



Peace in Yemen

Ashi Al-Kahwati





Abstract

This paper examines the prospects for peace in Yemen. It identifies the main challenges and opportunities, and evaluates their potential impact and likelihood of realisation. It gives an overview of the agendas of the warring sides and the history of past negotiations. It also covers other important issues, such as the war economy, federalism and the role of the international community.



Ashi Al-Kahwati

Analyst

The Swedish Institute of International Affairs



Content

The Stockholm sessions: an important first step	4
Background	4
Why is there a war?.....	4
Previous attempts to reach peace: a history of failed efforts.....	5
The players and their different agendas.....	6
The complexity of the Yemen War: different levels of conflict	6
The Houthis	6
The internationally recognised Yemen Government	7
Saudi Arabia	7
United Arab Emirates	8
Iran	8
Local Yemeni groups	8
Challenges for peace	9
The many players	9
The War Economy	9
Vague and rushed results from the Stockholm sessions	10
Avenues to peace	11
External actors depart the conflict.....	11
International pressure.....	11
Federalism	13
Conclusions	13
Closing remarks and recommendations.....	15
References.....	17



The Stockholm sessions: an important first step

The war in Yemen has been raging for over four years, with no peace in sight. In December 2018, the mediator for the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, managed to gather the official warring parties together for consultations. The internationally recognised Yemeni government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Houthi rebels met in Rimbo, outside Stockholm. Hoping to establish a framework for future peace talks and negotiations through trust-building mechanisms, Griffiths had several pressing issues for the negotiations. Among these were a prisoner swap between the warring parties, re-opening Sanaa international airport, de-escalating the situation in the cities of Hodeida and Taiz, and a plan to begin restoration of the activities of the Yemeni Central Bank in order to pay the salaries of civil servants.

The negotiations lasted around ten days in the period 4–13 December, during which the parties agreed a mechanism for a prisoner swap, an immediate ceasefire in

Hodeida, during which both sides would withdraw their troops under UN monitoring, and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor. In addition, they agreed to meet again in January under the auspices of the UN and to discuss the siege of Taiz in future negotiations together with representatives of Yemeni civil society.

The talks in Sweden can be seen as a major breakthrough in attempts to end the war. The fact that some significant agreements were made is an important first step, especially with regard to the humanitarian disaster. Moreover, the importance of the symbolic value of the talks should not be underestimated as it is the first time since 2016 that the warring sides have met.

While the negotiations in Sweden were a major step forward, there is still much that needs to be resolved before the conflict can be laid to rest. So, what are the prospects for peace in Yemen? What can realistically be expected? This paper discusses the most important challenges and opportunities, and assesses the prospects for peace.

Background

Why is there a war?

Yemen has a long history of war, both before and after the unification of North Yemen and South Yemen in 1990—a history that still has consequences for the conflict today [1, pp. 43–62]. The current war in Yemen began in December 2014, when the Ansar Allah militia, also known as the Houthis, backed by loyalists to Yemen's long-time strong man Ali Abdullah Saleh, seized the capital, Sanaa, and subsequently put the current president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, under house arrest. Hadi fled

to Saudi Arabia and sought military assistance. Subsequently, a Saudi-led coalition initiated a military intervention in March 2015 in order to push back the Houthis.

Initially named Operation Decisive Storm, and led by Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the then newly appointed defence minister of Saudi Arabia, the intervention was only supposed to take a few weeks. The war has since developed into the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world. An estimated 60 000 civilians have been killed and an additional 85 000 children under the age of



five have died from starvation [2] [3]. War crimes have been committed by all sides. For instance, there have been aerial attacks on schools, weddings, funerals, hospitals and markets, and there have been forced displacement and mass arrest of journalists, as well as sexual violence, the targeting of minorities and violations of economic rights [4].

Previous attempts to reach peace: a history of failed efforts

Throughout the war, there have been numerous efforts to achieve peace, but they have all failed [5, pp. 44-58]. When Martin Griffiths assumed office at the end of February 2018, there had already been several attempts to negotiate a peace or organise consultations. The most recent before the Stockholm talks was held in Kuwait in April 2016 but collapsed after 108 days. Before that, there were two rounds of unofficial talks in Geneva. Griffiths' own attempt to get the warring sides to a pre-consultation meeting in August 2018 had also failed [6].

Before these attempts, deals and negotiations took place in the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, that were supposed to end the escalation in violence [5, p. 44]. A Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative in 2011 was initially hailed as an example of a successful UN-Gulf states mediation approach to 'resolving' the Yemen crisis.

The GCC Agreement and failure of the Security Sector Reform

Although the war 'officially began' with the Houthi-Saleh takeover of Sanaa in December 2014, three years of negotiations preceded the outbreak of war [7, pp. 56-123]. When the Arab uprisings spilled over into Yemen in 2011, and the military effectively split, causing further escalation of the tensions into a civil war, Ali Abdullah Saleh was deposed in a power sharing agreement

known as the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative (the GCC deal). In exchange, he received immunity from prosecution and was allowed to maintain his position as head of his party, the General People's Congress (GPC), the largest political party in Yemen. The deal was backed by the then UN Special Adviser on Yemen, Jamal Benomar, the European Union (EU) and the United States. A key aspect of the deal was the formation of an interim government—the Government of National Unity—that would lead Yemen's transition to a new democratic governance structure. Besides members of the GPC, some of the most powerful opposition parties as well as new groups arising from the 2011 protest movements were to be included. Saleh's former vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, was to become interim president. The implementation mechanism for this transition included measures on transnational justice, security sector reform (SSR) and a National Dialogue Process (NDC) with the aim of deciding what a future Yemen would look like—and to settle issues with the Houthis and southern separatists.

Although the 'new' government complied with some of the agreements in the first phase, the implementation mechanism for SSR remained vague [7, pp. 71-75]. The idea of creating a unified army failed, partly due to Saleh's entrenched network in the military and security services, and Hadi's own attempts to solidify his power over the army. This in turn made it difficult for the new government, which was already malfunctioning due to competition instead of power sharing between the groups and their respective ministries, to exercise authority. This led to a further deterioration in public services and renewed protests. In addition, the NDC had failed to address the question of the Houthis and federalism [7, pp. 75-85]. The loyalty of the security and military base also gave Saleh an opportunity to ally himself with his former enemies, the



Houthis, and the subsequent takeover of Sanaa in September 2014 in a 'slow coup' was completed in December 2014 [7, p. 90].

UN Resolution 2216

Shortly after the military intervention by the Saudi-led coalition, UN Security Council Resolution 2216 was adopted in April 2015 [5, p. 55]. It has been the framework for all the negotiations since. It urges the warring parties to return to the framework for political negotiations as stipulated in the GCC Initiative. It also established an arms embargo and demanded an immediate and unconditional Saleh-Houthi withdrawal from captured areas and the handover of their weapons.

Thus far, four years after the resolution was passed, the admonition of the Security Council has not been heeded. Instead, there have been a number of unsuccessful peace negotiation efforts, which have been more or less doomed to failure from the outset. The GCC Initiative gave Saleh an opportunity yet again to insert himself into Yemeni politics, and resolution 2216 in turn failed to recognise the realities on the ground and stipulate the conditions for a peace process accordingly.

The players and their different agendas

The complexity of the Yemen War: different levels of conflict

Often described as either a civil war between the Houthis and the Hadi government, or a regional war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the conflict in Yemen is in fact multi-layered and fragmented. Alongside a national civil war, there are also global, regional and local elements to the conflict. Moreover, the levels of violence often intersect and affect each other. In addition to regional and national power struggles between the political elites, there is also a power struggle between north and south. This section presents the different actors and their complex agendas as a way to understand the complexity of the conflict.

The Houthis

One of the main warring factions in the conflict, the goals of the Houthis have changed over time. Originally, their struggle was existential, a fight for their right to recognition and influence [8, pp. 651-652]. As they have gained more power, however,

their agenda has changed and hardliners within the group have adopted a much more authoritarian approach to governing the areas they control.

Named after their founder, Hussein Badreddin Al-Houthi, the Houthis emerged in the early 1990s as a revivalist movement known as 'Believing Youth'. The main objective was to restore the core ideology of Zayidism—a distinct form of Shi'itism—among their youth [9, pp. 116-118]. As Zayidis from Sa'dah, they had been politically, economically and religiously marginalised by Saleh's policies since the 1970s. Between 2004 and 2010, the Houthis fought six wars with the Saleh administration in what are known as the Sa'dah Wars. Throughout these years, they gained more territory and strengthened their military capacity.

By the time the anti-Saleh uprising took place in 2011, they had already conquered a significant amount of territory beyond their home area. Saleh was replaced by Hadi during the NDC in 2011. Although some Houthi moderates participated in the NDC,



Houthi hardliners were still fighting and gaining more ground [9, p. 340]. In 2014, they took advantage of the protests against an unpopular fuel price increase by the Hadi government and allied themselves with their former enemy [8, p. 654]. Having gained access to more weapons in 2015, they were also able to advance south towards Aden before being pushed back by the Saudi-led coalition.

While far from being a monolithic organisation, the senior leadership has now adopted a nationalistic narrative in which the war is being fought against external aggressors and oppressors—symbolised by Saudi Arabia, the USA and Israel [9, pp. 132-133]. They may be skilled warriors, but the Houthis are not experienced at governing, and thus far only seem to know how to govern through fear and violence in the form of a nascent police state.

The longer the war has lasted, the more sectarian the Houthis have become [7, p. 323]. Hardliners in particular try to impose their dogmatic views not only on other tribes, but also among other Zayidis. In 2017, they killed Saleh who was trying to switch sides, thereby destroying the political cover they had gained through his GPC.

The internationally recognised Yemen Government

The government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi wants to push the Houthis back and reclaim its lost territories, thereby reuniting Yemen. It is seen as legitimate and is internationally recognised as a result of the negotiations in the NDC, when the former president was forced to step down in favour of his deputy. After the Houthi takeover of Sanaa, the majority of the government fled to Riyadh or to Aden, which they declared the new capital of Yemen.

Although it does have some loyalists in parts of the country, the Hadi government is considered weak, corrupt and ineffective. In addition, frictions within the government, between the government and its coalition partners and between the coalitions partners themselves have resulted in fragmentation on the ground and undermined the legitimacy of the Hadi government.

Saudi Arabia

Since March 2015, the main external player in the Yemen war has been the Saudi-led coalition, which consists of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) [10, pp. 146-149]. Saudi Arabia mostly conducts airstrikes while the UAE has deployed ground troops inside Yemen. The USA, the UK and France also contribute indirectly through the provision of logistical support and intelligence.

The official reason for the intervention of the coalition is that it was at the request of the Hadi, government. This provides the coalition with the legitimacy to engage in the war. However, while aiding the Yemeni government might be the official reason, Yemen has long been considered a 'domestic issue' for Saudi Arabia, which has a long history dating back to the 1930s of meddling in the internal affairs of its neighbour [10, pp. 143, 148].

Yemen can thus be understood as part of a larger power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which Saudi Arabia blames for arming the Houthis and trying to create a 'Gulf version' of Hezbollah right on its border [11]. Although denied by Iran, and seen as an exaggerated threat by many analysts, the agenda and participation of Saudi Arabia can thus be understood as a way of securing their own influence and interests in the region by trying to push back Iranian influence that is channelled through the Houthis.



United Arab Emirates

While the agenda of the UAE is officially strategically aligned with that of Saudi Arabia, it seems to have developed its own interests in Yemen over the course of the conflict that differ from those of Saudi Arabia [7, pp. 98-102]. Although both countries officially support and fight on the behalf of the Hadi government, they also support local militias, tribes and security forces in various parts of Yemen and their objectives are in several respects at odds with each other.

The groups backed by the coalition are, for instance, not only opposed to the Houthis, but have also fought each other on several occasions, as well as loyalists to the Hadi government [12, p. 21]. A prime example is the Islamist party, Islah, the main opposition party in northern Yemen, which is backed by Saudi Arabia but strongly opposed by the UAE due to its association with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The UAE has not only supported secessionist groups in the South that resist the Hadi government, but also trained, equipped and paid local militias such as 'Elite Forces' and 'Security Belts' [7, p. 366]. Some of these groups have Salafists in leadership positions who target Islahis, as well as Houthis and loyalists to the Hadi government. This can be understood as part of a long-term UEA strategy to secure parts of the territory around the coast of the Red Sea, as well as a corridor to the Horn of Africa where it has already established military bases in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Iran

The war in Yemen is often described as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia, which supports the Hadi government, and Iran, which backs the Houthis. This narrative is not new but was in fact already being deployed

by Saleh during the Sa'dah Wars and later by the Hadi government. It has also been used by the Trump administration, which sees the conflict in Yemen through a counterterrorism lens, or more recently as part of an overall effort to push back what it considers to be Iranian expansionism in the region.

However, several analysts consider the actual involvement of Iran in Yemen to be rather limited [13] [8] [10, pp. 149-150]. Although there is proof that it has supplied limited amounts of light weapons and advice, the evidence that Iran has provided the Houthis with heavy weaponry is thus far scarce.

While advice has probably been given to the Houthis, this does not mean that the Houthis follow Iranian instructions or wishes. In fact, according to some sources, the Houthis have done the opposite; for instance, by taking Sanaa and moving south, despite Iranian advice not to do so. A more accurate assessment is that the ties between the Houthis, Iran and Hezbollah have deepened and will continue to do so as a result of the very same attempts by Saudi Arabia to prevent it.

For Iran, the conflict in Yemen is above all a very cheap way to keep Saudi Arabia on the back foot and divert attention from Syria and Iraq. While Riyadh invests several billion dollars a month, the level of expenditure by Tehran is minimal in comparison.

Local Yemeni groups

In addition to the regional and national war between political elites, the root causes of this conflict are local, and there are deep underlying historical tensions linked to the political and economic marginalisation of certain groups and areas [14]. Saleh's autocratic rule of 33 years was characterised by patronage and corruption through which



some groups and political parties gained power and resources in exchange for their loyalty. One such group is Islah, which was established in 1990 and allied itself with the GPC, thereby gaining more power and, in turn, strengthening Saleh's image as the established ruler of a unified Yemen [15, p. 4].

Although Islah eventually opposed Saleh, the uprising in 2011 was directed towards both on account of their position as northern elites. The southern secessionists, represented by movements such as Hirak, were among the main opponents, having called for an independent state since 2007 [5, p. 47]. The tensions between north and south, and between elite and marginalised groups, still exist and continue to play an

important role in the complex situation in Yemen.

There are far too many local actors to enumerate in this brief, but their various agendas and motivations are based on historical grievances. While the government claims to control 80 per cent of Yemeni territory together with the coalition, in reality there is no unified force that controls the situation on the ground.

Challenges for peace

There are many obstacles to achieving a sustainable peace in Yemen. The three main ones are discussed below: the large number of players, the war economy and the vague outcomes from the Stockholm sessions.

The many players

The more players that are involved, the more difficult it will be to come to any peace deal that will be substantial enough to accommodate the demands of all the parties involved. Reaching such a deal will therefore probably take a considerable amount of time, during which new breaches could arise.

This is particularly true for the Houthis and other internal actors, especially Islah, between which a peace deal will need to be brokered to resolve the local dimensions of the war. In addition, the Houthis are not a

homogenous group, but consist of different factions with different agendas, which further complicates the issue.

The proxy dimension of the Yemen war is of particular relevance when it comes to future mediation. Since 2015, the war has been internationalised to such an extent that although the war is taking place in Yemen, it has far wider geopolitical reach than just resolving the internal conflict. Moreover, the agendas of the outside powers are fuelling and inflaming the local conflicts in Yemen.

The War Economy

The economic situation in Yemen has steadily deteriorated over several decades, and this has affected the living conditions of most Yemenis [7, pp. 45-46]. The war has led to an unprecedented economic disintegration and a collapse of the financial sector, which has further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. One particularly



important aspect is the situation with the central bank. In 2016, the Hadi government decided to move the central bank to Aden but the resources needed to run its operations remained in Sanaa [7, p. 113]. This has led to a confusing situation for international banks and crippled the government financially. Government employees in Yemen have not received their salaries for over 2 years. This is particularly damaging, given the fact that many families rely on them as their main source of income.

The war economy and the black market, which have replaced most of the economic institutions in Yemen, present a serious challenge to any peace-making efforts. They harm Yemeni society and restrict its ability to recover from the war by amplifying the humanitarian crisis; and they create incentives for the players to continue a conflict from which they benefit economically.

Leaders from all the warring parties benefit economically from the war, for instance by imposing taxes and tariffs on imported goods such as weapons, fuel, food, medicine and hard currency. All this reduces the incentives for peace [12, pp. 24-30]. Moreover, while many Yemenis suffer from the war economy, it has also created opportunities for some to at least provide for their families, for instance by joining a militia or manning a checkpoint [7, p. 556]. The war economy has created a situation in which a few are benefiting economically, many are dependent on it for survival but most are excluded, with little chance of improving their situation.

Vague and rushed results from the Stockholm sessions

While the Stockholm sessions represent a significant step in the right direction, the agreement can in many respects be considered too vague. Imprecise language

may sometimes be necessary to persuade warring parties to agree on something, but a vague deal runs the risk of leaving vital details to chance.

One example of something the parties agreed on was a complete ceasefire in Hodeida. This is of course a positive outcome. In the absence of specific details on how such a ceasefire is to be implemented, however, there is a significant risk that it will not be maintained.

Another example is the agreement to redeploy and hand over weapons to 'local security forces', which was made without a proper definition of what those security forces would consist of. This provides too much room for different interpretations as well as disingenuous attempts by the warring parties to push their own agenda. There have already been tendencies for this to happen, for instance when the Houthis claimed to have redeployed their troops when in fact, they had just handed over their weapons and uniforms to local groups loyal to them.

The agreements arrived at in Stockholm can thus be considered more symbolic than effective, and were probably the result of a rushed process. For instance, the timeline for the redeployment was set at 21 days from the day it was announced, but has still not happened more than five months later.

Although an important first step, if they lead to an early failure, the agreements have the potential to do more harm than good in the long run. Ambiguous agreements are not only problematic in the sense that they cause confusion and indecision with regard to implementation mechanisms, they also have the potential to be used by the warring parties to advance their own agendas. An illusory peace that breaks down rapidly is likely to lead to deeper mistrust between the warring parties, and make future political negotiations more difficult.



Avenues to peace

While achieving peace in Yemen presents many challenges, the outlook is not totally bleak. There are also important avenues to peace. The three most important are discussed below: withdrawal of external actors from the conflict, international pressure and federalism.

External actors depart the conflict

The prospects for successful mediation and a peaceful solution would be significantly improved if external actors, such as the Saudi-led coalition, the USA and Iran, were to cease their direct and indirect involvement in Yemen. Since the conflict is already highly complex, with many actors driving their own agendas, any simplification of the situation would present a significant opportunity.

For the Saudi-led coalition, and specifically Saudi Arabia itself, this would entail ending its aerial attacks. The UAE, on other hand, would have to end its deployment of troops around the Red Sea coast and both countries would have to cease their support for local proxies and groups, although the UAE is said to have greater involvement with proxies. Iran/Hezbollah would have to end their involvement, be it ideological or in the form of supplying weapons to the Houthis.

For the USA, ceasing its involvement in the war might be seen as more difficult. Its agenda in Yemen is two-fold: to provide support to the Saudi-led coalition, on the one hand, and counterterrorism aims, on the other. However, an important first step would be to cease its military support to Saudi- and UAE-led forces.

There are several reasons why this would represent an opportunity for peace. One important aspect is that the number of actors and agencies would be reduced. Removing external actors would not necessarily mean an end to the war or the violence, since the internal dimension of the war in Yemen is complex enough to prolong the fighting for some time. However, by removing the involvement of the Saudi-led coalition, the 'fuel supply' for the conflict would be greatly decreased in terms of money, weapons and soldiers. Another factor is that the amount of violence and the number of casualties would be likely to decrease if the aerial attacks by the coalition were to stop—and thus the humanitarian situation would significantly improve, allowing efforts to focus on rebuilding Yemeni society.

International pressure

In addition to the mediation efforts of the UN, the concentrated and sustained will and efforts of other actors in the international community will be paramount to a push for sustainable solutions. Actors such as the EU and Russia are in a unique position to negotiate with, and possibly influence, several Yemeni groups as well as Iran. As indirect supporters of the Saudi-led coalition, other actors, such as the USA and to some extent the UK and France, have a significant amount of leverage in pushing the coalition towards more active participation in mediation efforts.

Pressure from the international community was one of the main reasons why the meeting in Rimbo took place just three months after failed efforts to get the warring parties to meet in Geneva. Two important events occurred between these two events:



the death of the Saudi national and Washington Post journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, in the Saudi Arabian Consulate and the international, and US Congressional—outcry over the involvement of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in the killing. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi also shed more international light on the war in Yemen and the part that the Saudi-led coalition plays in it, which was also the topic of the journalist's final piece.

The European Union

Apart from the UN, the EU is the only western international organisation with a working relationship with both the main warring parties [16]. Until Griffith's appointment as UN mediator, the only western diplomat to have met the Houthi leadership was Antonia Calvo Puerta, who leads the EU's Track 2 efforts involving multiple Yemeni tribes. In addition to cooperation with the tribes, the EU also has an opportunity to facilitate Griffith's mediation efforts. The UK has previously vetoed greater involvement by Brussels on several occasions but the imminent departure of the UK from the EU means that it now has a renewed opportunity to press for solutions and to mediate.

Russia

Russia has no deep involvement in the Yemen conflict as of the spring of 2019 but it still has an opportunity to engage with, and influence, several Yemeni groups, such as the Houthis and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), in mediation efforts. This is due both to its own strategic interests and its historical connections [17].

Russia was the only country to abstain from voting on UN Security Council resolution 2216, which makes it look somewhat 'neutral' in the eyes of the Houthis—something Russia could use to its advantage in order to push the Houthis to participate in negotiations. This has already happened to a

certain extent. Since 2014, Moscow has engaged more with the Houthis than any great power and pushed them to participate in multilateral diplomacy. The moderate faction in particular has had Track 2 dialogues with Saudi Arabia.

The United States

The USA has a significant amount of leverage over the Saudi-led coalition and is thus a key player in pushing both Saudi Arabia and the UAE towards compromise in at least ending the regional dimension of the war [11]. This is particularly true of Saudi Arabia, with which the USA has had the longest relationship of all the states in the Middle East, most notably with regard to the oil and arms industries [18]. Saudi Arabia is reliant on spare parts, munitions and technical support from US companies, which it has received with the blessing of successive US administrations. In fact, some analysts claim that the US arms relationship with Saudi Arabia is the most important leverage that the USA has, and that this should be used as a bargaining chip to end the war in Yemen. If the USA, and to a lesser extent the UK, were to end the flow of materiel and logistical support, the Saudi Air Force would quickly be grounded. The USA could either completely withdraw its support or make it conditional. The US Congress could push the Trump administration to end US involvement.

Creative diplomacy

Besides negotiations at the national level, the complexity of the war also demands diplomacy between the warring sides at different levels and on different tracks. This is sometimes referred to as Track 2 or 'Track 1.5' dialogue, that is, informal (Track 2) or semi-formal (Track 1.5) meetings behind closed doors in which the actors or their representatives can build relationships and trust, and search for common ground. For instance, some kind of settlement between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia is required,



since the Saudis perceive the Houthis as a threat to their internal security. However, since they are not officially at war with each other, there are no formal talks. Here, finding avenues in which people close to both sides could engage in diplomacy-by-proxy would be a useful way to build the minimum amount of trust needed to pursue proper negotiations.

Federalism

Federalism is the idea of dividing Yemen into a number of semi-independent regions. A single unified Yemen is probably no longer feasible as the war has left it fragmented to an unprecedented extent. The current situation, with multiple actors waging war and holding different territory, is a form of de facto fragmentation.

One opportunity for achieving peace might be to re-examine decentralisation and what it would mean for Yemen. Various analysts and policymakers have suggested different solutions based on this idea. Some say that Yemen should be divided into two areas, some three and some even four. While the details differ, the core idea is to increase autonomy and thus stability, which would enable society to be rebuilt. There are in the spring of 2019 currently examples of areas of stability under local authority [19, p. 11]. This could be the only way to reach an agreement

in the peace negotiations, since the different players are unlikely to accept a solution based on a unified Yemen under a single authority.

Historically, however, the issue of federalism has been contested. It was a recurrent theme in all the major wars in both North and South Yemen, especially following the unification of the country in 1990. Discussions about federalism and decentralisation were prevalent during the transition process of 2012–2014 [7, pp. 77–81]. This was partly a way of dealing with the demands of southern separatist groups and the Houthis, by redistributing control over resources from the national elites in the north of Yemen to the oil and gas producing areas.

Although participants in the NDC agreed to divide Yemen into a federal state, there were disputes over much of the detail, such as border, tribal, identity and economic issues. Hadi eventually chose to divide Yemen into six federal regions, which the Houthis and several southern separatists rejected on ideological as well as economic grounds [20, p. 11]. Moreover, dissatisfaction with the agreement played a part in the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September 2014. Thus, while federalism represents an avenue to peace, the difficulty of agreeing on what it actually entails should not be underestimated.

Conclusions

Many challenges and obstacles stand in the way of peace in Yemen. However, there are also avenues to peace. To what extent might these help Yemen to overcome the challenges? How realistic is it that these opportunities might be grasped? These questions are discussed below in an attempt to assess the prospects for peace in Yemen.

One challenge is the large number of players in the Yemen war. This has escalated the violence and exacerbated the humanitarian situation. One potential solution to this problem would be if the external actors, such as Saudi Arabia, were to depart the conflict. Since there are so many internal players, this would not completely resolve the issue, but it might



significantly alleviate the situation. The question is: how realistic is this prospect?

Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi view Yemen as a piece in a larger strategic game of competing influences in the Middle East and North Africa. Yemen can for instance be understood as part of the UAE's experiment of implementing a more aggressive foreign policy, as well as establishing a military and strategic presence in the coastline around the Red Sea coast and the Horn of Africa, and responding to the perceived threat of political Islam in the shape of Islah.

In addition to countering the threat of looming Iranian influence in the Gulf, Yemen is also viewed as a domestic affair in Saudi Arabia, which shares an 1800-km long border with Yemen. Therefore, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE intend to stay in Yemen in some form in the long term, even if there were to be some pressure from the USA and other international powers. In addition, the personal prestige of Mohammed bin Salman, as the main architect of the Saudi-led intervention, is dependent on winning this war—or at least being perceived to have won it, be that through continuation of the use of force or a face-saving withdrawal. Thus, unless there is a significant change in the current situation, it is highly unlikely that the fact of there being so many players will be resolved.

Probably one of the greatest challenges, if not the most serious challenge, is the war economy and the different spoilers that it creates. Many people, especially military leaders on all sides, are profiting from the war. It is also important to remember that the war economy has arisen partly as a result of Yemen's collapsed and fragmented economy.

Rebuilding the economy in Yemen will be a very difficult task but it is also vital and possibly the most important factor in

resolving the conflict—with regard to both the immediate humanitarian disaster and famine, and securing long-term stability in the region. It is fundamental to recognise the connection between the collapsed functions of the Yemeni Central Bank and the increasing importance of the black market. This has in turn fuelled corruption and increased the power of war profiteers, particularly since it has become more difficult to track revenues and income flows.

In the short term, restoring the functions of the Yemeni Central Bank is therefore vital, as is resuming payment of the salaries of civil servants. This should be emphasised in future mediation efforts. Sanctions on individuals could be another solution for dealing with some aspects of corruption. However, in the long term, the issue of rebuilding the economy and other institutions of society is closely related to the question of decentralisation and federalism.

The fragmentation of Yemen makes the idea of a single unified Yemen appear unrealistic to many analysts. It is therefore possible to argue that federalism would provide the necessary foundation for rebuilding various parts of Yemen with a functioning economy while also addressing some of the issues around economic marginalisation. This would in turn have the potential to obstruct some elements of the war economy.

However, the likelihood of these measures being implemented is slim. After all, it would require a substantial amount of effort on all sides, including the warring parties themselves, which has so far appeared unlikely. Moreover, it would require pressure from the international community as well as the involvement of external powers that also benefit from the war economy.

Finally, there is the issue of the vague agreements arising from the peace negotiations. This has been a problem not



only at the Stockholm meeting, but also in several previous agreements between the warring parties and the international community. Ambiguous agreements are problematic since they only push the problems down the line and increase the risk of an early breakdown.

One obvious solution to this problem would be to make future agreements more concrete, through a greater focus on implementation mechanisms in continuing peace negotiations. In order to do this, the international community would need to put pressure on the warring parties on all sides to continue with consultations and future negotiations, and it would have to be ready to help steer these in the right direction. The negotiations need to focus on solutions that all sides can realistically agree on and are concrete enough to be implemented.

The case of Security Council resolution 2216 is of particular relevance here, in terms of both failing to accept the realities on the ground, and preventing future dialogue. The

international community needs to steer future agreements towards more realistic starting points. It can also provide support through other, more creative, forms of diplomacy that can enable regional dialogue and build the necessary trust that will be vital in future peace talks.

Albeit with flawed results, international pressure has worked in the past: it was US pressure that meant the talks in Stockholm could take place so soon after the failed attempts just three months before. At the time, Congressional outrage over the Khashoggi murder and the role of Saudi Arabia in Yemen made an especially important contribution to the US pressure on the Saudis.

As mentioned above, the international community has proved able to play a significant role in pushing for mediation efforts between the warring sides. It is likely that it will continue to do so, although there is a risk that efforts will decrease over time as momentum is lost.

Closing remarks and recommendations

After two and a half years of political deadlock and a total absence of peace talks, the Stockholm talks can rightly be considered a breakthrough. However, the question remains, what are the prospects for peace in Yemen? This brief has tried to answer this question by examining: (a) the different actors in the conflict and their agendas; (b) the challenges; and (c) the avenues to peace in Yemen.

In conclusion, while the Stockholm talks were a step in the right direction, the prospects for peace do not look good. Achieving a sustainable peace faces several significant challenges, such as the large number of players and their separate agendas, the war economy and that previous

peace agreements have all been too vague, making them either difficult to implement or unrealistic. There are also possibilities, such as that external actors might quit the conflict, that international pressure will continue to drive progress or that federalism can offer a solution to the deadlock. However, it is unlikely that these opportunities will be enough to resolve the problems, and they would require a great deal of concerted effort.

Nonetheless, while the prospects for peace in Yemen might not look good, there are still things that can and must be done. Some recommendations on the most important actions that would help increase the chances for peace in Yemen are set out below.



Recommendations

Continue the peace talks	Rebuild the economy	Increase international pressure
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Replace Security Council resolution 2216• Be more concrete in future peace agreements• Use creative diplomacy to build trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unify the central bank• Resume payment of salaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The United States, the European Union and Russia have an opportunity to play a more active role• Put pressure on regional powers• Put pressure on for peace talks to maintain momentum



References

- [1] S. Phillips, *Yemen's democracy experiment in regional perspective: Patronage and pluralized authoritarianism.*, Springer, 2008.
- [2] "Yemen War death toll now exceeds 60,000 according to latest ACLED data," 11 Dec 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-war-death-toll-now-exceeds-60000-according-latest-acled-data>.
- [3] P. Karasz, "85,000 Children in Yemen May Have Died of Starvation," 21 November 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/21/world/middleeast/yemen-famine-children.html>.
- [4] Brookings, "What's next for Yemen's tragic war?," 9 May 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/what-next-for-yemens-tragic-war/>.
- [5] M. Asseburg, W. Lacher and M. Transfeld, "Mission Impossible? UN mediation in Libya, Syrien and Yemen," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik: German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, 2018.
- [6] P. Salisbury, "Is the Yemen Peace Process Coming Back to Life?," International Crisis Group, 7 September 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/yemen-peace-process-coming-back-life>.
- [7] H. Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis: Autocracy, Neo-liberalism and the Disintegration of a State.*, Verso, 2017.
- [8] T. Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment," *International Affairs*, vol. 96, no. 3, pp. 647-663, 2016.
- [9] M. Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A history of the Houthi conflict*, London: Hurst & Company, 2017.
- [10] D. Byman, "Yemen's Disastrous War," *Survival*, pp. 141-158, 2018.
- [11] G. Johnsen, "A Roadmap for Yemen Peace Talks," 19 December 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://tcf.org/content/report/roadmap-yemen-peace-talks/?agreed=1>.
- [12] P. Salisbury, "National Chaos, Local Order," *Chatham House*, 20 December 2017.
- [13] E. Kendall, "Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?," Atlantic Council, 2017.
- [14] International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Is peace possible?," 2016.
- [15] S. P. Yadav, "Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood and the perils of powersharing," *Brookings Institution. The Rethinking Political Islam series*, 2015.
- [16] F. Al-Muslimi, "The Iran Nuclear Deal and Yemen's War: An Opportunity for EU Statecraft," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, 18 November 2018. [Online]. Available: http://sanaacenter.org/files/An_Opportunity_for_EU_Statecraft_en.pdf.
- [17] S. Ramani, "Russia's Mediating Role in Southern Yemen," Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, 12 October 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/77482>.
- [18] B. Riedel, "After Khashoggi, US arms sales to the Saudis are essential leverage," Brookings, Wednesday 10 October 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/10/10/after-khashoggi-us-arms-sales-to-the-saudis-are-essential-leverage/>.
- [19] A. Ghanem, "Addressing social fragmentation in Yemen," *Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies*, 2019.
- [20] A. Longley Alley et al, "Collapse of the Houthi-Saleh alliance and the future of Yemen's war in," in *Politics, Governance, and Reconstruction in Yemen*, vol. 29, The Project on Middle East Political Science, 2018, pp. 9-14.



About UI

Established in 1938, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) is an independent research institute on foreign affairs and international relations. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field. Copyright of this publication is held by UI. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content of this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written consent of UI.

The Swedish Institute of International Affairs

Visiting Address: Drottning Kristinas väg 37, Stockholm

Postal Address: Box 27 035, 102 51 Stockholm

Phone: +46 8 511 768 00

www.ui.se info@ui.se Twitter: [@UISweden](#) [@ResearchUI](#)