

Will Stockholm agreement between the Yemeni government and the Houthis survive?

Case Analysis

Political Analysis Unit

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Introduction

The Houthis seized the port and city of Hodeidah in western Yemen in October 2014, one month after they invaded the Yemeni capital, Sana'a. Since that date, six months before the Decisive Storm by the Arab Coalition in Yemen, the Houthis have actually begun to manage the ports and used their revenues to cover the war expenses.

Six months after the Houthis controlled the country's resources via the ports on the West Coast including the port of Hodeidah, the legitimate government was powerless and unable to confront the Houthis until a Saudi-led Arab Coalition intervened in March 2015 to rescue the elected President Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi's government and support its legitimacy.

In May 2018, the Arab Coalition's joint forces progressed to the outskirts of the strategic city of Hodeidah, but military operations to liberate the city and its port stopped under Western pressure.

In December 2018, an important agreement was reached at the last minute of a week-long consultations in Stockholm of Sweden (December 6-13) between the Yemeni legitimate government and the Houthis to de-escalate the fighting in the city and port of Hodeidah. The agreement, which included the cessation of hostilities in the city of Hodeidah and its ports, including Salif and Ras Issa ports, understandings about Taiz (central Yemen) and a deal on prisoners and detainees exchange under the auspices of the UN Red Cross, was strengthened by a new Security Council resolution 2451 on 21 December 2018.

This paper examines the possibility of the holding up of Hodeidah agreement and achieving quick results of the implementation of the UN-sponsored agreement and its relationship with the rest of military and political files.

The Last Minute Agreement

On December 13, 2018, the Stockholm agreement was announced after consultations between the legitimate government and the armed Houthi group. The Hodeidah Agreement, which was outside the consensus between the two parties until the final moments of consultations, was signed with three other agreements:

The first one: the agreement of prisoners and detainees exchange under the auspices of the Red Cross, including the release of all prisoners and detainees from both sides. The two parties have received lists of 16,000 names of prisoners and detainees asking for their release or their fate.

The second one: understandings about Taiz, which include the opening of crossings for relief aid and travelers as the city, where 600 thousand people live, is still under the Houthi blockade since 2015.

The third one: an agreement on the start of new consultations in January.

The UN Secretary-General's Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, had postponed the consultations from November 2018 to December 2018 for several reasons, most notably is the ceasefire in Hodeidah.^[1]

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The last moment agreement in Stockholm that included the cessation of hostilities in the city of Hodeidah and its ports, understandings about Taiz, and the release of prisoners and detainees was strengthened by a new Security Council resolution 2451

The two parties have been in need for the agreement. The Houthis need to ease military pressure on them and avoid the fall of the port of Hodeidah and reorganize themselves on the ground militarily to give Iran a momentum after UN communication with the Iranians to pressure on the Houthis in exchange for understandings on the nuclear agreement.

The Yemeni government needs to make concessions to show flexibility to the international community and to show a good will so that political solutions hopefully can be reached to solve the Yemeni crisis. The restoration of the ports of Hodeidah without war helps in preventing expected destructions in the city. For the legitimate government, it is also a chance to obstruct plans of some parties in the Arab Coalition to take control of Hodeidah after liberation in a way similar to what happened in Aden after the liberation, especially with the expansion of dispute between the legitimacy and the UAE - the second state in the Arab Coalition that was able to recruit militias that refuse to work under the leadership of the Yemeni National Army and the government of President Hadi.

The two sides also try to avoid accusation by the international community of committing war crimes if the supply of food to the Yemenis stops as a result of conflict in the port of Hodeidah, which is used as a transit point for 80% of the country's imports. The port of Aden and other ports in Shabwa and Hadramout have not been presented as safe alternatives since the Arab Coalition has controlled them more than three years ago.

The British Foreign Office, the United Nations and the European Union have acted as background channels to exert pressure on the two parties to sign the Hodeidah agreement:

- On the eve of signing the agreement, the Gulf capitals had received calls from London and New York. British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and the UN Secretary-General pressed Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to force the Yemeni government to agree to the Hodeidah agreement.

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The Yemeni government and the Houthis have been in dire need of an agreement that would avoid Hodeidah destruction and the government does not want to repeat a military liberation similar to that of Aden. The Houthis do not want Hodeidah to fall militarily. This agrees with international pressure that does not accept the closure of a port that feeds 80% of Yemenis

- Iran and the European Union countries say that Tehran had a role in forcing the Houthis to accept the Hodeidah agreement, so that the nuclear agreement with Europe will continue. "This is the benefit of the continuation of the Iranian nuclear agreement: the result of the dialogue we have had with Iran on regional issues," EU official Fredica Mugreni said. "Iran has exerted its influence on the Houthis to start discussions in Sweden, under the auspices of the United Nations - something we have insisted on and strongly supported."^[2]
- The presence of ambassadors of 19 countries to Yemen in the place of the consultations in order to pressure on the two parties to reach an agreement- this seems to have actually happened.

These combined pressures have led to an agreement that can be summarized in three points:

1. Cease-fire: The cease-fire will be in the city of Hodeidah and its ports of Salif and Ras Issa, starting from the signing of the agreement. The open truce began on 18 December 2018 and witnessed violations until the end of the month, but not to the extent that affects the agreement's entry into force.

2 - Joint redeployment of forces of the two parties: includes the city and the port of Hodeidah and the ports of Salif and Ras Issa to sites to be agreed upon through a committee to be supervised by the United Nations, including three from the Yemeni legitimate government and three Houthis. Under a UN appointment and a Security Council resolution, the retired Dutch general Patrick Cammaert started to lead the mission through a "competent and robust" surveillance system.

Developments in this axis can be noted as follows:

- In the last third of December 2018, Cammaert arrived in Hodeidah after Aden and Sana'a, along with an international team - some of them are former military commanders who worked with the UN. In the city of Hodeidah, they met with representatives of both sides to discuss the forces redeployment.

- The two sides presented detailed plans of full redeployment to Cammaert in early January 2019. In the second round of talks between them,^[3] Cammaert will have to reconcile the two visions in order to reach a mutually satisfactory vision.
- At the end of the first round of consultations, the United Nations announced that the parties had agreed to begin the opening of humanitarian corridors starting from the main coastal road between Hodeidah and Sana'a after removing the landmines. The Houthis control the center of Hodeidah city and even the entrance to the eastern city, while government forces control the area of "Kilo 16." The move was a mutual confidence between the two sides to achieve progress in redeployment.
- The Kilo 16 road was scheduled to be opened on 29 December 2018 in the presence of the UN Monitoring Commission, but the Houthis refused and turned against the agreement. Cammaert expressed his disappointment at "these missed opportunities to build confidence between the two parties."
- According to the agreement, its implementation will be in phases to be determined by the Coordination Committee for Redeployment. The redeployment will include the ports of Hodeidah, Salif, Ras Issa and the critical parts of the city associated with the important humanitarian facilities in the first phase, which ends two weeks after the cease-fire enters into force, (January 1, 2019), which did not happen on time.
- The full redeployment of all forces from Hodeidah city and its ports will be completed within a maximum period of 21 days from the beginning of the cease-fire, which means that this phase ends on 8 January 2019. This step has not been done until now.

3 - Security of the city and its ports: The agreement indicates that the security of the city and its ports will be assigned to local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law. The agreement states that "the security of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa shall be the responsibility of local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law. The legal tracks of the Authority shall be respected and any obstacles or impediments to the functions of the local institutions, including supervisors, shall be removed." This loose text is highly improbable, as the Houthis see that the agreement means the current local forces that are under their control, while the Yemeni government says that the local authority means the government forces that used to be existed in Hodeidah in 2014 before the Houthis invasion of the city.

In addition to this text, there is another text: "The concealment of armed manifestations in the city of Hodeidah." It is clear that this reference also contradicts with the government's vision over the withdrawal of the Houthis from the city, while the Houthis insist on the literal meaning of the text that is the disappearance of armed militia from the streets of the city.

These texts will be negatively reflected on the understanding of the nature of the authority that is supposed to be in charge of running the city and keeping security.

The withdrawal of the Houthis from the three ports of Hodiedah - Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa - is supposed to be the first step in implementing the agreement, followed by the withdrawal of both parties from the city and the surrounding area. General Patrick Cammaert did not provide a vision about the limits of this redeployment or the areas to which the government forces and Houthi militants would withdraw until January 5, 2019. The unarmed observers will be stationed under the command of Cammaert "in key locations around the city and the port of Hodeidah, with a strong reporting mechanism, and according to the scenario, weekly reports will be submitted to the Security Council on compliance with the agreement."^[4]

The Houthi Trick

When the international observation team, led by General Cammaert, was in the port of Hodeidah to open the road to Sana'a, the Houthis have carried out a handover and withdrawal operation at the port. The UN team was unaware of the Houthis' intention and representatives from the Yemeni government did not show up at the event^[5]. The Houthis announced the implementation of the first phase of the redeployment by withdrawing their gunmen from the port and handing over security to the local Coast Guard. The Yemeni government considered that as "wrapping". The United Nations questioned the Houthis' claims and said that the withdrawal should not happen without the presence of all parties.

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When the UN observation team, led by General Cammaert, was in the port of Hodeidah to open the road to Sana'a, the Houthis carried out a handover and withdrawal operation at the port, but the Yemeni government described it as an attempt to “wrap” the agreement, so the United Nations has doubted the Houthis' allegations

The Houthis said that they implemented the first phase by handing over security to local forces, although the forces that took over the port were not the Coast Guard in the city. The Houthis replaced 300 Coast Guard troops with their own troops. The real Coast Guard stay at home since more than a year and they were not called for work and their salaries were not paid. The head of the Coast Guard, who took over the security of the port, is a prominent Houthi leader who was appointed weeks ago in his position by the Houthi group with the rank of brigadier general ^[6], Abdul Razzaq al-Muayyad, his nickname (Abu Jihad).

The Houthis insist that they are the local Coast Guard force and that they will not hand the ports to security forces of 2014. They claim that the forces that received the ports are the same forces existed in Hodeidah before they came to Hodeidah. "The fighters of the group withdrew from the port in accordance with the peace agreement and handed over responsibility to local units of the Yemeni Coast Guard, which was responsible for protecting the ports before the war," said the Houthi-appointed governor of Hodeidah, Mohamed Hameed. This will be under the auspices of the United Nations^[7]. This statement seems to be confession by the Houthis that the existing force must be the one that existed before they took control of the city and its ports. The security forces in the city used to be headed by Commander Mohammad al-Maqaleh, a professional and active figure.^[8]

The dangers of this agreement and the possibility of its failure

As any other agreement in Yemen, there is a possibility of a major failure of the Sweden agreement. This agreement, which came from consultations that lasted for one week after two years of rivalry, could only be maintained through a big international pressure. The first 20 days passed after the signing of the agreement do not indicate any confidence between the warring parties.

Other confidence-building measures may help in confidence building in Hodeidah. The file of prisoners and detainees exchange that is contained in the United Nations resolution is the appropriate way to build confidence and it is the best way through which the United Nations can save the UN-brokered agreement that appears to have begun to collapse.

But this file of the agreement is also expected to fail. It is expected that 16,000 prisoners and detainees will be exchanged by both sides by 20 January 2019, but the legitimate government and the Houthi group exchange accusations of trying to fail the prisoners and detainees exchange.

The Houthi group claims that the Yemeni government had not responded to the issue of prisoners from the group in UAE and Saudi prisons inside and outside the country. Commenting on the list presented by the other party (the legitimate government), the Houthi group said that the list included 2171 repeated names, 1144 who have been already released and 1460 fake names and incomplete records.

The Yemeni government, for its part, accused the Houthis of manipulating and refusing to reveal the fate of many political detainees and denying the existence of about three thousand prisoners and abductees in their detention camps. The government said that the Houthi group did not provide any information on the fate of the leader in the Islah Party, Mohammed Qahtan, and Major General Faisal Rajab. It said that 2612 names in the Houthi list are not exist in the government's prisons and that they may be among deaths or those who are lost.

There are other risks related to the agreement:

- **Gaps:** Some paragraphs of the agreement have many gaps. They are not clear enough to obligate any one of the two parties. They open the door to the government and Houthi interpretations. The United Nations needs to explain this clearly so as not to build hopes on a fragile agreement.
- **Stabilization of the ceasefire:** This is another threat to the agreement. Without a ceasefire and a team to monitor who violate the truce, the war in Hodeidah could be resumed.
- **Redeployment:** the location of the redeployment of troops will be an escalation point in the near future. The redeployment around the city of Hodeidah may allow rapid return of clashes near the city of Hodeidah making the agreement the cause of a new war, perhaps more violent than before.
- **The Economic Committee:** As agreed, revenues from ports will go to the Central Bank in Hodeidah and therefore the agreement needs a quick mechanism to manage the economy and pay the salaries of employees.

UN Security Council Resolution 2451

The resolution was adopted by the UN Security Council in support of the "Stockholm" agreement. This is the first decision since 2015, if we ignore the resolutions adopted between 2015 and 2018 concerning the extension of sanctions and the work of the Committee of Experts. The new resolution, although comes under the umbrella of UNSC resolution 2216, it was issued amid regional, international and local changes, and it is different from resolution 2216, which supports the legitimate government and calls on the Houthis to withdraw and hand over arms. There are some fears that this resolution can be used to impose a fragile peace agreement that does not lead to the handover of the Houthis weapons and does not support the return of the legitimate government.

Scenarios for the future of the agreement

The Stockholm agreement is related to peace and war paths in Yemen even though it is a very small step towards peace. Although many local and regional actors are present in the scene, the main conflict is still between the Houthis and the legitimate government.

If there is a possibility of failure in some parts of the agreement and success in other parts of it, different scenarios are expected.

- Failure of the agreement:

Failure of this agreement will eliminate the prisoners exchange agreement, which is already faltering, and will also eliminate Taiz understandings. What reinforces the possibility of failure is that the Houthis have broken the agreement to open the highway for relief aids from the port to the city and have deceived the UN team by handing over the port to Houthi-affiliated local forces. If the failure happens, the war will violently come back to destroy the coastal city and will last for weeks. The two parties will be exhausted, although the Houthis defeat is assured, but in a devastated city. There is no worse war than street war.

If the government takes control of an already devastated city and if the port is interrupted during military operations, famine will hit most of the country as the port is responsible for receiving 80 percent of Yemen's food needs. In addition, concerns over whom the UAE wants to place in the city's administration after war seem to be justified. The status of Aden port in the south is not ready yet to be a good alternative to receive relief aid at the current time.

In a report handed to the UN Security Council on 28 December, the UN Secretary-General complained that the international organization had lost \$ 2 million in the port of Aden due to bad storage of foodstuffs, which had been delayed several months because of slow procedures at the port. The cost of transportation is also very high.

- The success scenario of the agreement:

The success of the first achievement of UN Envoy Martin Griffith can be announced, but the completion of the two phases will take a long time beyond the timetable that set by the agreement. So far, the first phase has not been achieved let alone the second phase. This is the risk of the plan put by Griffith, who seems to be confident of his success "step by step." It is a long-term timetable. The situation in Yemen does not accept more diplomatic and political actions before it goes out of control.

The success of the agreement can be enhanced with international pressures on both the government and the Houthis to make peace. However, if the pressures succeed in pushing the two parties towards a new round of talks this January, reaching a comprehensive agreement will also be out of reach, taking into account the conditions of both sides and the lack of any breakthrough in Stockholm agreement so far, in addition to the number of regional and local actors and the economy of war as beneficiaries will struggle to keep the war going on and seek privileges in the next stage.

If a comprehensive agreement is reached to stop the war with leaving heavy weapons with the Houthis and organizing the group in the hierarchy without dissolving it, that will be just a delayed war and a new Hezbollah inside the Yemeni state whose status may not be different from that of Lebanon.

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In case of the agreement fails, it will eliminate the prisoner exchange agreement and the Taiz understandings. The war will be resumed strongly and the risk of famine will increase. And if the agreement succeeds, it will take a long time beyond the timetable set by the agreement under a situation that may not accept more political actions before the situation goes out control.

Margins:

- [1] Yemen peace talks 'to resume next week' after long delay- Sky News- <https://news.sky.com/story/yemen-peace-talks-to-resume-next-week-after-long-delay-11565051>
- [2] Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council - [eeas.europa.eu](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-) <https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters->
- [3] Yemen's Houthis start redeployment in Hodeidah as part of U.N. deal – <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-yemen-security/yemens-houthis-start-redeployment-in-hodeidah-as-part-of-u-n-deal-idUKKCN1OS04R>
- [4] An interview with Griffith published in the UN News website on 20 December 2018 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/12/1024001>
- [5] A senior government official familiar with the redeployment in Hodeidah spoke to the Abaad Center on December 30, 2018, by telephone.
- [6] A Coast Guard officer at his home in a village in Hodeidah spoke to Abaad Center by telephone on 31 December 2018.
- [7] Note source # 2
- [8] Documents of the city and its leaders prior to the control of the Houthis, Abaad read them.



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