FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 15.08.2022 | Magdalena Kirchner

Can the third time be the charm for Yemen?

The extension of a truce between Houthis and the government in Yemen is good news. But real momentum for a peace process is still lacking

The recent two-month extension of the truce in Yemen, which has been in effect since April, required tough negotiations until the very last minute. A real momentum for a peace process is still lacking; for this, local power brokers and international actors share responsibility.

'You have the watches, we have the time', a saying often attributed to the Afghan Taliban, might as well describe the current negotiating strategy of Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis. They have controlled the Yemeni capital Sana'a since 2014 and – despite massive military resistance, especially since 2015 when the regional powers Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) intervened – the north of the country, where more than 70 per cent of the population live. According to UN figures, in the past seven years, more than 370,000 people have died from the war's direct and indirect consequences: Fighting, airstrikes, and blockades have destroyed the livelihoods of millions of Yemenis and triggered an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

Following fierce fighting at the beginning of the year, there has been a military stalemate between the Houthis and the internationally recognised government in Aden, which helped propel the ultimately successful UN-led negotiations over an – at least temporary – ceasefire. International interest in de-escalating the conflict grew amid the global impact of Russia's war on Ukraine, as stability in the Gulf and increased oil production in neighbouring countries could help rein in skyrocketing energy prices. The Houthis' ability to attack critical infrastructure in the Red Sea and the Gulf that is so critical for the international trade in raw materials and supply chains represents a significant risk.

The history of the conflict

The military intervention against the Houthis, which began in 2015 as an opportunity for the young Saudi minister of defence and current heir apparent Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) to reinforce the Saudi, and his personal, claim to regional leadership, is now viewed as a disaster. As his coalition against the Houthis failed to defeat them militarily, negotiations appear to be the only way forward.

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Eventually, the ceasefire also provided US President Joe Biden and MBS a platform for repairing their own relations that fractured following the murder of Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi in autumn 2018. It is no surprise that the US government announced it would be delivering billions of dollars in arms to the Gulf the very day the ceasefire was extended, and the US State Department even praised Riyadh – which Biden had wanted to make a 'pariah' during the 2020 election campaign – as a 'force for political stability in the Gulf region'.

Similar to calculations made by the US government before the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Riyadh, too, finds itself now between a rock and a hard place: On the one hand, confronting the Houthis has been militarily unsuccessful, pricey (there have been reports of it costing $1bn a week), and risky amid Houthi missile and drone attacks on critical Saudi infrastructure, damaging current and potential investors' confidence in the Kingdom. Although the intervention was trying to achieve the opposite, the influence of Iran in Saudi Arabia's immediate neighbourhood has even grown in the past years.

On the other hand, disengaging from Yemen empty-handed would be understood by many as a foreign policy and personal humiliation of MBS and raise doubts about Saudi reliability, should they abandon their allies in Aden militarily and, in the medium term, financially.

An early sign that Riyadh has begun to try to cut its losses was its April 2022 push for a presidential council to replace the hapless President Hadi. In contrast to the US's situation in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia does not view itself as a warring party or is categorised as such by the UN and has a negligible military footprint in Yemen. Hence, Riyadh remains flexible in dictating the conditions and timing of its engagement without any formal agreement with the Houthis guaranteeing the protection of withdrawing troops.

One step forward, two steps back?

In recent months, some of the ceasefire conditions that should benefit the local population have, in fact, been implemented. In March, Oxfam reported that with the cost of fuel rising by 543 per cent since 2019 and tripling in the first quarter of 2022, cars queued for days at petrol stations. While the blockade of the Houthi-controlled port city of Hodeidah was eased between April and late July, more than 720,000 tonnes of oil were landed – up from just 470,000 tonnes for all of 2021.

But distributing the increased revenues creates new strife: In the Stockholm Agreement of 2018, the Houthis pledged to transfer the profits to the central bank so public-sector employees could receive the salaries they have not received for years. The fact that this has not yet happened increases the other negotiating parties' frustration – although UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg is optimistic that a transparent and effective mechanism will soon be found.

More than 8,000 passengers have also benefitted from the resumption of flights from Sana'a airport, and the government pledged to accept Houthi-issued passports for those travelling to and from Sana'a. But the agreement has not managed to stop Houthis from at times preventing civil society representatives from attending international conferences or considerably curtailing women's freedom of movement in the meantime.

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The lack of progress around the strategically important, third-largest city of Taiz, which the Houthis have besieged since 2016, remains the most significant sticking point in discussions about a political agreement. Although they had recognised that ending the blockade was a condition of the truce, they have done little to implement it. As Yemeni researcher Ibrahim Jalal points out, an absurd situation has developed: Thousands of Yemenis have been able to buy expensive tickets to fly to nearby countries or Sana'a – but for the three million inhabitants of Taiz Province, even taking short bus trips remains a distant dream.

The ceasefire, the end of airstrikes and the significant decrease in civilian casualties cannot obscure ongoing violence in many parts of Yemen. More than 1,800 incidents and more than 300 deaths, mainly caused by the Houthis, have been recorded since 2 April. There are also reports of the conflict parties exploiting the ceasefire, for example, by expanding

their military positions around the city of Marib, an important oil-production centre.

The truce is no end in itself

Yemen's internationally recognised government, the EU and the US all criticise the Houthis' blockade. Residents in Taiz and Aden raise frustration about how only one side has reaped the peace dividend and that the Houthis should not be rewarded for threatening to leave the negotiating table with even more concessions.

Due to its own weaknesses and dependence on international support, the Aden government finds itself in a dilemma like that of Afghanistan after the Doha Agreement of 2020: Either it can stick to a ceasefire that is far more advantageous to the enemy and threatens to undermine its legitimacy in Yemeni eyes – or it risks alienating its most important backers with little hope for a quick military win. With the Houthis having escalation dominance, a real breakthrough in the third round of negotiations remains elusive.

Now it is up to negotiators, mediators, and Yemen's international partners to square the circle so that the truce doesn't become an end in itself: to both prevent a new armed conflict – perhaps by expanding humanitarian assistance to structural measures – and to get the Houthis to make real concessions that will equally improve the everyday reality of the 'other side'. Otherwise, a Doha Agreement for Yemen is not unthinkable, yet would equally remain a precipitant deal, without any progress in or towards a peace process, credible commitments to human and especially women's rights, or a shared and inclusive vision of a post-war Yemen.



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