

## Yemen at crossroads between peace and war

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After 8 years of war in Yemen, Hans Grundberg, the UN envoy for Yemen, described the ongoing efforts, including the Saudi and Omani talks in Sanaa, as “the closest Yemen has been to real progress towards lasting peace” since the war began. “This is a moment to be seized and built on and a real opportunity to start an inclusive political process under UN auspices to sustainably end the conflict.”<sup>1</sup>

The conflict in Yemen has widely been seen as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Houthis, aligned with Iran, toppled a Saudi-backed government from Sanaa in late 2014, then Yemeni President Abdrabuh al-Mansur Hadi fled first to Aden and then to Riyadh. Saudi Arabia formed an international coalition to wage a war on Yemen in March 2015 in order to restore Hadi to power. Saudi Arabia mediated a transition of power from Hadi to an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) in 2022 in order to address the conflict between forces loyal to Hadi and others opposed.

The Houthis have de facto control of northern Yemen and they have been fighting against a Saudi-led military alliance since 2015. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, through direct and indirect causes, and Yemen is suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, according to the United Nations.

Eight years after the intervention of the Saudi led coalition in the civil war in Yemen, it seems that all sides involved in the war suffer from war fatigue and came to the conclusion that they will not be able to defeat the other side. Saudi Arabia is looking for a way to end the war and the Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said Riyadh's priority is now to, “find a way to have a permanent ceasefire in Yemen.”<sup>2</sup>

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In a televised interview on April 9, 2023, Nasr Aldeen Amer, the head of the Houthi-run Saba News Agency, said, “time is ripe for a solution because the war has dragged on longer than it should have. The Yemeni people have suffered enough, and this aggression should stop, and the blockade should be lifted”.<sup>3</sup>

There are intense diplomatic efforts at different levels to end the fighting:

*The talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran.*

*The talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.*

*The UN initiative to extend the truce in Yemen.*

It is not clear if there is, and if so, what is the mechanism for coordinating between the 3 negotiation channels, but it seems that Saudi Arabia is the only one that participates in all the negotiations and therefore has the ability to synchronize between the various channels.

Despite the efforts to achieve a ceasefire and a peace agreement that will bring an end to the war in Yemen the Houthis escalated the situation on all military fronts to make the most gains before a ceasefire declared and to allow them arriving at the negotiating table in a position of military advantage which they will try to translate into political achievements.

### **Prisoners exchange as confidence-building measure**

The legitimate Yemeni government and the Houthi group agreed in March 2023, on a prisoner exchange deal. The negotiators of the Yemeni government and the Houthis completed an agreement in Switzerland to exchange civilians and military prisoners and detainees after a ten-day round of negotiations under UN auspices and with the participation of the Red Cross.

A Houthi official said on April 9, 2023, the group had received 13 detainees released by Saudi Arabia in exchange for a Saudi detainee freed earlier, ahead of the wider prisoner exchange agreed by the warring sides.<sup>4</sup>

The Houthi rebels and government forces have completed a three-day prisoner exchange on April 16, 2023. The ICRC said that 869 prisoners were freed. Among those exchanged was one woman who government

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forces detained five years ago and accused of organizing explosions that killed dozens. She was freed in exchange for the release of four journalists had been sentenced to death by the Houthis.<sup>5</sup>

It was the most significant prisoner exchange in Yemen since the Arab coalition and the Iran-backed Houthi militia released more than 1,000 detainees in October 2020.

It is not known how many prisoners each side still has but thousands of people are believed to be held as prisoners of war by all sides since the conflict erupted.

Houthi political chief Mahdi al-Mashat said the next round of talks with Saudi Arabia would start after Eid al-Fitr and is expected on April 21, Yemen's Saba news agency reported.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Iran – Saudi Arabia agreement**

Peace efforts in Yemen have also gained momentum after Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to reestablish ties in a deal brokered by China.<sup>7</sup>

Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran in 2016 after its embassy in Tehran was stormed during a dispute between the two countries. At the time, the Kingdom asked Iranian diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours while it evacuated its embassy staff from Tehran.

The China-brokered talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia on March 10, 2023, have raised optimism that reverberations may also be felt throughout Yemen, which has been a critical point throughout the two countries' bitter rivalry.

Saudi Arabia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan and his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian met in Beijing on April 6, 2023, for first time since 2016 to discuss the next steps of their diplomatic rapprochement. In a joint statement issued after the meeting, the foreign ministers "emphasized the importance of following up on the implementation of the Beijing Agreement and its activation in a way that enhances mutual trust, expands the fields of cooperation and helps create security, stability and prosperity in the region.

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Saudi Arabia and Iran have also agreed to reopen their diplomatic missions within 60 days of resuming ties, and will proceed with the necessary measures to ensure that happens in Riyadh and Tehran, as well as in Jeddah and Mashaad, where their general consulates were previously stationed.<sup>8</sup>

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said on April 12, 2023, that Tehran and Riyadh have taken preliminary steps to exchange ambassadors in the context of the agreement to resume diplomatic relations.<sup>9</sup>

An Iranian technical delegation arrived in Saudi Arabia on April 12, 2023, and Iran's embassy in Saudi Arabia opened its gates on same for the first time in seven years.<sup>10</sup> Earlier this week, a Saudi technical delegation had visited Tehran to inspect the Kingdom's embassy.<sup>11</sup>

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said about the war in Yemen that the issue "is an internal Yemeni affair. We are working with Saudi Arabia on ensuring the stability of the region."<sup>12</sup>

Iran promised it would stop arming Yemen's Houthi rebels as part of the deal. This also followed a statement from the Iranian mission to the UN that the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, "would accelerate the ceasefire, help start a national dialogue, and form an inclusive national government in Yemen."<sup>13</sup> But, the US, UK and French navies have reported increasing seizures of Iranian vessels with weapons that were headed to Yemen over the past months, showing Tehran's military support has become more pronounced.

Testifying in April 2023 to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Gen. Michael Kurilla, who leads the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), said the U.S. has intercepted five major weapons shipments from Iran to Yemen in the last 90 days.<sup>14</sup>

Saudi Arabia is also pushing for the reintegration into the Arab League of Iran ally Syria, more than a decade after its suspension over President Bashar Assad's brutal crackdown on pro-democracy protests. The kingdom, which once openly championed Assad's ouster, hosted top diplomats from eight other Arab countries in Jeddah for talks on Syria,

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then issued a statement highlighting the “importance of having an Arab leadership role in efforts to end the crisis.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Houthi response**

The Houthi rebels reacted to the Saudi-Iran accord, portraying China’s role in facilitating the talks as a defeat for what described as U.S. and Israeli imperialism – something the faction have long touted to justify their war efforts in Yemen’s conflict. The group didn’t express praise for the move as an opportunity for a power-sharing government, meaning the latest developments alone will not alter the Houthis’ attitudes immediately.<sup>16</sup>

### **The UN-brokered truce**

The United Nations sponsors new efforts to resolve the Yemeni crisis as it enters its ninth year. A truce announced by the UN roughly a year ago has significantly reduced active hostilities within Yemen, and is still largely respected even though it officially expired in October 2022.

UN special envoy Hans Grundberg told the UN Security Council in March 2023 that there were intense diplomatic efforts at different levels to end the fighting. There is hope that a deal could facilitate broader efforts to end the conflict, which have been helped by the resumption of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia this month.<sup>17</sup>

Mohammed Abdulsalam, a spokesman for the Iran-backed Houthi militia had announced that Houthi officials had met with UN envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg in Oman for talks on the political and humanitarian arrangements of the comprehensive solution, as well as a prisoner swap. The Houthi spokesman, stated that he had arrived with an Omani delegation to Sanaa as part of Muscat's efforts to persuade the group's leaders to agree to the plan to extend the truce and expand it.<sup>18</sup>

The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) has submitted its response and proposed amendments to the peace plan. It has demanded guarantees that the Houthis would not attempt to undermine the plan or renege on pledges.<sup>19</sup>

Deputy head of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, has stressed on the first anniversary of the PLC’s establishment,

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that the Council and its members are going ahead in meeting the objectives and the aspirations of the Yemeni people. Al-Zubaidi stated that the PLC cooperates with the Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and agrees with them on the roadmap for a comprehensive political solution in Yemen. Al-Zubaidi reassured the Yemeni people, in general, and the people of the south, in particular, that the roadmap will prioritize the nation's problems, including the cause of the southerners.<sup>20</sup>

### **The UN-sponsored comprehensive political process**<sup>21</sup>

The latest peace plan for Yemen would take place over three stages. The first would take up six months, the second three and the final one two years.

The plan would kick off with the declaration of a ceasefire in the coming days and a prisoner swap would be held as a trust-building measure between the warring parties.

The parties would then hold direct negotiations to establish how the Yemenis envision a state. This would then be followed by a transitional period.

The plan also calls for reopening all land, air and sea routes and lifting all restrictions on travel so that life could return to normal in government- and Houthi-held regions.

A comprehensive economic reform process, with Saudi Arabia's backing, would also get underway. A committee, comprised of the PLC presidency, Yemeni prime minister and Saudi experts, has been formed to tackle the reforms. The committee would also oversee the merger of the central banks.

### **Saudi – Houthi talks**

The direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have been facilitated by Oman. The United Nations and the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) are not directly part of the Saudi-Houthi talks.

Saudi and Omani delegations arrived in Yemen's capital Sanaa, on April 9, 2023, to negotiate a permanent ceasefire deal with the head of Houthi

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Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat and other Houthi officials. The visit indicates progress in the Oman-mediated consultations between Riyadh and Sanaa, which run in parallel to UN peace efforts.

The Saudi-Houthi talks focused on a full reopening of Houthi-controlled ports and Sanaa airport, payment of wages for public servants, rebuilding efforts and a timeline for "foreign forces" (Saudi coalition forces) to exit the country.<sup>22</sup> The Saudi delegation, left Sanaa on April 13, 2023, without a finalized truce but with plans for more talks, according to Houthi and Yemeni government sources.<sup>23</sup>

Houthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam said peace talks with Saudi Arabia had made progress and further discussions would be held to iron out remaining differences.<sup>24</sup>

Rashad Al-Alimi, president of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, said that Saudi officials informed the council of behind-the-scenes engagements and communications with the Houthis, and that their efforts were intended to achieve a breakthrough in getting the Houthis to sign an agreement with the Yemeni government to end the war.<sup>25</sup>

On April 12, 2023, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani expressed his country's openness to the possibility of reaching a lasting peace in Yemen. The Iranian official noted that his country "agrees to extend the truce" with the aim to "create the favorable conditions for a lasting peace path, which is commensurate with the interests of the Yemeni people."<sup>26</sup>

### **Summary**

Hans Grundberg, the UN envoy for Yemen, described the ongoing efforts, including the Saudi and Omani talks in Sanaa, as "the closest Yemen has been to real progress towards lasting peace" since the war began.

The announcement that Saudi Arabia and Iran were restoring their diplomatic relations have also a positive impact in Yemen and would likely ease the military and political tensions and possibly lead to more understandings between the warring parties in the future.

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It seems that all the parties involved in the war in Yemen are initially interested in achieving a ceasefire which will allow negotiations to reach a comprehensive peace agreement.

Saudi Arabia has designated the Houthis as a terrorist organization in 2014, and the UAE did the same. The U.S. also listed them as a terrorist organization in 2021, but the designation was revoked once Joe Biden became president.<sup>27</sup>

The negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis and the arrival of a Saudi delegation to Sana'a constitute a victory for the Houthis and an expression of Saudi willingness to recognize the Houthis as a legitimate entity in Yemen, even though in practice Saudi Arabia still defines the Houthis as a terrorist organization.

While the arrival of the Saudi delegation in Sanaa in April 2023, has emboldened the Houthi group, it has dealt a severe blow to the Houthis' opponents in Yemen mainly the government, the Southern separatists, and other militias.<sup>28</sup>

A peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis that would end Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen and leave northern Yemen under the control of the Houthis would be considered a failure of Saudi Arabia, which intervened in the civil war in Yemen in order to return power to the legitimate government of Yemen.

A comprehensive peace agreement between the opposing parties in Yemen will be much more complex since there are different groups within the Yemeni society with opposing interests: the Shia Houthis who currently control most of northern Yemen, including the capital Sanaa, the legitimate government of Yemen that controls most of the territory of South Yemen, but in this area, there are also forces that strive for the separatism of South Yemen. Apart from these groups, there is also tribal factionalism and the threat of extremist Islamic organizations like Al-Qaeda.

Achieving a peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis and lifting the blockade on the air and sea ports controlled by the Houthis before reaching a peace agreement between the legitimate government



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of Yemen and the Houthis will weaken the Yemeni government in negotiations and harden the positions of the Houthis. Therefore, Saudi Arabia should synchronize the progress of the processes of a peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis with the progress of the internal Yemeni peace process.

Experts have warned against being too optimistic over the latest talk about peace. Past experience in the Yemeni arena shows that a cautious policy must be adopted vis-à-vis Iran and the Houthis who in the past failed to respect their commitments and used periods of ceasefire to build the power of the Houthis and resume fighting at a time that was convenient for them and the Iranians.

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