

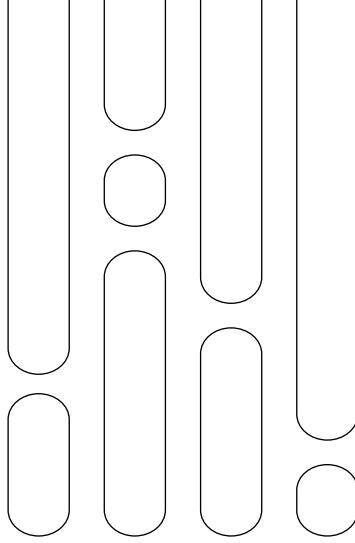
*Position Paper*

# THE OUTCOMES OF POLITICAL EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE YEMENI CRISIS

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Amid the ongoing geostrategic shifts in the Middle East which may lead the region from the present raging conflicts to a phase of security and stability, the Yemeni arena has witnessed new developments. It is hoped that these developments lead to inclusive negotiations to settle the longstanding crisis in the country. This hope is based on the all-out efforts made through Omani mediation, the UN efforts to bring the warring sides – the Houthis in Sana`a and the Presidential Leadership Council and the government in Aden – and Saudi Arabia and Iran – two countries with substantial influence in Yemen. The core of all these efforts is to bring peace to Yemen and end the protracted conflict that has resulted in countless deaths, devastation and the displacement of hundreds of thousands.

The timing of the recent efforts – which came a few days following the détente agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two regional heavyweights – raises some questions. What are the incentives and dimensions of these efforts? How do the direct and indirect parties to the Yemeni conflict view such efforts? What are the internal and external obstacles to the crisis settlement amid the regional and international efforts? What scenarios are likely to emerge in light of these recent efforts considering the advantages and disadvantages facing all the parties to the eight-year Yemeni conflict? This report sheds light on these urgent questions.

## **The Nature of the Political Efforts to Settle the Yemeni Crisis**

As part of new political efforts to extend the truce between the parties to the conflict and build consensus on outstanding issues, Sana`a and Aden have recently turned into hubs for mediators and Arab and international delegations. These visits aimed at implementing what was agreed upon during the talks between the parties to the conflict over the past weeks. The following highlights the most salient political efforts to resolve the Yemeni crisis and assesses the most important outcomes.

### **Arab and International Efforts to Resolve the Crisis**

#### ***Omani mediation***

Oman is the most important mediator in bringing together the views of the conflicting parties. The Omanis have hosted many rounds of talks with the warring parties in Yemen and put forward several initiatives to resolve the crisis. Omani efforts gained momentum following the agreement signed between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Beijing on March 10, 2023. This was evident in the visit paid by an Omani diplomatic delegation to Sana`a on April 9, 2023, which included the chief Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdul-Salam who lives in Muscat. The delegation was dispatched to dis-

cuss the extension of the truce which ended in October 2022 for another 6-month period and to mediate a permanent ceasefire in Yemen to bring the curtain down on the most dangerous stage of the conflict in the country.

### ***Saudi mediation***

On April 6, 2023, only four days prior to the Omani delegation's visit to Sana`a, Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman met with the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council of Yemen Rashad al-Alimi, in Riyadh. During the meeting, the two leaders discussed peace efforts within the framework of a comprehensive political process under the auspices of the UN to end the human suffering and restore security, stability and development in Yemen. Moreover, a Saudi delegation was sent to Sana`a one day after the Omani delegation's arrival to the Yemeni capital. The purpose of the visit was to support Saudi diplomatic efforts to reach a permanent ceasefire agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in preparation for ending the ongoing war in the country.

In addition, the Saudis, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber, met with Alimi on April 16, 2023. During the meeting, Alimi and members of the Presidential Leadership Council were briefed on the positive results of the meetings in Sana`a, with the participation of the Omani delegation, aiming at reviving the political process to achieve a comprehensive and sustainable solution in Yemen.

### ***UN mediation***

Over a period of 10 days, starting from March 11, 2023, Geneva, under the auspices of the UN, represented by its envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), hosted negotiations between the Yemeni government and the Houthis to conclude a prisoner exchange deal. At the end of the talks on March 20, 2023, the two sides signed an agreement to exchange some 887 detainees – the Yemeni government and the Arab coalition forces to support legitimacy in Yemen would release [706](#) Houthis in exchange for 181 detainees affiliated with the government and the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition. According to global media outlets, the exchange will be followed by others on the basis of an “all for all” deal involving all remaining detainees.

## **Understandings and Outcomes of the Recent Efforts**

### ***Renewing the Truce for Another Six Months***

The abovementioned political efforts in Yemen have resulted in media reports about an agreement between the warring parties for another 6-month

truce as a prelude to starting talks about entering a two-year transitional period. The reports added that the [truce](#) will allow for re-exporting oil, paying salaries of employees and opening Sana`a International Airport to international destinations.

### ***Receiving Saudi Arabia's Delegation in Sana`a***

As a result of these recent efforts, the head of Houthi Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat received both the Saudi and Omani delegations. The published images captured the warm reception of the Saudi delegation including an embrace between Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed al-Jaber and Houthi leader Mahdi al-Mashat. A group photo also showed the Saudi ambassador and the Houthi leader in the center, accompanied by members of the Saudi and Omani delegations.

Saudi Arabia has been making steady efforts to end the crisis in Yemen since its early endeavors with the Gulf countries to resolve the crisis in 2011 through the Gulf initiative and its 2021 initiative to reach a comprehensive political settlement. The country has also provided extensive and ongoing financial support to Yemen, the latest of which was a \$1 billion deposit in the Central Bank of Yemen, contrary to what the Houthis have alleged over the past years.

### ***Implementing the Prisoner Swap Deal***

The prisoner swap deal between the conflicting sides in Yemen has been implemented. Under the deal, 887 prisoners were exchanged between April 14-16 on ICRC flights. The detainees included former Defense Minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi, Major General Nasser Mansour Hadi (brother of former Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi) and four journalists kidnaped in 2015 and sentenced to death by the Houthis in 2020 on charges of spying for Saudi Arabia. They also included Lieutenant General Ali Mohsen Afash's sons, the brother of Vice Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council Brigadier General Tariq Saleh and a number of affiliates of the Arab coalition.

The recent Arab and international efforts in Yemen stem from political and humanitarian reasons. They have, however, gained more traction than the previous ones as they came a few weeks after the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement to restore diplomatic relations. The agreement allows for a stable environment that could help in resolving the rest of the contentious issues, such as the non-payment of salaries and the closure of the main roads between the governorates which are either under the Houthis' or government's control. This is in addition to recommencing operations at Yemeni

ports and airports, paying the wages of public servants and planning the reconstruction and rebuilding of the country to pave the way for a sustainable peace in Yemen.

The outcomes of the recent Arab and international efforts in Yemen are significant in the context of building confidence between the warring parties. Their commitment to the prisoner swap deal reflects a genuine desire to strengthen and build mutual trust and to turn the page on the bitter past. It also shows a desire to accept the postponement of sensitive issues such as the state's control of arms and the seizure of weapons from the Houthis, the formation of a new political equation in Yemen and the issue of the Southern Movement. The recent political endeavors to settle the Yemeni crisis will not be effective in the long term if the root causes, rather than the superficial ones, are not addressed. Foremost among the fundamental causes of the crisis in Yemen is the issue of the Southern Transitional Council which does not hide its objection to any settlement that does not take its demands into account.

### **The Conditions Set by the Parties to the Conflict**

The seemingly intractable Yemeni crisis has been the main hindrance to re-establishing diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran. As the two countries have reached a diplomatic breakthrough, there must be some agreement or a vision to settle the crisis in Yemen. The Yemeni issue is central to both Saudi Arabia and Iran and unless there is progress in the Yemen file, the Saudi-Iranian agreement will not be successful.

The first of Saudi Arabia's conditions is that the Houthis must remain committed to any future agreement and not to back down from it, as happened in the past. Saudi Arabia has conditions that go beyond de-escalation and the halting of attacks by the Houthis – a proxy group used by Iran to target the kingdom. They also go further than obtaining security guarantees, including establishing a buffer zone with Houthi-held areas along the Yemen-Saudi border. Rather, the kingdom is after an effective settlement that puts an end to Yemen's prolonged turmoil through a comprehensive political process that leads to the formation of a united national government that meets the aspirations of all Yemenis and achieves Saudi Arabia's interest in protecting its national security. Therefore, the Saudi conditions are ensuring a permanent ceasefire, supporting the prisoner exchange process and exploring the prospects for dialogue between the Yemeni parties to bring about a sustainable peace. Saudi Arabia wants the parties to the conflict to go beyond the post-armistice phase, through which Riyadh succeeded in putting an end to the escalation and directing the parties to the conflict to-

ward the path of resolving the crisis for the benefit of Yemen and the region as a whole.

As for Iran's conditions, Iran is aware that the success of the agreement with Saudi Arabia and the end of its regional isolation are linked to playing a positive role in Yemen. Unless Iran reaps benefits from the agreement with Saudi Arabia in regard to the latter's orientations toward it, and its position on contentious issues, including its escalation in the context of the Iranian nuclear file as well as other files of importance to Iran, such as the Syrian file, which is witnessing progress in parallel with the Yemeni file, Iran could thwart the settlement process in Yemen. In the meantime, Iran will not accept the marginalization of the Houthis and will be keen to ensure that they secure a share of power and wealth from any settlement. Iran is not against quelling the situation in Yemen as this is a prerequisite to any settlement, yet it will continue to support the Houthis and only accept a settlement that does not undercut their role in the Yemeni arena.

The Houthis also have conditions, most notably, finding a new equation for the relationship with Saudi Arabia. This is why the Houthis have conditioned in the ongoing talks that Saudi Arabia signs any settlement agreement as a party to the conflict and rather than as a mediator – a demand that both Iran and Oman have asked the Houthis to back down from. Another Houthi condition is the normalization of relations with the region's countries. This is in addition to translating their gains on the ground into any potential settlement, i.e., securing a significant share of power within the framework of any settlement, as well as acquiring a share of Yemen's resources and wealth. This will allow them to identify the modalities for the creation of a consolidated central bank and establish a mechanism to pay the salaries of all state employees – including the army and the Houthi military elements – from oil and gas revenues. The Houthis also seek to retain their power and weapons and not to make any concessions in this regard in any agreement. Hence, they want to ensure that the mechanism by which the forces will be integrated is in their favor so that they do not lose their monopoly over arms.

Moreover, the Houthis look to a settlement that enables them to obtain a broad representation in the transitional government, especially in sovereign ministries. Not to mention testing the terms of any agreement, including the lifting of the air and sea blockade imposed on some areas, the arrival of aid and other agreed upon terms.

It can be said, in general, that the complexities of war require real solutions to the roots of the conflict and the abandonment of exclusion and one-sidedness as a prerequisite for moving forward in any settlement, especially

since the years of conflict have finally proved the failure of any party to resolve it in its favor.

### **Factors and Reasons for the Recent Efforts**

The factors and reasons behind the recent political efforts in Yemen can be summed up as follows:

#### **Attempts to Unite the Perspectives of Political and Popular Components**

Saudi Arabia follows a resolute and consistent foreign policy approach – bringing the various factions together and halting the conflicts plaguing the region. Without interfering in the internal affairs of countries, Saudi Arabia aims to strengthen the foundation of the region's security and stability. Yemen, a neighboring country that shares borders with Saudi Arabia, has always caught the attention of its northern neighbor. This was evident in Saudi Arabia's efforts to establish security, peace and stability at the popular and political levels in Yemen through diplomacy and dialogue.

#### **Favorable Regional Conditions**

Saudi Arabia has made evident efforts to achieve an enduring peace in Yemen that allows for development and a comprehensive renaissance throughout the country, as well as for the Yemeni people to enjoy safety, prosperity and well-being. Saudi efforts date back to the start of the Yemeni conflict in January 2011 when Riyadh called on the Yemenis to resolve their internal disagreements on the basis of Yemeni interest. Since then, Saudi Arabia has taken the initiative to hold political and diplomatic talks as well as provide economic and development support, and financial funding, relief and humanitarian support.

Although these efforts contributed greatly to alleviating the pain and suffering of the Yemeni people, they were not sufficient to end the state of internal conflict between the warring Yemeni parties.

However, the recent Saudi efforts to settle the crisis in Yemen were aided by favorable regional conditions that may encourage the warring parties to find a political solution to the crisis. Foremost among these conditions is the de-escalation in the region that prioritizes mutual interests such as stabilizing regional affairs and moving the region from the stage of tensions to one of cooperation and coordination. This can only be materialized when the region ends its conflicts to focus on achieving the aspirations of the peoples which include a better future, prosperity and economic integration.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, sees the ramifications of the prolonged crises in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon within a broader perspective in line with its



supreme strategy of achieving its Vision 2030. However, for Iran, internal and external pressures have forced it to accept political changes to avoid a further exacerbation of the situation.

As mentioned, another recent prominent development in the region is the landmark agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The agreement affirmed respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs. Moreover, the two countries agreed to revive a Security Cooperation Agreement signed in April 2001 and a General Agreement for Cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, technology, science, culture and sports signed in May 1998. The two countries also stressed their commitment to exert all efforts to enhance regional and international peace and security.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the positive developments of the Yemeni crisis and the progress made with the warring parties following the talks between the Saudis and the Yemenis are a direct outcome of the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement.

### **Obstacles to the Crisis Settlement**

As much as there are incentives to end the crisis in Yemen, as mentioned above, there are also challenges facing the settlement of the crisis, as follows:

#### **The Houthis' Intransigence**

The Houthis imposed control over all state corridors after their takeover of Sana`a. Therefore, in any upcoming settlement, they need to make important political concessions in favor of state institutions. This could be viewed by the Houthis as an unacceptable concession which could hinder a real political settlement to end the war in Yemen. This is especially true as any democratic path that equally distributes positions of leadership and influence could result in the biggest losses for the Houthis due to their limited capabilities and electoral potential compared to other political forces.

#### **The Emergence of a Hardline Fringe Within the Houthis**

The Houthis remain a sectarian group with a political culture that conflicts with the values of the Yemeni state. Thus, the ideological nature of the group could encourage the emergence of a sub-group or a current that adheres to its ideology and rejects the concessions made by the group's leadership. The new current could also use military force to obstruct any future agreement, perceiving the Houthi leadership's pragmatic approach as a violation of the group's principles.

### **The Role of the Houthis' Partners**

Media reports have indicated that a state of [rage](#) prevails among the leaders of the Conference Party, a nominal partner of the Houthis, as a result of the marginalization of these leaders and their exclusion from attending the talks led by the Saudi and Omani delegations to agree on a roadmap for peace. These leaders could thus obstruct the reaching of a settlement either through political or military tools.

### **The Tribal and Militant Nature of Yemeni Society**

The well-established tribal traditions along with the unrestricted use of weapons in Yemen risk the prospect of reaching a political settlement by the warring parties.

### **Disagreements Between Houthi Leaders**

The Houthi leadership remains ruptured by disagreements. The views of the head of the Houthi Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat on the details regarding the resolution of the Yemeni crisis do not match the proposals of the former Head of the Houthi Revolutionary Committee Mohammad Ali al-Houthi.

### **Potential Scenarios Amid the Recent Endeavors**

Based on the recent developments following the Arab and international efforts to resolve Yemen's issues, the following scenarios could happen:

#### **First Scenario**

Tension diminishes in Yemen and all parties participate in the talks, paving the way for a comprehensive settlement. Yet, for this scenario to materialize, it requires a serious commitment from all the conflicting parties, particularly the Houthis, to prioritize the interest of Yemen and to make concessions for reaching a comprehensive solution accepted by all and forming an inclusive government. This scenario gives momentum to the Saudi Arabia-Iran agreement which is expected to provide a framework for settling all contentious files with Iran in the region. This forecast also aligns with the Saudi orientation to de-escalate tensions with the Houthis and settle the Yemeni crisis, illustrated by the Saudi ambassador's visit to Sana`a, the successful prisoner swap deal and the reported six-month truce to hold talks to bring the conflict to an end.

#### **Second Scenario**

The prevailing situation does not change – the Houthis controlling Sana`a and the legitimate government controlling Aden and the fighting contin-

ues. This scenario is likely if Iran and the Houthis back down on their commitment to resolving the crisis. If this plays out, it would prompt Saudi Arabia to continue to support the legitimate government as the withdrawal of the Saudis from Yemen would lead to the Houthis monopolizing the scene in Yemen and the country being plunged into further security, economic and political crises.

### **Third Scenario**

The warring parties fail to reach a settlement, hence the conflict continues and turns into a war of attrition which makes it much more difficult for any party to resolve it in their favor. This scenario is supported by several factors. First, the multiplicity of the parties involved and their varying interests. Second, the Houthis have gained significant control over the past eight years. Thus, they could insist on preserving their successes which would be rejected by the other parties. Third, the increasingly complicated issue of the Southern Movement. If this scenario occurs, Yemen would be further divided and torn.



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