Yemen’s Fleeting Opportunity for Peace

The potential for a breakthrough in the Yemen war, now in its fourth year, may be close at hand. Last week, Martin Griffiths, the new UN envoy to Yemen, delivered a proposal that would avert a fight for Hodeidah, a city of as many as 600,000 people whose port provides an economic lifeline to millions of Yemenis. Now, it is up to the Houthis, the rebel group occupying Hodeidah, along with the internationally recognized government of Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition that backs it, to deliver their responses to Griffiths.

If any one of these parties rejects Griffiths’s plan—or if Western powers fail to exert enough pressure on their Gulf allies to accept it—they would be complicit in the ensuing tragedy and the perpetuation of a war that has precipitated the world’s costliest humanitarian crisis. With UAE-backed forces on the outskirts of Hodeidah and the Houthis digging in for what promises to be a long, nasty fight, these answers could not come soon enough.

While Griffiths’s plan has not yet been made public, a broad

outline has leaked. The details include a phased Houthi withdrawal from Hodeidah's port and city, along with two other nearby ports. The UN would help Yemeni staff run the port facility, and would also assist local government and police in managing the city. Because these local personnel have remained largely neutral during the war in Yemen, they ought to be acceptable to all sides. In return, UAE-backed forces would gradually pull back from the city. The deal would be tied to a broader national ceasefire, and a return to peace talks after a two-year hiatus.

So far, the parties have hedged. The Houthis have demonstrated some flexibility. They have agreed to hand over the port even as they quibble over control of the city. For its part, the Hadi government has been somewhat positive about the UN proposal—albeit, chiefly because it thinks the Houthis will reject it, not because it feels a need to broker a settlement with them. Indeed, even as they credit their military pressure for the Houthis' newfound willingness to compromise, both the government and the coalition argue that the rebels are not negotiating in good faith. They contend that their foes have continued preparing defenses around Hodeidah, and point to earlier instances when the rebels purportedly reneged on their word. These are legitimate concerns, but the UN proposal nonetheless deserves a chance. Emirati officials have argued repeatedly that the threat to forcibly seize Hodeidah was designed to prompt greater Houthi flexibility. If the coalition can't take yes for an answer now, then what was the point of that threat to begin with?

The coalition has also suggested that even if Griffiths's ideas were endorsed by all, the UN lacks the capacity to carry them out. Yet surely this ought not stand in the way of an agreement that could spare thousands of lives. There is a straightforward remedy: If the UN needs support, it stands to reason that UN member states should provide it.

At times, the UAE and Saudi Arabia behave as if they should be rewarded with a better deal simply for restraining themselves from carrying out their assault. But avoiding a battle for the port is not doing the world a favor—it's living up to a moral

and political obligation, and giving themselves a face-saving way to achieve their goals without waging a fight they may not even win.

Griffiths needs help to keep this peace deal on track. He needs much more than the mostly empty, cautious rhetorical backing he's received from Western capitals and UN Security Council members to date. Countries with influence over warring parties face a choice: stick to the verbal acrobatics they have employed thus far and risk becoming complicit in the outcome of their inaction, or put political muscle behind their call for a negotiated settlement. In the case of Iran—which has consistently claimed it can help resolve the conflict—this means holding the Houthis' feet to the fire while pressing them to accept the UN proposals to manage not only the port but also the city.

But responsibility for bringing about a negotiated end to the war lies chiefly with the United States, France, and Britain. All have concrete leverage over the coalition, stemming from their arms sales to the Saudis and the Emiratis; none has been willing to use it. In private, all can be forceful in their concern about an attack on Hodeidah, but in public, they are far more muted. Speaking behind closed doors, U.S. officials worry that a fight for the port and city could be calamitous. In contrast, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's public statements have only promised that the United States is "monitoring" the situation in Hodeidah. This should change, and pressure from Congress on the administration could make that happen.

There are certainly reasons why the anti-Houthi coalition might balk at halting its campaign to take Hodeidah. It has undeniably made military progress in recent months, giving it less incentive to accept Griffiths's plan. But the coalition has also encountered unexpected resistance in its efforts to seize the port and struggled to maintain its supply lines. While it claims the current pause in its campaign is designed to facilitate diplomacy, it is clearly facing operational problems on the ground. The bottom line is that there can be no clean military victory once the fight reaches the city of

Hodeidah. And even if coalition forces succeed there, the Houthis are unlikely to fade away.

The priorities today are clear: first, to get the parties to accept a compromise on Hodeidah, and then to resume negotiations to end the broader conflict. A real, if tenuous, chance exists to achieve both. It would be a missed opportunity and a moral failing if it were squandered.