Watchdogs of Pause: The Challenges of Ceasefire Monitoring in Yemen

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To cite this article: Júlia Palik (2021): Watchdogs of Pause: The Challenges of Ceasefire Monitoring in Yemen, International Peacekeeping, DOI: 10.1080/13533312.2021.1918004

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2021.1918004

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Published online: 22 Apr 2021.

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ABSTRACT
In 2018, the Government of Yemen and the Houthis concluded the UN-mediated Stockholm Agreement in which they agreed on a ceasefire in Hodeidah to be overseen by a UN monitoring mission. As of 2020, the implementation of the ceasefire is stalled, and the humanitarian situation has not improved. The purpose of this article is to provide a descriptive analysis of the challenges that UNMHA monitors have faced in Yemen. The empirical analysis builds on the literature on ceasefires and monitoring missions and focuses on four key factors: agreement quality, changes in the operational environment, the monitoring mission’s relation to the mediator, and conflict parties’ commitment to the ceasefire. I apply a qualitative case-study method, reviewing primary and secondary sources and conducting interviews with monitoring officers and local Yemenis. I find that monitors’ ability to carry out their mandate was hampered by the quality of the agreement and conflict parties’ perception of bias. Second, I find that the Houthis, operating from a position of relative strength prevented monitors from carrying out their mandate. Findings from the Yemeni case are relevant for other monitoring missions that are deployed in ongoing violent contexts, such as Libya or Ukraine.

KEYWORDS Yemen; ceasefire; monitoring and verification

Introduction
Between 2015 and 2019, the civil war in Yemen had killed more than 100,000 people.¹ In December 2018, the Government of Yemen and their Houthi opponents² signed the UN-mediated Stockholm agreement. This set out the terms for a ceasefire in Hodeidah, allowing the resumption of vital humanitarian aid to flow through the pivotal Hodeidah port.³ The United Nations

⁠¹ACLED, ‘PRESS RELEASE’.
⁠²I use the terms Houthis and Ansarallah interchangeably.
⁠³The Stockholm Agreement consists of three separate agreements: the agreement on the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif, and Ras Issa; the prisoner exchange agreement; and a statement of understanding on the city of Taiz.
Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) was established to head the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) that was tasked with monitoring the ceasefire.\textsuperscript{4} UNMHA was established by Security Council Resolution 2452 which stipulated the deployment of 75 civilian observers for six months. The monitoring mission faced significant challenges from the outset. Despite a brief decline of violence at the national level,\textsuperscript{5} violence in the ceasefire area continued, involving more civilian casualties and ultimately an increase of violence in Hodeidah governorate.\textsuperscript{6} Monitoring officers also became the victims of attacks. During a briefing to the Security Council in April 2020, the Special Envoy reported that the ceasefire was being violated daily and that the RCC had in effect ‘ceased to function’ following the killing of a government liaison officer in the RCC by the Houthis.\textsuperscript{7} By the end of April 2020, the escalation of hostilities on other fronts, and the COVID-19 pandemic, prompted UNMHA to reduce its presence to a twelve-member team.\textsuperscript{8}

The ineffectiveness of the UNMHA monitoring mission stands in contrast to prior research that points to the benefits and average effectiveness of such missions. Both academic and practitioner work on ceasefires has shown that monitoring generally improves the durability of ceasefires in both inter-\textsuperscript{9} – and intra-state conflict.\textsuperscript{10} Well-designed and impartial monitoring missions can aid inter-party trust building and raise the costs of parties’ non-compliance through the collection of information and the exposure of the violating party to internal and external actors.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet while the average effect of monitoring missions might be positive, not all missions ultimately succeed. Prior research focusing on South Sudan and Sri Lanka show that monitoring missions are often unable to perform reporting activities due to worsening security situations, and the challenges in remaining impartial and credible when operating in an ongoing conflict.\textsuperscript{12} Yet we still know very little about the challenges that monitoring missions face, and what factors shape their effectiveness.

This article contributes to our understanding of monitoring missions, highlighting the opportunities and constraints faced in aiding ceasefire implementation. This article does not aim to evaluate UNMHA’s


\textsuperscript{5}UN SC, “S/2020/524,” 2.

\textsuperscript{6}Civilian Impact Monitoring Project, ‘Reports’.

\textsuperscript{7}OSESGY, “Briefing to the United Nations Security Council UN Special Envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths 16 April 2020”.

\textsuperscript{8}UN SC, “S/2020/524”.

\textsuperscript{9}Fortna, Peace Time; Åkebo, “Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes”.

\textsuperscript{10}Clayton and Sticher, “The Logic of Ceasefires”.

\textsuperscript{11}Potter, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification”; Höglund, “Obstacles to Monitoring”.

performance or assess its impact on the peace process. Instead, the primary goal is to provide a descriptive analysis of the challenges UNMHA monitoring officers faced over the course of their mission. Building on existing ceasefire research, particular focus is played to how the monitoring mission was shaped by four key factors: the quality of the agreement, the operational environment, the relationship between the mediator and the monitoring mission, and conflict parties’ commitment (or lack thereof) to the ceasefire.

This study builds on a review of all UN documents published on Yemen since the Stockholm Agreement (Security Council Resolutions, press statements, Yemen Panel of Experts findings, and documents by the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen), an analysis of English-language Yemeni newspaper articles, and expert interviews with UNMHA monitoring officers who were deployed from March until June 2019 and individuals involved in the design of the mission.

The article contributes to the ceasefire literature in two primary ways. First, it improves our understanding of the conditions that shape the effectiveness of monitoring missions. Second, it makes an empirical contribution by presenting novel qualitative evidence and one of the first analysis of the UNMHA mission in Yemen. Understanding the constraints that ceasefire monitors may face has important policy implications, especially when various lethal or non-lethal tactics against monitors lead to the withdrawal of missions, as was the case with the UN’s Supervision Mission in Syria in 2012. To this end, the findings point to problems that are likely to extend to other cases where monitoring missions are deployed independently (i.e. not as part of larger peacekeeping missions) in ongoing violent contexts (e.g. Ukraine or Libya), and point to the need for more research in this area.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I begin by providing an overview of the literature on ceasefires and monitoring missions. Second, I describe the framework of analysis and the data sources. Third, in the empirical section, I discuss UNMHA, and describe in detail the significant challenges the mission faced.

Literature Review: Ceasefires

Ceasefires are arrangements by or between conflict parties to stop fighting (temporally or permanently) from a specific point in time’. They are a common feature during armed conflict. Between 1989 and 2019, more than 2000 ceasefires were concluded globally.

Ceasefires exhibit important variations in terms of their type, purpose, and geographical scope, as well as the parties involved (unilateral, bilateral, bilateral, unilateral, multilateral).

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or multilateral ceasefires), and the role of third parties in these agreements’
design and implementation.

Ceasefires can be important phases or starting points in peace processes
but are not always related to negotiations.15 Some ceasefires serve exclusively
humanitarian purposes or are agreed on to observe religious holidays.
Although these types of ceasefires may have nothing to do with peace pro-
cesses at their onset, they can nevertheless help pave the way for negotiations
or progressing with ongoing talks through a potential halt of violence.
Besides their potential to reduce violence, ceasefires are important because
the implementation of these agreements requires parties to work together
which constitutes an important step towards confidence building.16
However, this ‘emerging trust’ is fragile and if ceasefires fail, the gap
between conflict parties may widen further.17

Theoretically, a ceasefire should lead to a reduction in violence. However,
this is often not the case. For example, the ceasefire between the Colombian
government and the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC),
declared in 2002, did not lead to a reduction in battle-related deaths up
until the disarmament of the group in 2006.18 Furthermore, while ceasefires
may lead to de-escalation in the geographic areas that they cover, violence
can nevertheless increase in other locations. Conflict parties can also agree
to ceasefires only to improve their military positions or to re-arm.19

As conflict parties may find it difficult to commit to an agreement without
assurances that it will be enforced, external actors can be important both in
the conclusion and the implementation of ceasefires.20 They often mediate
ceasefires or provide security guarantees, such as monitoring and verification
missions. Smith (1997) for example finds that while external parties can help
to mitigate the obstacles conflict belligerents face in reaching a ceasefire,
these third parties can also become obstacles if they are perceived as
biased or fail to implement the agreement.21 Fortna (2004) finds that demili-
itarized zones, peacekeeping operations, and external third party guarantees
to enforce the agreement can raise the costs of attack, reduce uncertainty,
and manage incidents of violation.22 However, another study on local cea-
sefires in Syria found that domestic peacemakers outperform third parties
and that ceasefires mediated by external actors are associated with violated
agreements.23

15Karakus and Svensson, "Between the Bombs".
16Åkebo, “Ceasefire Agreements and Peace Processes”.
17Clayton et al., “Ceasefires in Intra-State Peace Processes”.
18Reidun et al., “The Effects of Ceasefires in Colombian Peace Processes”.
19Kolás, “Naga Militancy and Violent Politics in the Shadow of Ceasefire”.
20Smith, Stopping Wars; Fortna, Peace Time; Karakus and Svensson, “Between the Bombs”.
21Smith, Stopping Wars.
22Fortna, Peace Time.
23Karakus and Svensson, "Between the Bombs".
Due to the lack of empirical research on ceasefires, we also know little about the conditions under which they succeed or fail. Clayton et al. argue that the most important condition for ceasefires to succeed relates to the question of ownership, or the political will of conflict parties. If the belligerents view the ceasefire as an obstacle to moving towards their political goals, the agreement is likely to break down. If ceasefires result from third-party pressure, then ‘significant enforcement is required to ensure that the parties stick to the deal that they were reluctant to agree. In the absence of sufficient enforcement, these “imposed” ceasefires are likely to quickly break down’. Another key reason for ceasefire failure concerns agreement design. Agreements that lack a detailed time plan, precise wording, and conflict parties’ mutual understanding of its terms can fail quickly. Yet, if the political will is sufficiently high, it is sometimes possible to implement a weak agreement.

**Monitoring and Verification Missions**

As noted in the previous section, third parties can aid ceasefire implementation through various means, such as the deployment of peacekeepers or monitoring missions. Peacekeeping missions authorized by the Security Council under Chapter VI of the UN charter are deployed with conflict parties consent and the use of force is limited to self-defence, while Chapter VII missions may be authorized to use force beyond self-defence without the consent of conflict parties for enforcement purposes. Monitoring missions differ from peacekeeping operations in several ways, the most important being that these missions usually consist of unarmed personnel. Because monitoring missions by their nature lack coercive capacities, they are not in a position to enforce peace. Monitoring missions can be deployed independently or as part of larger peacekeeping missions. When deployed independently, these missions provide a ‘light footprint’ approach. The unarmed nature of these missions is often cited as an advantage, because they do not appear as threatening to conflict parties.

Monitoring missions have three distinct purposes: (1) to raise the costs of non-compliance by exposing the violating party to both internal and external actors, (2) to serve as a deterrent for future violence and to contribute to de-escalation, and (3) to contribute to inter-party trust building by sharing

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26 Hayson and Hottinger, “Do’s and Don’ts of Sustainable Ceasefire Agreements”; Clayton et al., “Ceasefires in Intra-State Peace Processes”.
28 UN, “United Nations Political Missions”.
information between parties. In most cases, impartial reporting is the core task of these missions. Reporting can be critical in environments where credible information is scarce and conflict parties have strategic incentives to misrepresent information. To be able to carry out their tasks, monitoring missions are required to ensure that they are not perceived as biased. If conflict parties, who do not trust each other, do not trust the monitoring mission either, then monitors’ ability to collect information would be constrained by conflict parties.

Research shows that effective monitoring helps to demonstrate compliance with the agreement and can build public support for the process. Others propose that the presence of monitors can enhance cooperation between conflict parties by reducing uncertainty, preventing escalation in areas where UN personnel is stationed. Information collection is proposed to directly impact conflict parties’ cost–benefit calculation of using violence. It reduces the propensity of surprise attacks and the likelihood of state’s repression of rebels.

However, research has also shown that monitoring is not a sufficient condition alone to deter the use of violence and that troops are more effective than unarmed observers, because military backing signals credible commitment to the mission and shows third parties’ willingness to punish violations. In fact, observers have no statistical impact on peace duration, battle-related violence, and geographic containment of conflict. In sum, observers do not pose a credible threat to conflict parties and as such they are unlikely to deter them from using violence.

Moving beyond the analysis of the mere presence or absence of monitoring missions, other works focus on variation in the composition of monitoring teams and these different actors’ impact on ceasefire implementation. Ceasefires in most cases are monitored by international actors, the conflict parties themselves, or the combination of both.

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29 Haysom and Hottinger, “Do’s and Don’t’s of Sustainable Ceasefire Agreements”.
32 Ross, “Civil Society’s Role in Monitoring and Verifying Peace Agreements”; Findlay, “The Role of Monitoring and Verification”.
33 Bove, Ruffa, and Ruggeri, Composing Peace; Fortna, Peace Time.
34 Bove, Ruffa, and Ruggeri, Composing Peace.
36 Beardsley and Gleditsch, “Peacekeeping as Conflict Containment.”
38 Clayton, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Support Architecture”.

Little attention has been paid to what types of monitoring mission are effective in ensuring ceasefire implementation. Fortna argues that joint commissions are more effective than exclusively third-party monitors because they signal conflict parties’ intent to move towards peace.\(^{39}\) In another study, Höglund and Wennerström analyze the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) and show that a worsened security situation and conflict parties’ diminished support for the ceasefire led to a narrow interpretation of mandate by monitors.\(^{40}\)

We also know that monitors should be examined in terms of their relation to mediators. In some cases, third parties assume dual roles: In Yemen, the UN mediated the Stockholm Agreement and is also the leading monitoring body. In Sri Lanka, Norway mediated the conflict between the government and the Tamil Tigers and led the monitoring mission. Höglund points out that both the peace process and the monitoring mission can be ineffective when external actors assume dual roles, as mediators are often discouraged from reporting ceasefire violations. From the perspective of monitors, links to mediators can be problematic; if the mediator is perceived as biased, then the monitoring mission’s credibility and reputation can also be harmed.\(^{41}\)

Framework of Analysis

Drawing on the literature’s findings on the causes of ceasefire failure on the one hand, and the impacts of monitoring missions on the other, I focus on two factors that can impact the ability of monitoring missions to fulfill their mandates (agreement quality and mediator’s relationship to the monitoring mission) and on two processes that can make the mandate fulfillment challenging (operational environment and conflict parties behaviour). The subsequent empirical analysis of UNMHA’s challenges is based on the following four factors:

- **Agreement quality**: Monitors’ tasks and mandate are derived from the ceasefire agreement and as such the quality of this agreement has important implications for monitors’ work. Ceasefire agreements should be clear and contain specific and comprehensive provisions for security arrangements, and conflict parties should have the same understanding of these provisions. Unclear ceasefire agreements are more difficult to implement and disputes stemming from the agreement are more difficult to resolve later.\(^{42}\)

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\(^{39}\)Fortna, *Peace Time*.


\(^{41}\)Höglund, ‘Obstacles to Monitoring’.

\(^{42}\)Haysom and Hottinger, “Do’s and Don’ts of Sustainable Ceasefire Agreements”; Fortna, *Peace Time*; Potter, “Ceasefire Monitoring and Verification.”
• The relationship between the monitoring mission and the mediator: If the mediator and the monitoring mission are closely related, or belong to the same organization then this link can negatively impact the reputation and perception of the monitoring mission by the conflict parties, both of which can be perceived as biased.  

• Operational environment: When monitoring missions are deployed independently, their security is dependent on the conflict parties. Changes in the conflict environment over time can force monitors to adopt a narrow reading of their mandate or, in extreme situations, force them to leave the country.  

• Conflict parties’ behaviour and commitment to the agreement: Monitors’ work can be undermined by conflict parties if these parties are not committed to implementing the agreement. Conflict parties can prevent monitors from fulfilling their mandates by both lethal and non-lethal means.  

In the empirical analysis, I rely on the analysis of primary and secondary sources and complement this data with a total of 21 key informant interviews. To understand the challenges for the UNMHA that stem from the quality of the ceasefire agreement and the mediator’s relationship to the monitoring mission, I review all publicly available UN documents related to Yemen from the conclusion of the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018 up to September 2020. These documents consist of: Special Envoy’s Security Council Briefings (19), Security Council Resolutions (5), Security Council Presidential Statements (2), the Secretary-General’s Reports (3), Final Reports of the Yemen Panel of Experts (4), and Security Council Letters (11). I complement this primary data with news reporting and nine interviews conducted with individuals who had intimate knowledge of the UNMHA mission (even if they were not stationed in Yemen) and military observers who were deployed in Hodeidah as part of the UNMHA.  

To understand the challenges that stemmed from the operational environment and conflict parties’ behaviour and commitment to the ceasefire agreement, I rely on the above-mentioned UN sources, human rights-related reports from Human Rights Watch, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), the Yemen Polling Center, the Yemeni based Mwatana for Human rights organization reports, and the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies reviews. These sources provide a useful overview of the evolution of the security situation in Yemen, but they do not address the relation between the UNMHA and the conflict parties. To complement these

43Höglund, “Obstacles to Monitoring”;  
reports, I conducted 12 interviews with local Yemenis to gain a better understanding of the conflict environment and their perceptions of conflict parties’ strategies upon the deployment of UNMHA. Interviewees were selected with a snowball technique and semi-structured interviews with mission members were held through Skype and in person in Oslo between September 2019 and February 2020. As face-to-face conversations with locals were not possible, I relied on Skype. All participants were given accessible information about the purpose, method, and goal of the research and they gave their informed consent.46

Admittedly, conflict parties’ perceptions are absent in this analysis. Thus, the assessment of their commitment to the agreement is derived from other actors’ perspectives (monitors and locals) and secondary sources that might emphasize only instances of non-compliance with the ceasefire. Although UNMHA had women in its team, I was unable to interview them and hence the interview material (with monitors) is limited to only male perspectives. Future work on monitoring missions should pay particular attention to women monitors’ perspectives.47 In this section, I first present an overview of the civil war in Yemen and the circumstances surrounding the Stockholm Agreement, before presenting the empirical analysis.

Civil war in Yemen and the Stockholm Agreement

The ongoing conflict in Yemen is a complex crisis in which multiple external and internal groups are fighting over both government and territory. The primary conflict over government is fought between the Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels (Ansarallah) and the Government of Yemen (GoY), headed by Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The conflict started with the 2011 Yemeni episode of the Arab Spring, which was aimed at ending the 33-year rule of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Gulf Cooperation Council and the UN mediated a transitional agreement through which former Vice President Hadi became president. The transitional period failed in 2014 when the Houthis occupied the capital Sanaa.48 The conflict escalated in March 2015, when the Saudi Arabia- and United Arab Emirates (UAE)-led coalition intervened to restore the internationally recognized president and to reverse the territorial gains of the Houthis. Ansarallah receives support from Iran, while Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states provide military support for the internationally recognized government of Hadi. After more than three years of violence, the first agreement that the parties could reach was the

46I paid particular attention to ethical questions surrounding these interviews. I anonymized, coded, and stored separately all interviews.
47For example, Höglund shows that in the SLMM women had twice as negative a view about the dual role of Norway as male monitors. Höglund, “Obstacles to Monitoring,” 219.
48Palik, “Ceasefire Country Reports”.
UN-mediated Stockholm Agreement on 13 December 2018. As of 2020, the fragile ceasefire in Hodeidah remains in effect, but the implementation of the agreement has stalled, and a country-wide negotiated settlement remains elusive.49

The Stockholm consultations were preceded by an important military development in Yemen. In June 2018, the Saudi-led coalition sent troops to attack the port city of Hodeidah, which since October 2014 has been held by the Houthis. The assault was expected to be the biggest military campaign since the start of the intervention. Recapturing the Red Sea coast had been a strategic goal of the coalition since 2017 for three reasons.50 First, Hodeidah’s port facilities are the most important in Yemen with regards to imports of essential goods and humanitarian aid. Second, the Houthis’ main income has been derived from the revenues they collected related to imports and their transportation through Hodeidah. Third, the port served as the main weapon trafficking hotspot for the Houthis. These weapons were sophisticated missiles from Iran, which were used to conduct cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia.51 The UN warned against an all-out attack, which according to UN humanitarian chief Mark Lockwood was considered to pose a ‘clear and present danger of an imminent famine’ because it prevented the delivery of humanitarian supplies.52 The crisis was averted during the Stockholm consultations, which were aimed at preventing a mass famine.

The Stockholm consultation was largely an externally led process.53 This feature of the agreement has important consequences for conflict parties’ willingness to implement it and thus monitors’ ability to fulfil their mandate. The agreement was influenced by the confluence of various international processes such as the increased attention on the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, the rift between the US and Saudi Arabia over the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khassogi, an increased pressure by the US to establish a partial ceasefire in Yemen, and the last minute arrival of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to the talks.54

The Hodeidah ceasefire is a local, geographically limited ceasefire. As its purpose was to avert famine, it can be considered a humanitarian ceasefire. At the same time, early in the process the international community argued that the talks represented a ‘critical opportunity to move the peace process towards a comprehensive agreement’.55 A year after the conclusion

49Transfeld, “Peace and State Fragmentation in Yemen”.
50Riedel, “In the Face of Hodeidah Assault, Yemen Is on the Brink.”
51Horton, ‘What the Battle for Hodeidah Means for Yemen and the Region’.
52OCHA, ‘A Clear and Present Danger of an Imminent and Great Big Famine is Engulfing Yemen’ – UN Humanitarian Chief’.
53International Crisis Group, “Yemen Update #3”.
54International Crisis Group, “Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen”.
55UN News, “Yemen War”.
of the agreement, the UN expressed a much less optimistic outlook and noted that ‘by itself, it could not bring peace to all of Yemen’.\textsuperscript{56}

### Agreement Quality

This section shows that the Hodeidah agreement had some key weaknesses and conflict parties had conflicting interpretations of some of its key provisions. These features of the agreement negatively impacted the monitoring mission’s ability to carry out its tasks. The ceasefire agreement consists of 14 points and stipulates inter alia the following:

- An immediate ceasefire in the city of Hodeidah, the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa
- A mutual redeployment of forces from the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa
- A joint and agreed upon Redeployment Coordination Committee chaired by the United Nations and comprised of, but not limited to, members of the parties to oversee the ceasefire and the redeployment
- That security of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa would be the responsibility of local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law.\textsuperscript{57}

The agreement also set an ambitious time plan, according to which the redeployment of the forces should be ‘completed within two weeks’ and the full mutual redeployment of all forces should be completed within 21 days after the ceasefire enters into force.\textsuperscript{58} On 21 December 2018, the UNSC passed resolution 2451 and authorized the deployment of a monitoring team for an initial period of 30 days to oversee its implementation.\textsuperscript{59} This was followed by Resolution 2452, which established the UNMHA, a Special Political Mission consisting of military personnel, police, and civilian authorities.\textsuperscript{60}

Given the civilian nature of UNMHA, its mandate did not provide for force protection or any sanctioning mechanism. In Resolution 2452, the UNSC unanimously approved the deployment of up to 75 observers to Hodeidah for an initial period of six months to monitor the ceasefire and redeployment of forces in Hodeidah city and its Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa ports.\textsuperscript{61} In October 2019, the Hodeidah mission had 55 observers,

\textsuperscript{56}OSESGY, “A Year after the Stockholm Agreement”.
\textsuperscript{57}OSESGY, “Full Text of the Stockholm Agreement”.
\textsuperscript{58}OSESGY.
\textsuperscript{59}UN SC, “Resolution 2451”.
\textsuperscript{60}UNSC, “Security Council Resolution 2452 – UNSCR”.
\textsuperscript{61}UNSC.
while in April 2020 this number decreased to 12.\textsuperscript{62} UNMHA’s mandate has been renewed three times and currently extends until July 2021.\textsuperscript{63} UNMHA’s mandate entails six interrelated tasks:

- To lead and support the functioning of the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC);
- to oversee the governorate-wide ceasefire, redeployment of forces, and mine action operations;
- to monitor compliance of the parties to the ceasefire and the mutual redeployment of forces;
- to work with the parties so that security of the city of Hodeidah and the three ports is assured by local security forces in accordance with Yemeni law;
- and to facilitate and coordinate UN support to assist the parties to fully implement the Hodeidah Agreement.\textsuperscript{64}

Between December 2018 and June 2020, the RCC had three different leaders\textsuperscript{65} and convened seven meetings, amongst which three were joint meetings (both conflict parties and the RCC were present).\textsuperscript{66} These meetings as well as the UNMHA’s headquarters were in a UN-flagged vessel anchored in the port of Hodeidah. Given that the UNMHA was located in a territory under the exclusive control of the Houthis, government members of the RCC were required to conduct frontline crossings that were often not possible ‘because of the volatile security environment’.\textsuperscript{67} A number of incidents transpired during these crossings and after the second joint meeting the Houthis suspended such movements. Joint sessions were thus suspended for five months, during which the head of the RCC shuffled between the conflict parties.\textsuperscript{68} In September 2019, UNMHA established a Joint Operation Centre which created a joint monitoring team consisting of senior liaison officers from the Houthis and Yemeni army to work with UNMHA personnel ‘to diffuse tensions and address incidents that occur in the field’.\textsuperscript{69} This decision was followed by the establishment of five joint observation posts along the Hodeidah city frontlines, which were manned by teams of UN, government and Houthis monitors.

\textsuperscript{63}UN SC, “S/RES/2534 (2020)
\textsuperscript{64}UNSC, “Security Council Resolution 2452 – UNSCR”.
\textsuperscript{65}The Secretary-General first appointed retired Major General Patrick Cammaert (The Netherlands) as the Chair of the RCC, who was followed by Michael Anker Lollesgaard. The current chair is Lieutenant General Abhijit Guha.
\textsuperscript{66}UN SC, “S/2020/524”.
\textsuperscript{67}UN SC, “S/2019/823”.
\textsuperscript{68}UN SC, “S/2019/485”.
\textsuperscript{69}UN SC, “S/2019/823,” 2.
There were two main factors associated with agreement quality that impacted the work of the UNMHA. The first is the tight timeline for the implementation of the agreement and the second concerns the vaguely formulated provisions of some key elements. Regarding the tight timeline, the Hodeidah agreement envisioned that the full mutual redeployment should be completed within 21 days after the ceasefire entered into force (i.e. by 7 January 2019). In his first report to the UNSC, the Secretary-General notes that ‘the original timelines have slipped’.\(^70\) This was in part due to the parties’ reluctance to begin the implementation of the agreement. A 16-member advanced team by the RCC arrived in late December to ‘assess and define the scope of UNMHA’, but at that time, neither the RCC nor UNMHA was fully operational.\(^71\) The first group of military observers arrived in Saana only in mid-March 2019, after two months of delay due to conflict parties’ disagreements over the composition of the observers team and the logistical difficulties concerning the issuing of visas and residency permits,\(^72\) challenges also noted by the Secretary-General’s reports. The delays in implementation led to early criticism by the government as well as throwing into question the Houthis’ commitment to implement the agreement. Delays in the start of the monitoring also meant that valuable time had been lost during which the Houthis had already begun to redeploy their forces.

The second challenge related to the quality of the ceasefire agreement concerned the lack of specificity and common understanding of key terms. The most contentious provision concerned the mutual redeployment of forces and the subsequent handover of the ports to ‘local security forces in accordance with the Yemeni law’. One of UNMHA’s main tasks was to oversee, verify, and facilitate this process. Although the vague wording of the agreement might have been a deliberate choice at the time of the conclusion of the agreement to help move the process forward, later on, this lack of specificity proved to be a sticking point and became virtually impossible to renegotiate. The mutual redeployment process was envisioned in two phases.\(^73\) In early February 2019 (a month after the initial deadline for the redeployment), the conflict parties reached an agreement on the first phase which required the opposing forces to move out from the ports of Hodeidah, Saleef and Ras Issa.\(^74\) As of September 2020, the full deployment has not yet taken place. The composition of local security forces remains the most contentious issue since it is closely connected to legitimacy and sovereignty. While for the government of Yemen, ‘local security forces’ means members of the Yemeni army and pre-war security forces, handing over the port to a non-


\(^{72}\)Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 2, 2019.

\(^{73}\)UN SC, “S/2019/485”.

\(^{74}\)OSESGY, “Briefing of Martin Griffiths, UN Special Envoy for Yemen to the Security Council.”
Houthi-related security force in Hodeidah was not possible due to the Houthis’ tight control and penetration into existing security institutions (see the section on conflict environment). Overall, the Hodeidah agreement lacked both local ownership and specificity, allowing for different interpretations of some of its key provisions by the parties. Furthermore, although UNMHA’s mandate did not provide for mediation, most of RCC’s time was spent on ‘engaging mediation efforts to re-build confidence’ together with the Special Envoy. RCC had to shuffle between the conflict parties to find a mutually acceptable interpretation of the agreement.

**The Monitoring Mission’s Relation to the Mediator**

This section shows that the close links between the monitoring mission and the mediator meant that accusations of bias directed towards the mediator had a knock-on effect on the perception of bias of the mission, and vice versa, negatively impacting the mission’s credibility.

In May 2019, six months after the conclusion of the Stockholm Agreement, the Houthis unilaterally redeployed forces from the three ports. Although the withdrawal was accepted by both the Special Envoy and the head of the RCC as satisfying the redeployment provision of the agreement, the GoY did not accept the handover. Ansarallah was accused of handing port management to its members in the Coast Guard. The GoY accused the UN of being biased towards the Houthis and threatened of suspending cooperation with the envoy. In a letter to the Secretary-General, Hadi argued that he ‘can no longer tolerate the violations committed by the special envoy, which threaten prospects for a solution’. Although relations between the GoY and the Special Envoy were restored, repeated allegations of bias continued throughout 2019 and 2020.

The UNMHA was linked to the Special Envoy and to the peace process in a number of ways. First, both UNMHA and the Office of the Special Envoy are Special Political Missions. Resolution 2452 calls for ‘close collaboration and co-ordination’ between the two bodies. The Secretary-General’s proposal to establish the UNHMA also notes that ‘the mission would provide important support for [the Special Envoy’s] efforts to facilitate an inclusive political process aimed at reaching a negotiated settlement’.

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75 Transfeld, “Implementing Stockholm”.
76 UN SC, “S/2019/823”.
77 UN SC, “Statement by the Chair of the Redeployment Coordination Committee”.
78 Jalal, “Yemen’s Stockholm Agreement One Year on”.
79 Washington Post, “Yemen’s President in Letter to UN Chief Criticizes His Envoy”.
80 The National, “Yemen Government to Meet UN Chief over Envoy’s ‘Biased’ Behaviour”; Almasdar Online, “Hadi Government”.
82 UN SC, “S/2019/28”.

The Hadi government has also repeatedly accused the UNMHA of being biased towards the Houthis. For example, Yemen’s information ministers said that the UNMHA ‘is being held hostage by the Houthis, is blackmailed and pressured and so unable to perform its duties professionally and impartially’. Similarly, the June 2020 review of the UNMHA takes note of a ‘crisis of confidence within the RCC’. In September 2020, the GoY announced that it will stop meeting UNMHA members until the current head of the RCC General Abhijit Guha, who is accused of being biased towards the Houthis, is replaced. A Yemeni individual who was working with the UNMHA team confirmed these accounts. He said that the UN lost leverage in Yemen. Their security is dependent on the Houthis, while the government accuses them of being biased. The reason for this? That until the peace process is driven by Security Council Resolution 2216, the Houthis have nothing to gain from cooperating with any UN body.

Challenges stemming from deteriorating relations between the Special Envoy and the GoY led to a corresponding loss of trust in the UNMHA. The mission’s credibility was further weakened by disagreements over the handover of the three ports and the subsequent allegations of bias. This mistrust towards the UN team culminated in the GoY’s withdrawal from the RCC (see the section on conflict parties’ commitment).

Operational Environment

When monitors are deployed in ongoing violent situations they have to adapt to the unfolding security situation. As indicated earlier, UNMHA operated in an exclusively Houthi-controlled area and the mission was faced with a strong rebel group. Since the overtaking of Hodeidah in 2014, the Houthis monopolized security provision and sidelined tribal leaders and the police. Between 2014 and 2019, the Houthis became deeply entrenched in Hodeidah by penetrating the local security apparatus and simultaneously installing their own supervisory system. Supervisors (musharafen) are Houthi loyalists appointed in state authorities who directly execute the orders of the Houthi leadership.

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83 Almasdar Online, “Hadi Government”.
84 UN SC, “S/2020/524”.
85 Debriefer, “Yemeni Gov’t Pauses Hodeida Talks with UN until Gen Guha Changed”.
86 Resolution 2216 (2015) has been cited as ‘One of the biggest barriers to a settlement (and) an outdated international approach to ending the war. The government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi holds that any deal must build on the foundations of the resolution that it interprets as a form of legal summons for the Huthis to surrender, hand over heavy weapons and allow the government to return to rule Yemen from Sanaa’. Since the 2015 conclusion of this resolution, political realities have substantially changed in Yemen. International Crisis Group. “Rethinking Peace in Yemen,” 1.
87 Author’s interview with Yemeni member of the Special Envoy’s office, 2019.
88 ACAPS, “The Houthi Supervisory System”.

This emerging rebel governance system has at least two important implications for the work of the UNHMA. First, UNMHA’s security was provided by the Houthis and monitors’ freedom of movement was dependent on the Houthis. For example, members of the UN Panel of Experts were not able to travel to Houthi-controlled areas for over a year. UNMHA patrols have not been able to access the city of Hodeidah since October 2019. Second, the Houthis’ consolidation of power in Hodeidah meant that the handing over of the ports to ‘local security forces’ was not possible. According to the results of a 2019 survey carried out by the Yemen Polling Center, ‘there are no neutral local forces to whom Ansarallah could hand over security for the city of al-Hodeidah’, given the extent to which the Houthis have penetrated the security system.

Due to the Houthis’ repressive practices, locals were reluctant to share information with UNMHA because they were afraid of potential retaliatory attacks from the Houthis. One local argued that reporting incidents is virtually impossible given the tight security control by the Houthis, who ‘would simply kill me if they would see me talking to a foreigner, because they would accuse me of being a traitor’. Another illustrative example of the impact of the Houthis’ rule is that they forced locals to hinder the work of monitors. One monitoring officer recalls that when he had to depart from Hodeidah, Houthi officers were waiting for him at the airport to confiscate his memory stick containing information on conflict parties’ human rights violations. As the officer put it, ‘it was one of the assistants from the compound. No one else saw me with that memory stick. I had 62 GBs of information. That local reported to the Houthis, otherwise they wouldn’t have known that I have this memory stick’.

UNMHA members were open about the difficulties they faced in Yemen. As one of them admits, ‘We were living in Houthi premises and force protection was provided by them’. Several monitors were concerned by the lack of force protection in such a violent environment. As one of them noted, ‘the Houthis were being able to do whatever they want with us. There were not enough helmets for all of us and the ballistic vests did not fit either, it was too tight in the throat. We lacked radio communication’.

At the same time, another member of the UN team was sceptical about the potential impact of increased force protection. As he argued, ‘it would not make any difference if [UNMHA] would have been better equipped or if a

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89UN SC, “S/2020/326”.
90OSESGY, “Briefing to the United Nations Security Council UN Special Envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths 12 March 2020”.
91Transfeld, “Implementing Stockholm”.
92Author’s interview with a local from Hodeidah, 2020.
93Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 1, 2020.
94Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 4, 2019.
95Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 1, 2020.
peacekeeping operation would have been deployed. The Houthis are in full control.\textsuperscript{96} In his third status report, the Secretary-General notes that the RCC was repeatedly threatened by conflict parties.\textsuperscript{97} The Houthis recognized the rather vulnerable position of monitors, which enabled them to systematically prevent monitors from carrying out their mandate. This power disparity between the monitors and the Houthis meant that the rebels constrained monitors’ freedom of movement and ability to collect evidence.

Between 2018 and 2020, the national-level conflict environment has undergone substantial changes. President Hadi has largely remained in exile in Riyadh and his domestic legitimacy has been severely weakened.\textsuperscript{98} Between December 2018 and 2020, although the ceasefire has largely held, indirect firing and sniping remained active. The Houthis began to attack Saudi forces and expanded territories under their control and, the location of violence has shifted to new frontlines, most notably to Saada, Hajjah, Sanaa, Al-Jawf, Marib, and Al-Dhalee.\textsuperscript{99} As one of the monitors put it, ‘Both parties played a game with the UN. They always delayed all processes, so they could continue their business as usual, building fortifications, trenches, or moving their forces during the ceasefire.’\textsuperscript{100}

During 2019, the Saudi-led coalition also experienced significant problems with its internal cohesion. In late 2019, Sudan and the UAE withdrew their troops but the UAE maintained its air operations and more than 90,000-UAE trained troops remained in Yemen.\textsuperscript{101}

The UAE-supported Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was established in 2017, occupied Aden in August 2019, thereby opening a new conflict within the anti-Houthi coalition. To prevent further escalation, another parallel peace process began in November 2019 with the Saudi Arabia-brokered Riyadh Agreement between the GoY and the STC, which established a new government that included the STC. This agreement was short-lived and in April 2020, the STC announced self-rule in areas under its control and violence significantly escalated in the previously stable southern part of Yemen. In June 2020, the government and the STC agreed on a ceasefire.\textsuperscript{102}

Overall, the local-level conflict environment for UNMHA remained non-permissive because of the overall military strength of the Houthis. The presence of monitors led to the reduction of violence, yet the ceasefire froze frontlines in Hodeidah. Military and political developments elsewhere in Yemen meant that the UN had to divert its attention from the

\textsuperscript{96}Author’s Interview with Yemeni member of the Special Envoy’s office, 2019.
\textsuperscript{98}Sana’a, “War’s Elusive End – The Yemen Annual Review 2019”.
\textsuperscript{99}UN SC, “S/2020/326”.
\textsuperscript{100}Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 4, 2019.
\textsuperscript{101}UN SC, “S/2020/326”.
\textsuperscript{102}Sana’a, “War’s Elusive End – The Yemen Annual Review 2019”.

implementation of the Hodeidah agreement to contain the further fragmentation of the conflict.

Conflict Parties’ Behaviour and Commitment to the Agreement

We also know that conflict parties’ political will (or the lack of thereof) is one of the most important factors that influences the likelihood of agreement implementation and monitoring missions’ ability to fulfil their mandates. In order to evaluate conflict parties’ commitment to the agreement, I examine conflict parties’ interactions with monitors, ceasefire violations and whether any of the conflict parties has officially withdrawn from the ceasefire. Violence has decreased in Hodeidah, but ceasefire violations have continued on a daily basis and all Secretary-General reports note that the overall humanitarian situation has not improved.103 The same reports note that threats against the RCC and UNMHA are continuous and that the local media has employed an inflammatory rhetoric. Interviewees agreed, however, that the mere presence of the UN forced the rebels to readjust their operations and ‘somehow restricted them’.104 Similarly, the Secretary-General argues that ‘the Mission’s presence […] continues to have a tangible calming and moderating effect’.105 This calming effect, however, has been severely weakened since the government’s withdrawal from the RCC, a development which ‘de facto halted the security cooperation mechanisms put in place […] and carries the risk of escalation of violence’.106

The Houthis had begun to respond to the deployment of monitors well ahead of their actual arrival. One monitor notes that rebels deliberately delayed their arrival.107 Monitoring officers from Norway, Germany, Bhutan, and Denmark first flew to Jordan for three weeks of training and then to Sanaa. As one interviewee states, conflict parties have systematically hampered the work of the mission from the moment of arrival. Monitoring Officer 3 was kept at the airport for four hours and interrogated by eight Houthi officers. The Houthis threatened the officer by taking photos of his phone and confiscating all equipment that could be used for military purposes, including the observer’s flashlight. The intimidation upon arrival ended with Houthi officers saying ‘if you stay more than 30 days, we would not guarantee your life. Welcome to Yemen, enjoy your stay’.108 When monitoring officers were transported to Hodeidah, during the six-

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104 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 2, 2020.
107 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 1, 2020.
108 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 3, 2019.
hour drive, they encountered 43 checkpoints and frequent small arm firing on their convoy, but they could not attribute responsibility to these firings. Monitors often did not have any tools at their disposal to collect information or to pressure the rebels to comply with the requests of team. Rebels were actively undermining monitors’ work when they did not allow monitors to set up an antenna on their vehicles because they were accused of being Saudi spies. On other occasions, when the Houthis did not want monitors to drive around the governorate, they blocked the exit of monitors with weapons. The Houthis also went to meetings with observers ‘only to chew qat and to laugh at us’ and when monitors were trying to gather information regarding the location of minefields and the recruitment of child soldiers, the Houthis simply refused to answer. In January 2019, it was reported that monitors, at that time led by Patrick Cammaert, were fired at by the Houthis. Members of UNMHA recall several similar incidents where they encountered frequent firing from the Houthis. As one monitor recalls, ‘the language assistant told us that if we have to have an emergency stop, we would be kidnapped or killed in 15 minutes. We were warned to stick to the road all the time’. When it comes to ceasefire violations, no public reports have been released by UNMHA. In fact, an informal conversation with one member of the UN Yemen Panel of Experts pointed to the secretive nature of the UNMHA; as he put it, ‘reports are not merely publicly unavailable, but even Panel members are unable to access those reports.’ Interviews with mission members paint a bleak picture of parties’ adherence to the ceasefire. One member estimated that between March and April 2019, around 180 ceasefire violations occurred per day, but they were not able to attribute responsibility and thus to fully verify which party was responsible for which violation. The lack of publicity enabled conflict parties to utilize accusations of ceasefire violations.

Although neither of the conflict parties suspended their commitment to the ceasefire, by early 2020 the monitoring mission had officially become dysfunctional. In March 2020, a government liaison officer and member of the RCC who was tasked with monitoring the ceasefire at the 5th joint observation post was killed by the Houthis. As a response to the attack, the

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109 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 3, 2019.
110 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 1, 2020.
111 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 4, 2019.
112 Jalal, “Yemen’s Stockholm Agreement One Year on”.
113 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 1, 2020.
114 Author’s interview with UN Panel of Experts member, 2019.
115 Author’s interview with UNMHA Monitoring Officer 4, 2019.

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Hadi government suspended its participation in the work of the RCC. The government also indicated that it was reviewing the feasibility of the Stockholm Agreement in light of the continued violations. UNMHA proposed a tripartite investigation of the incident, but the Houthis rejected the proposal. Following the suspension of the government’s participation in the monitoring mechanism and the spread of COVID-19, the UNHMA’s priorities are the re-establishment of trust and the government’s renewed participation.

Conflict parties’ behaviour towards UNMHA mission members was in many cases obstructive. The Houthis employed both lethal and non-lethal tactics to prevent monitors from carrying out their tasks. Continuous violations of the ceasefire and the failure to act in response to these violations was a further confirmation to the Houthis that they have little to fear from potential repercussions of their actions. UNMHA’s experience in Yemen calls into question the proposition that monitoring and reporting activities have reputational costs for conflict parties.

Conclusions

This article described the challenges UNMHA monitors faced in Hodeidah, Yemen. The paper focused on four key factors that contributed to these challenges: the quality of the ceasefire agreement, the monitoring missions’ relation to the mediator, the operational environment, and conflict parties’ commitment to the ceasefire. One key task of ceasefire monitoring missions is to be able to collect information about ceasefire violations and to build trust between the conflict parties. Impartial evidence collection is assumed to deter ceasefire violations because reporting such breaches of compliance would cause the violating party’s reputation to suffer. This mechanism did not work in Yemen. UNMHA was often unable to collect information about violations due to restrictions on their movements by the Houthis. When monitors sought to collect evidence from locals, the Houthis were also able to manipulate the information flow from civilians. Further, as the security situation worsened, the UNMHA was portrayed as biased. These dynamics led to the deterioration of trust between the two conflict parties: the exact opposite of what a monitoring mission sets out to achieve. This case study showed that previous literature has too uncritically assumed that conflict parties are deterred from ceasefire violations because of reputational concerns. It has also demonstrated that the vague wording of the Stockholm Agreement and the subsequent problems with implementation

also impacted conflict parties’ view of the Special Envoy and the UNMHA, both of which were accused of being biased, weakening both missions’ credibility.

Despite the challenges detailed above, ceasefire monitoring missions can be valuable third-party tools in ongoing violent conflicts. Monitors can serve ongoing peace processes by representing a credible reporting source on battlefield-related events. However, they alone are unable to change battle-field dynamics and their effectiveness is contingent on the political will of conflict parties, especially in a nonpermissive security environment, such as in Libya, Syria, or Ukraine. This article calls for further investigation into the challenges monitors face in violent contexts. Currently, there are no comparative studies on this topic and thus we know relatively little about the role of third parties in ceasefire implementation and the conditions under which monitoring missions can contribute to these processes.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank participants at a three-day workshop on the ‘causes and consequences of civil war ceasefires and security arrangements’, Oslo, 18–20 September 2020, and to the editors of this special issue. I am grateful to the individuals who were willing to be interviewed for this paper, Govinda Clayton, Siri Rustad, Corinne Bara, Gudrun Østby, Gee Berry, and the two anonymous reviewers for comments on an earlier version of this article.

**Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on Contributors**

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document/view/31077957/ceasefire-monitoring-and-verification-centre-for-humanitarian-


Appendix

Interview guide – UNHMA Mission members

2019, Oslo.

Experience, background

Please tell me about yourself and your work

Please tell me about your deployment to Yemen (how long were you there, was this your first time, what were your tasks)

Mission Specific question

How was the situation in Yemen upon your arrival and when you left?

Who were you working with?

Did you interact with civilians?

If yes, what was your experience with them? (for example, did they trust you or were suspicious?)

Did you work with any of the conflict parties?

If yes, what was your experience with them?
**MVM specific questions**

Please tell me about your perceptions of the mission you were part of (personnel, training, etc.)

What methods did you use for monitoring? (did you rely on technology or not? If yes, what kind of technology were you using?)

In your opinion, was the mission able to deter noncompliance?

In Yemen, insider mediators (tribal sheiks and elders) frequently settle disputes, including the negotiation of ceasefires. They often assume monitoring responsibilities too. Did you/the mission talked to locals who has monitoring experience in Yemen?

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges of MVMs in Yemen?

How is the Yemeni context different from other conflicts?

How can these challenges be overcome (i.e. what should be done to ensure successful implementation of a ceasefire)?

**Any other things you would like to share**

**Interview guide – Locals**

**Background**

Please tell me about yourself and what you do

Where are you from and where do you live now?

**Mission Specific question**

Do you know about the ceasefire in Hodeidah?

If yes, what do you know about it?

Have you met anyone working for the UN?

Have you met anyone working for the UN’s Mission for the ceasefire?

If yes, please tell me about your experiences

**Conflict resolution**

Please tell me about conflicts in Yemen

How are those conflicts usually resolved?

Who do you talk to if you have experienced conflict?

Please tell me about sheiks and how they resolve conflicts

How do sheiks make sure that an agreement is implemented?

Have you talked to a UN personnel about negative things you experience?

If yes, what was your experience?

If no, why not?

**Any other things you would like to share**