



The Way Forward in Yemen

by *Ibrahim Fraihat*

*Only a ceasefire can halt the war
and provide relief to millions*

A “completely man-made catastrophe,” Stephen O’Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs at the UN, described the situation in Yemen during a Security Council meeting held in August. He added: “millions of people in Yemen are facing a triple tragedy: the specter of famine, the world’s largest ever single-year cholera outbreak, and the daily deprivation and injustice of a brutal conflict that the world is allowing to drag on and on.” Yemen has been the country where everyone has failed: the Saudi-led coalition and its backer, the US government; the Houthi-Saleh alliance and its partner, Iran.

No winners, only losers

The Saudi-led coalition’s 30-month war in Yemen has failed miserably to meet its declared objectives of ending the Houthi-Saleh coup and

reinstalling the ousted Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi government. In Aden, the only city “liberated” from Houthi control, the coalition has been unable to launch a meaningful reconstruction process for more than two years now. There is a real risk that Yemen may become a failed state—large-scale displacement (over one million Yemenis have already been displaced), piracy, intransigent poverty and terrorism are all on the rise. If this war continues, Saudi Arabia will end up facing graver security threats along its southern border than those that motivated it to launch air-strikes in the first place.

For the Houthis, their first failure is a moral one. In 2004, the Houthis had rebelled against the social, political and economic marginalization they were subjected to by Saleh’s central government in Sanaa. Today, they partner with Saleh to oppress their fellow Yemeni citizens who had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them in Change Square back in 2011 to topple his autocratic regime. Houthi prisons are now filled with many of these same youth revolutionaries, journalists and political activists.

The Houthis’s second failure relates to governance. The Houthis continue to blame the collapse of the country’s health and economic systems solely on the Saudi-led coalition—there are currently more than half a million suspected cholera cases. Yet keeping Sanaa’s streets clean, a basic requirement to fight cholera, is not something that Saudi Arabia has prevented the Houthis from doing.

Beyond the Arab Gulf

The failures extend to actors beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Politically, Iran has been unable to protect its Houthi allies during 30 months of Saudi-led bombardment. Diplomatically, the country has failed to block UN Security Council Resolution 2216 that called on the Houthis to immediately and unconditionally “withdraw their forces from all areas they have seized.” Although Iran can easily fund the civil war, it cannot alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe that is resulting from it.

Perhaps worst of all, Iran’s role may be contributing to rising sectarianism in Yemen. The Zaydi Shia minority, who mostly make up the Houthis, are backed by Iran. This feature risks creating

structural antagonism against the Zaydi minority that will take decades to undo—Yemenis are already accusing them of being Iran’s proxy in the country.

Further afield, the familiar US security-focused approach, which includes the use of drones and lengthy support for Saleh’s corrupt regime, has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) to thrive in Yemen. If this war continues, the Islamic State is well-poised to supplant AQAP given that it was recently driven out of its base in Mosul.

A ceasefire?

Despite this gloomy picture, there are still ways to end the conflict. Firstly, a ceasefire must be declared immediately—there is no military solution to this conflict, and neither the Saudi-led coalition nor the Houthis have made real gains in the past two years. Secondly, a transitional technocrat government should be formed to replace the Houthi-Saleh government in Sanaa. Delivering humanitarian assistance and holding parliamentary elections within six months should be the two major tasks guiding such a government. In the meantime, generous humanitarian assistance from the international community can help save Yemen from total collapse.

As for Yemen’s political parties, inclusive and genuine national dialogue should be launched that builds on the 2015 national dialogue that all parties agreed to. At the same time, no arrangements can ever work if they are toothless—humanitarian assistance, parliamentary elections and the formation of a technocratic government must be supported by a firm position from the Security Council that will impose tough sanctions on any party that attempts to hinder the implementation of such a plan.

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