

Yemen: Peace Talks and Current Congressional Action

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Overview

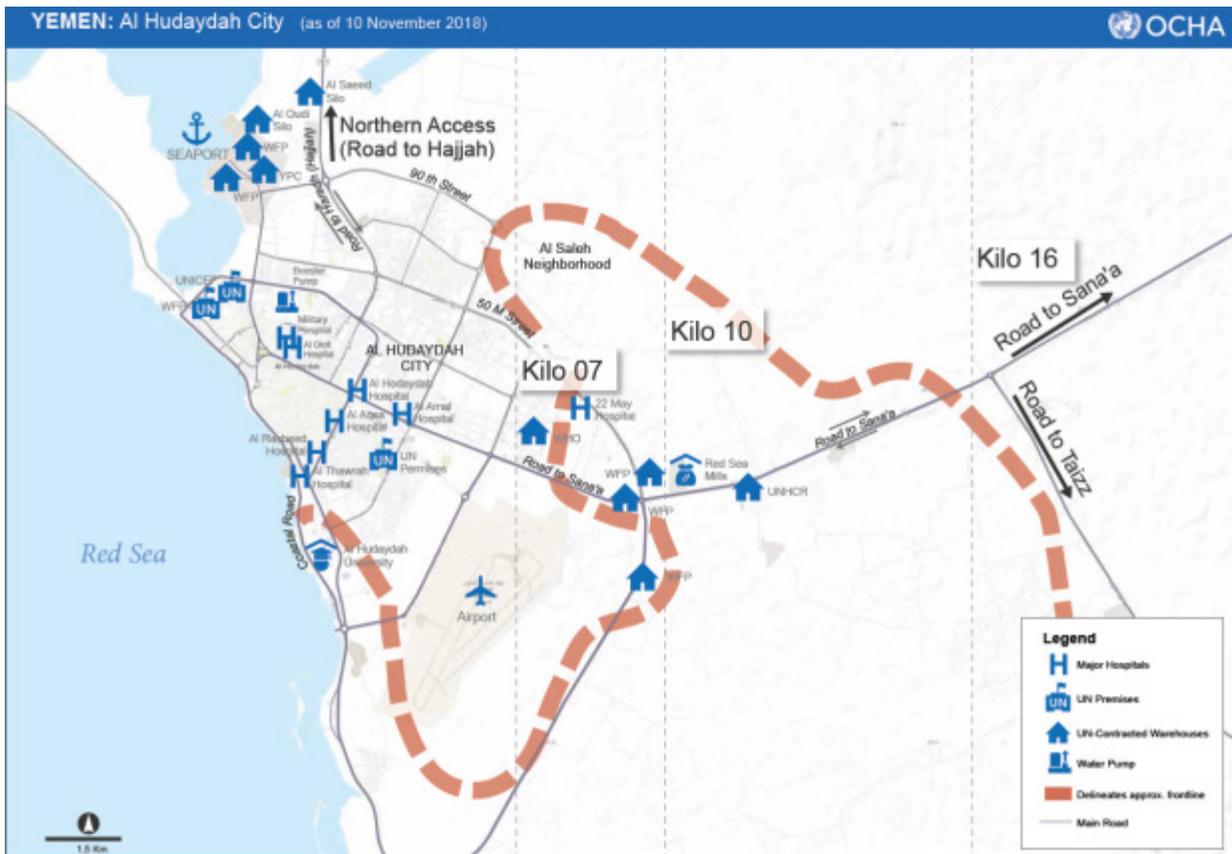
On December 6, 2018, the warring parties to the [conflict in Yemen](#) convened in Sweden under the auspices of the United Nations to discuss various de-escalation proposals and a possible road map to a comprehensive peace settlement. The 10-day talks are the first formal negotiations since 2016, and they coincide with Senate consideration of several pieces of [legislation](#) that would, among other things, endorse United Nations-led efforts for a comprehensive political settlement to the conflict in Yemen and censure Saudi Arabia for the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

These developments occur at a critical juncture of the war in Yemen. Since the summer of 2018, the Saudi-led coalition, a multinational grouping of armed forces led primarily by [Saudi Arabia](#) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have waged an offensive to retake the Red Sea port city of Hudaydah from the northern Yemeni armed militia and political movement known as the Ansar Allah/Houthi Movement. The Houthis have held the city and the port, which is crucial for the importation of commercial goods and humanitarian aid into Yemen, since October 2014. As of mid-November 2018, when the coalition paused military operations to pursue negotiations, coalition and associated Yemeni forces had seized the eastern outskirts of Hudaydah, severing access to the main road leading to the Houthi-controlled capital Sana'a (see [Figure 1](#) below).

The siege of Hudaydah, through which an estimated 70% of commercial goods enter the country, has exacerbated Yemen's humanitarian crisis, as has Houthi interference with shipments of goods. The value of Yemen's currency, the rial, plunged over the summer and, while it has somewhat recovered, basic commodities remain unaffordable for wide swaths of the population. [With coalition and Houthi restrictions on humanitarian access](#) making food unaffordable, the [United Nations estimates](#) that 11-14 million Yemenis (half the population) are facing pre-famine conditions.

Figure 1. Map of the Situation in Hudaydah, Yemen

As of November 10, 2018



Source: U.N. OCHA, Yemen Humanitarian Update, Covering November 7-21, 2018, Issue 32.

Trump Administration Calls for Talks

Both the Trump and Obama Administrations have supported U.N. efforts to broker a peace deal. However, in recent months, [errant coalition air strikes](#), the risk of widespread famine, the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, and [Congressional pressure](#) appear to have prompted U.S. officials to push for renewed peace talks. On October 30, [Secretary of Defense James Mattis](#) and [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) called for all parties to reach a cease-fire and resume negotiations. On November 9, [Secretary Mattis further announced](#) that effective immediately, the coalition would use its own military capabilities—rather than U.S. capabilities—to conduct inflight refueling in support of its operations in Yemen. Some Members of Congress had earlier criticized Secretary Pompeo's September 10 certification that the coalition, among other things, was taking demonstrable actions to reduce the risk of harm to civilians resulting from military operations. [Section 1290 of the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act](#) prohibits the obligation or expenditure of U.S. funds for in-flight refueling operations of Saudi and Saudi-led coalition aircraft if certain certifications cannot be made and maintained.

Peace Talks Resume

On December 6, [Martin Griffiths, the Special Envoy of the U.N. Secretary-General for Yemen, launched](#) peace talks in Uppsala, Sweden between representatives of the internationally recognized Yemeni government based in Aden and members of the Houthi movement and their allies based in Sana'a. Unlike a [September 2018 attempt](#) at talks, this latest U.N. effort has resulted in sides taking [confidence building measures](#), such as an evacuation of 50 injured Houthi fighters to Oman, a prisoner exchange involving 5,000 detainees, and guarantees of safe passage for the Houthi delegation to the talks.

The United Nations intends to first focus negotiations around specific logistical issues, in the hopes that incremental agreements can pave the way for a broader political settlement. The parties are expected to negotiate through intermediaries. Issues of contention include:

- de-escalating the conflict in Hudaydah in order to keep the port accessible;
- reopening Sana'a Airport to commercial traffic; and
- restoring civil service salaries through the Central Bank of Yemen.

Analysis

The immediate goal of the talks is to halt fighting around Hudaydah in order to restore humanitarian access to northern Yemen, where disruptions to port operations and the transit of goods increases the prospect of widespread famine. In exchange for agreeing to halt its offensive, the coalition may seek guarantees that the Houthis will halt ballistic missile attacks and cede control of Hudaydah port to a third party. The Houthis, who have violated [previous agreements](#), may seek guarantees that their access to international commerce will not be wholly severed. Any Houthi concessions with regard to Hudaydah may come at the expense of retaining their control of or influence in Sana'a. [U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216](#) demands that Houthi forces withdraw from all areas they seized in 2014-2015. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates seek to roll back Houthi gains as much as possible and especially demand the severance of channels of Iranian military support to Houthi forces. Delineating a future model for Houthi participation in Yemen's security and governance remains a dilemma.

Few observers expect the current U.N.-led talks to resolve Yemen's longer term challenges. The Houthi-Coalition conflict [is but one of several conflicts afflicting Yemen](#), and local forces have become empowered during four years of war. Without a central Yemeni government that is both recognized by the international community and acceptable to most warring Yemeni parties, it is unclear how the international community will both raise and channel [the billions of dollars needed in reconstruction funds](#). The largest donors to [the United Nations Yemen 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan](#) are the two primary members of the coalition, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Congressional Action

As of December 7, 2018, the Senate is considering at least three legislative proposals relating to Saudi Arabia and Yemen, [S.J.Res. 54](#), [S. 3652](#), and [S.Res. 714](#). On November 28, 2018, the Senate voted 63-37 in favor of a motion to discharge the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations from further consideration of [S.J.Res. 54](#), a joint resolution to "direct the removal of United States Armed Forces from hostilities in the Republic of Yemen that have not been authorized by Congress," clearing the way for possible debate on the measure in the Senate.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee plans to mark up [S. 3652](#), the Saudi Arabia Accountability and Yemen Act of 2018 that, among other things, would prohibit the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, deny the Department of Defense funds for aerial refueling of coalition aircraft in Yemen, and sanction individuals complicit in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.