ties to Iran, which supports the Huthis, in exchange for participation in a unity government.

The plans for a Hodeida offensive have been gestating since at least 2016. They were bolstered by the December 2017 schism within the odd-couple alliance of the Huthis and Saleh. Street fighting in Sanaa ended with the Huthis killing Saleh, while his nephew and military avatar, Tareq Mohammed Saleh, escaped and promptly switched sides. Since May, the joint National Resistance Forces – the Tihami Resistance, led by tribal forces from the Red

Sea coast; the Giants’ Brigade, led by Salafist-leaning southern resistance fighters; and Tareq Saleh’s Republican Guards – have made swift progress up the coast, aided by UAE air support. In June, they made major, rapid advances towards the port and city, and are now on its outskirts, intending to take Hodeida by defeating the Huthis outright or by forcing them to accept a deal that would allow them to evacuate eastward to Sanaa.

The Emiratis believe they can win Hodeida as effectively as they did Aden in mid-2015 and Mukalla, a port in the east that had become an al-Qaeda stronghold, in April 2016. In both cases, they provided military support to forces recruited from the local population. In Hodeida, too, they are counting on what they refer to as local resistance inside the city to set up internal checkpoints and neighbourhood security when Abu Dhabi gives the signal for these groups to activate.

The coalition has been careful to communicate its plans to protect civilians and ensure humanitarian access while warning that the Huthis will likely use the civilian population as human shields. The truth is that both the Huthis and the coalition have displayed a blatant disregard for the protection of civilians throughout the war. Aid agencies remain deeply concerned that fighting at the port could

prevent access to the country's most important source of food, fuel and humanitarian supplies, while an assault on the city could endanger the lives of the city's estimated 600,000 residents. The UN worries that the fighting could make the world's worst humanitarian crisis even worse and tip some of the 8.4 million-plus Yemenis on the brink of starvation into famine. If, as seems likely, the Hodeida campaign is harder fought and longer lasting than the UAE anticipates, it is difficult to see how humanitarian access will be improved, while the lives of more than half a million will unquestionably be deeply affected.

The UN Security Council met to discuss Yemen twice in June as the operation began but has failed to stake out a unified position beyond broad language on civilian protection. For its part, the U.S., while at first cautioning the UAE against the wisdom of undertaking an assault on Hodeida, citing the uncertain military outcome and probable humanitarian cost, appears to have eased pressure on the coalition. UAE officials believe that the U.S. does not object to

an assault on the port and city, although they add that their American counterparts have warned them they will be responsible for the outcome.

On 20 June, a week after launching "Operation Golden Victory", the UAE-backed forces announced that they were in full control of the sprawling airport complex that sits on Hodeida city's southern edge. Although the Huthis dispute the claim, and sporadic fighting continues, the coalition has clearly gained the upper hand in the week-long struggle for this strategically important facility. Fighting has now reached residential areas on the city's southern edges. The UAE is poised to move toward the port in the next phase of combat.

A Possible – and Necessary – Compromise

Most military analysts following the campaign say the Huthis have little chance of holding the port and city if the UAE-backed campaign proceeds. The Huthis appear to realise this as well. While they have maintained their



Yemeni pro-government forces gather at the south of Hodeida airport, in Yemen's Hodeida province on 15 June, 2018.

bellicose rhetoric, they have also indicated a new willingness to hand control of the port to the UN and discuss at least a partial withdrawal from the city – ideas they had dismissed out of hand as recently as a year ago. In a televised 20 June speech, Abdelmalek al-Huthi, the rebels' leader, said for the first time that the Huthis were willing to cede control of the port.

This is important, but falls short of the public position of coalition leaders who, capitalising on their military momentum, are calling for a complete Huthi withdrawal and handover of the port and the city to the National Resistance Forces, while offering the Huthis safe passage to Sanaa. Yet this demand could prove to be flexible. Diplomats and coalition officials apprised of ongoing backroom negotiations claim coalition leaders have hinted they might accept a compromise in order to avoid a prolonged fight for the port and city whose humanitarian impact almost certainly would be devastating.

They would have good reason to do so: given clear warnings over the likely consequences of a military offensive, any worsening of the humanitarian situation would prompt intense international criticism and condemnation of the UAE and its allies at a time when they already are under heavy public scrutiny. As an immediate step, Griffiths should therefore publicise the fact that both protagonists have told him a deal is possible and shown newfound flexibility; this would limit the risk that either side claims the other is unwilling to compromise and uses that as an excuse to block negotiations. The outlines of a potential compromise that would respect both sides' core interests are clear. The Huthis would agree to a short, firm timetable to withdraw from the port and relinquish any role in managing it. They would hand over management of the port to the UN, with current civilian staff running the port on a day-to-day basis. UN member states would lead a de-mining operation in the port and waters surrounding it to ensure it is safe for operations in conjunction with the coalition. Optimally, the UN, supported by the government of Yemen and UN member states, would

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implement technical upgrades to boost port capacity.

While the Huthis might conceivably play a role in managing security within the city for an interim period, they would ultimately need to hand over security operations to local police forces and governance functions to local council members. This could be done in a gradual albeit clearly delineated process, overseen by a joint committee comprising military commanders from the Huthi camp, the coalition and the various Yemeni forces on the ground in Hodeida, and assisted by the UN and international experts. If successful, such a phased and coordinated withdrawal and handover to local, effectively neutral management could serve as a model for the rest of Huthi-held territory should talks over Hodeida succeed.

In return, UAE-backed forces would maintain a military presence at Hodeida airport but refrain from sending their forces into the city and port. They also would pull back from the eastbound highway connecting Hodeida with Sanaa, through which Huthi forces could then withdraw to the highlands.

Room for such a compromise exists as long as the assault on the city has not begun. But time is running out. What is most needed now is strong international backing for Griffiths' efforts to reach such a compromise, coupled with powerful international pressure on the two sides to accept it. To that end:

- The Security Council should issue a presidential statement strongly backing a negotiated settlement on Hodeida under UN auspices as per Griffiths' proposals, and forcefully remind the Huthis and coalition forces of their obligations under international humanitarian law to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.

- The U.S. should take the lead in calling for a deal that would prevent a battle for the city and port, and its fellow Security Council member states (notably the UK and France, which have supported the coalition politically and militarily) should rally behind this call. They should also make it clear that the “Pottery Barn” rule – if you break it, you own it – inevitably will apply to the UAE-led coalition in Hodeida.
- UN member states that support or have open communication lines with the Huthis – Iran, Oman, Russia and the EU, for example – should ensure that the group is under constant pressure to agree to a compromise and abide by its commitments in the event of a deal. The Huthis have a long track record of using negotiations as an opportunity to reposition or legitimise their actions. This cannot be allowed to happen again.

For the past three years, it has been an international mantra that there is no military but only a political solution to Yemen’s war, even as that war has continued unabated. What happens in Hodeida in the coming days can either validate this principle and the international community’s commitment to it, by serving as a bridge to further negotiations, or undermine it if fighting escalates and prospects for peace further diminish. Hodeida offers an opportunity for the UN Security Council to demonstrate its ability to pursue negotiated solutions to conflicts at a time of growing doubt about its effectiveness and utility. It offers the warring sides a face-saving exit that protects their vital interests after years of recklessly jeopardising them. And it offers the Yemeni people a chance to avoid a devastating escalation and the persistence of endless, pointless bloodshed.