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Former U.N. Envoy Says Yemen Political Deal was Close Before Saudi Airstrikes Began

my guess: someone did not want to see a deal coming through....

By Joe Lauria and Margaret Coker – Wall Street Journal
4/29/2015

Campaign derailed agreement that could have averted conflict UNITED NATIONS—Yemen’s warring political factions were on the verge of a power-sharing deal when Saudi-led airstrikes began a month ago, derailing the negotiations, the United Nations envoy who mediated the talks said.

Jamal Benomar, who spearheaded the negotiations until he resigned last week, told The Wall Street Journal the Saudi bombing campaign against Iran-linked Houthi rebels has hardened positions on a key point—the composition of an executive body to lead Yemen’s stalled transition. This will complicate new attempts to reach a solution, he said.

“When this campaign started, one thing that was significant but went unnoticed is that the Yemenis were close to a deal that would institute power-sharing with all sides, including the Houthis,” said Mr. Benomar, a Moroccan diplomat.

Mr. Benomar is scheduled to address the U.N. Security Council behind closed doors on Monday and report on the suspended political talks.

Most Yemeni political factions agree talks were progressing in the run-up to the Saudi air campaign, but their views vary on Mr. Benomar's assertion that a deal was close.

This round of U.N.-brokered talks—which began in January and included 12 political and tribal factions—represented a crucial part of a mission to install a unified government in Yemen, the poorest Arab country and home to al Qaeda's most dangerous offshoot.

The Houthi rebels, who have overrun significant parts of the country in the past eight months, had agreed to remove their militias from the cities they were occupying under the deal that had been taking shape. The U.N. had worked out details of a new government force to replace them, Mr. Benomar said.

In exchange, Western-backed President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who has since fled the country, would have been part of an executive body that would run the country temporarily, Mr. Benomar said.

The Houthis had agreed to that reduced role for Mr. Hadi until the Saudi military intervention began on March 26. At that point, the Houthis hardened their position on this key point and opposed any role for Mr. Hadi in government, Mr. Benomar said.

Saudi-backed factions have also hardened their positions, saying the Houthis shouldn't be granted political power.

Several Yemeni political factions, which were also interested in power-sharing, said the military tensions in the capital led to feelings of unease during negotiations. In their takeover of the capital, the Houthis kidnapped members of rival political parties.

“We did not like the Houthi plan on the table, but we were willing to sign it since it reflected reality. It was either that or no deal,” said Mohammed Abulahoum, president of Yemen's Justice and Building Party.

The air campaign transformed Yemen into a battlefield for a broader contest over regional power between Shiite Iran and Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis want to restore Mr. Hadi to the presidency and also support a separate armed political faction named Islah, which is anti-Houthi. Iran supports the Houthis, who abide by a Shiite offshoot of Islam. Many Yemenis accuse both countries of meddling in their affairs.

The Houthis took over the capital San'a and the government and then advanced on the south. As they approached the port city of Aden, where Mr. Hadi had taken refuge, he fled the country and ended up in Saudi Arabia.

Yemen's troubles mark an abrupt turnabout from what the international community had once hailed as a success story.

The 2011 Arab Spring protests triggered political change in Yemen, a largely peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. Groups that felt oppressed or excluded for decades under the former regime, such as the Houthis, were supposed to take part in the new government.

But that transition stalled in 2014. In the two months leading up to the Saudi air campaign, the Houthis and other parties insisted on a reduced role for Mr. Hadi, blaming him for the slow pace of reform.

Mr. Hadi, his Saudi allies and other political factions opposed the terms for the presidency being hammered out by Mr. Benomar.

“A very detailed agreement was being worked out, but there was one important issue on which there was no agreement, and that was what to do with the presidency,” Mr. Benomar said. “We were under no illusion that implementation of this would be easy.”

Two other Arab states—Qatar and Morocco—were willing to host new rounds of Yemen peace talks. But after both countries joined the Saudi-led military coalition, the Houthis rejected those venues, according to Mr. Benomar.

President Hadi has suggested that talks resume in the Saudi capital of Riyadh under Saudi auspices. But that was a non-starter for the Houthis.

A senior diplomat familiar with the negotiations said the Saudis also intervened to prevent a power-sharing deal that would include the Houthis and that would give 30 % of the cabinet and parliament to women.

Saudi Arabia declared last week that it was shifting to a new phase in the Yemen campaign more focused on seeking a political solution. But it left open the option of continued military action, and has kept up airstrikes at a robust pace since the declaration.

Mr. Benomar said he would tell the Security Council on Monday that only U.N.-led talks in a neutral location can have any chance of success.

On Saturday, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed of Mauritania was named as the new U.N. envoy for Yemen.

On Sunday, Yemeni officials reported several apparent strikes by the Saudi coalition against Houthi targets amid deadly clashes between Houthi militants and forces aligned with Mr. Hadi.

Strikes hit the capital San'a as well as targets in energy-rich Marib province, officials said.

Several southern provinces also saw strikes, including one that hit a convoy of Houthi fighters heading to the southern port city of Aden.