

Is the War in Yemen Coming to an End?

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A delegation from Saudi Arabia has [arrived](#) in Yemen’s capital Sana’a alongside Omani negotiators with the aim of reaching a resolution to the protracted war in Yemen. This marks a major turning point in a conflict that began more than eight years ago and has been characterized as a stalemate between Yemen’s Houthis and a coalition of anti-Houthi forces backed and led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

This arguably unexpected turn of events — surprising given Saudi Arabia’s years-long war against a group they characterize as “Iran-allied rebels” — is the result of talks that began in early 2022 between the Saudi Arabian government and Yemen’s government in Sana’a, led by Ansar Allah — also known as the Houthis. The Houthis have in effect been ruling much of northern Yemen for the past eight years.

This is “the closest Yemen has been to real progress towards lasting peace,” **Hans Grundberg**, the United Nations envoy to Yemen, [remarked](#) to the Associated Press earlier this month. Grundberg urged both parties to “start an inclusive political process under UN auspices to sustainably end the conflict.”

While the terms of any settlement have yet to be made public, this moment signals the seriousness of the talks and the likelihood of a lasting political agreement among warring parties following years of asymmetrical warfare in which [hundreds of thousands](#) of Yemenis were killed, [millions](#) more were [starved](#), and Yemen was virtually left in [ruins](#).

War and Famine

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, peaceful country-wide protests began in Yemen that eventually ended with Yemen’s longtime dictator, **President Ali Abdullah Saleh**, [transferring](#) power to his **then-Vice President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi** in 2011.

In the following years, Hadi clung to power after failing to address the demands of all of the country's various factions. Meanwhile, **Ansar Allah** rose to power following [protests](#) against the government's curbing of fuel subsidies, and eventually [seized](#) the capital Sana'a in late 2014, and forced Hadi into house arrest.

Despite these tumultuous events, a UN-negotiated settlement was [reached](#) between Hadi, the Houthis and other factions, but this settlement was derailed. Soon after the new Saudi king appointed his son, **Mohammed bin Salman**, as deputy crown prince and defense minister in early 2015, Saudi Arabia amassed a coalition of several neighboring countries and, together with Western support – primarily from the [Obama administration](#)—launched airstrikes against the Houthis and imposed a naval blockade targeting food, medicine, fuel and other essential supplies in an effort to reinstate Hadi as the main head of the government. This was ratified in [UN resolution 2216](#), which provided cover for these attacks and the imposition of the blockade under the guise of an “arms embargo.”

Meanwhile, Hadi fled to Riyadh and continued to enjoy Saudi support for years to come, while the UAE [trained and funded](#) the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group whose stated goals are to secede from the Yemeni union.

Despite full military [support](#) from the United States and other allies, including [weapon sales](#), intelligence, logistics, training, targeting support, and, until late 2018, mid-air refueling, the Saudi-led coalition failed to capture Yemen's most populous region from the Houthis. The Houthis, on the other hand, joined forces with their longtime enemy, former president Saleh, and formed a government and armed resistance to the Saudi-led coalition.

Even after their fallout and subsequent killing of Saleh in December 2017 after he [switched](#) to the Saudi-coalition's side, the Houthis continued to control much of the pre-1990 unity north Yemen, where 70% to 80% of the population resides. However, the Houthis' attempts to capture Marib, a key oil- and gas-rich province, [failed](#).

As the fighting continued and the [blockade](#) on Yemen was tightened, the Yemeni population faced a crumbling economy and destruction of its healthcare systems. This led to [outbreaks](#) such as cholera and diphtheria, [reduced](#) functional healthcare facilities to 50%, and left more than 80% of Yemenis in need of food, water and medicine. With more than 17 million people facing food insecurity in 2022, the UN [warned](#) that “catastrophic” and “famine-like” conditions were projected to increase five-fold for those most vulnerable.

Previous Talks

In early 2022, after a series of Saudi-led [attacks](#) that killed at least 80 civilians and shut down Yemen's internet for four days, and Houthi [attacks](#) that reached an oil facility in Jeddah and a storage facility in Abu Dhabi, warring parties began ceasefire [talks](#) in Oman.

Though far from being the first peace — a ceasefire agreement was reached in April 2022, and [extended](#) twice until October of that year — they brought a halt to U.S.-supported airstrikes for the first time since March 2015.

Despite the U.S. and Saudi's [insistence](#) that this war was waged on behalf of Hadi — Yemen's “legitimate” head of government — he was virtually powerless and remained in Riyadh since leaving Yemen in 2015. This facade came down when the Saudi and UAE governments [set aside](#) Hadi and [replaced](#) him with a council of eight men, all of

whom were [backed](#) by Saudi Arabia or the UAE. While the Council was formed to unify anti-Houthi groups given that most had already waged battles against the Houthis, their [conflicting](#) interests soon led to in-fighting, especially in [Shabwa](#) where UAE-backed STC forces fought Saudi-backed Islah forces.

Peace Now?

In the year since the first ceasefire was achieved in 2022, fighting on the ground [continued](#) in key southern areas including Shabwa and al-Mahra. And when Houthi demands to pay government workers their long overdue salaries using oil and gas revenues were not met, they responded by [attacking](#) oil facilities to prevent the export of oil and gas.

Now, this key condition seems to have been [met](#) in a draft deal last month, and reports of a roadmap toward peace include issuing payments to government employees using gas and oil revenues in exchange for the Houthis allowing exports to take place.

But to achieve a lasting peace deal, Yemen's sovereignty must be restored and the blockade must be fully lifted. While talks with Saudi Arabia are a major first step toward alleviating Yemenis' suffering, the UAE must also give up control over strategic areas such as [Bab al-Mandab strait](#) and the island of Socotra, which they occupied and recently [militarized](#).

The coalition's [failure](#) to consolidate power among warring groups in southern Yemen, which they have controlled since 2015 underscores the importance of ceasing all foreign intervention and financial backing of warring factions. This includes the U.S.'s role, which has been instrumental in furthering the war over the past eight years despite legislative [efforts](#) to end this unconstitutional involvement.

While the meetings in Sana'a between Saudi and Houthi officials hold promise for peace with the Saudi-led coalition, a meaningful end to the war can only take place when all Yemenis who fought on either side of the war — the Houthis, Saleh and Hadi's General People's Congress, the Islah party, the STC, and others — face one another in direct talks and draft a way forward without the financial and military backing of foreign governments. When overt and covert foreign interventions cease, Yemen will finally have a chance to chart its own course.

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