

THE LONG ROAD TO FINDING TRUE PEACE IN YEMEN

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Yemeni street artist Alaa Rubil walks towards one of his artworks painted on a wall in the southern port city of Aden. Rubil uses the shell-pocked buildings of his hometown as canvas, to depict the horrors of the war | Photo Credit: AFP

In April this year, just as the Saudi-led war in [Yemen](#) completed eight years, a diplomatic delegation from the kingdom reached Sanaa airport for talks with its [Houthi](#) enemies. Some details of the talks soon became public: building on the year-long ceasefire, the two sides agreed to a six-month truce, to be followed by talks over three months to agree on a two-year “transition” period when the details of the Yemeni state that would emerge after the war would be finalised. The Houthis asked that the blockade of Sanaa airport and Hodeidah port be eased and the kingdom to pay the salaries from the country’s oil revenues. An immediate exchange of prisoners was also agreed to.

Saudi Arabia, leading a coalition of some Arab forces, had initiated military operations on March 26, 2015, to prevent the Houthis, a Shia militia representing the marginalised Zaidi community and aligned with Iran, from taking control of Yemen, with which the kingdom shares a porous 1,400-km border.

However, the war has ground to a stalemate, with the Houthis controlling the capital and the principal port, Hodeidah. The coalition controls the sea and the sky and large parts of the south, thus preventing essential food, medical and energy supplies from reaching the population. With a death toll of about 4,00,000, including 85,000 children, and several million displaced, Yemen is in the throes of a severe humanitarian crisis: 80% of its people (over 20 million) need assistance, while six million are on the brink of starvation.

Given the estimated expenditure of about \$60 billion in the eight-year conflict, Saudi Arabia has been anxious to obtain a face-saving exit. The Saudi-Iran accord brokered by China in March provided this opportunity. There are reports that Iran has agreed to curtail military supplies to the Houthis and facilitate a peace process, thus opening the doors for the Saudi-Houthi engagement in April.

What has been achieved so far is the exchange of prisoners and the easing of the blockade on Sanaa and Hodeidah; humanitarian aid has come in and flights have taken Yemeni pilgrims, including Houthi leaders, to Mecca for the Haj.

Challenges coming in the way of the peace process include the Houthi insistence that the kingdom pay the salaries of all government officials, including armed forces personnel, for the last few years from Yemen's oil revenues. The Saudis are hardly enthusiastic about funding their former enemies. The Houthis are also seeking "compensation" from the Saudis for war damage; the latter are willing to consider contributing to reconstruction, but balk at the idea of "compensation".

The Houthis are also reluctant to engage with the eight-member Saudi-supported Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) that heads the internationally-recognised Yemeni government. They insist on direct negotiations with the Saudis, while the latter wish to be "mediators" between the Yemeni factions.

The crucial point relating to the Yemen scenario is that the Houthis have won the war and the Saudis are desperate to get out of the country. Thus, the Houthis have the upper hand in the negotiations vis-à-vis the Saudis and the PLC set up by them. Even as Saudi involvement with Yemen decreases, the PLC will lose its standing and credibility and open the country, particularly the northern areas, to Houthi control.

But there is another matter that muddies the Yemen scenario. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), a United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed movement based in Aden, wants the southern provinces that constituted the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), an independent communist country from 1967 to 1990, to once again become an independent state. A UAE academic has caused considerable disquiet in Yemeni circles by suggesting possible names for the new entity: "Arab Southern State" or "Arab Hadhramaut State".

This reflects the competing geopolitical interests of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen. The UAE's control over ports in south Yemen, Eritrea and Somaliland, as also the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden and Perim Island at the mouth of the Bab al-Mandab, has already given it a dominant geopolitical and commercial position in the western Indian Ocean. It is backing the STC's independence agenda to retain these advantages.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is seeking a united Yemen so that it can assert influence over the south Yemeni provinces of Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra: Hadhramaut shares an 800-km border with the kingdom, while Al-Mahra could provide an oil pipeline to Saudi Arabia to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. Hence, the kingdom has sponsored its own Hadhramaut National Council that rejects the independence agenda of the STC and is content with autonomy in a united Yemen.

Recent reports also suggest that Saudi Arabia, anxious to leave Yemen, might accept a north-south division but would want to elbow the UAE out and itself control Aden and the southern areas.

Another complicating feature is that, despite the Saudi-Iran bonhomie, Iran may be expected to maintain ties with the triumphant Houthis, retain its influence in Yemen, and even consolidate its presence in the Red Sea.

Thus, despite the cessation of hostilities in the war-ravaged country, rivalries between the diverse Yemeni factions and the competing interests of regional powers will ensure that peace and stability will remain a long way off.

Talmiz Ahmad is a former diplomat

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