



Mediation in the Yemeni Civil War

Actors, outcomes, and lessons learned

Yemen is the most severe humanitarian crisis in the world today. Qatar, the UN, EU, US, and the Gulf Cooperation Council have tried to mediate the conflict between the Government of Yemen and the Houthis. But mediation efforts have been complicated by the duality of roles: some mediators have been directly involved as a conflict party, and others indirectly involved, providing support to those engaged in the war. These factors violate the mediation principle of impartiality and diminish a mediator's credibility and leverage. In this brief, we analyze all mediation efforts between the Yemeni government and the Houthis since 2007, reviewing the strategies, outcomes, and implementation processes to identify the factors that have hindered successful mediation.

Brief Points

- Between 2004 and 2018, five different mediators in five distinct attempts have tried to resolve the conflict between the Government of Yemen (GoY) and the Houthis.
- In line with quantitative research on mediation, mediators have a short-term positive and tangible impact, but in the medium- to long-term, all agreements have failed to de-escalate the conflict and find a sustainable political solution.
- Since 2011, all mediation efforts have been built upon the Gulf Initiative, exhibiting strong path dependence. Further, the initiative does not reflect current political realities.
- Mediators exclusively focus on the GoY-Houthi conflict and neglect other conflict dyads, such as the GoY and the UAE-backed Southern Security Council (STC), and the Houthis and the Sunni Islah-Party.

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Introduction

In 2012, former US president Barack Obama referred to Yemen as an example of peaceful political transition for other Arab Nations. But today's Yemen is anything but peaceful. In April 2019, a UNDP-commissioned study concluded that the civil war has already reversed human development by 21 years. Approximately 250,000 people have been killed directly by the fighting and indirectly by the lack of access to food, medicine, and basic infrastructure. Sixty percent of the deaths are children under the age of five and 24 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Finding a negotiated solution to the conflict is imperative, but growing more complicated as both the number of external actors and internal parties increase.

The primary conflict over government in Yemen has been waged between the Government of Yemen (GoY), headed by Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and the Zaydi Shia Houthi rebels (or Ansarallah). In September 2014, the Houthis took over the capital Sanaa. In 2015, they dissolved the Parliament, established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, and forced Hadi to resign and relocate to Aden and then Riyadh from where he has governed since then.

In response to these events, in March 2015, a Saudi Arabia-led coalition began a military intervention in Yemen with the stated goal of restoring the legitimate government of Hadi and reversing the territorial gains of the Houthis, whom they accused of being an Iranian-funded military force. The coalition receives weapons and logistical and intelligence support from major powers like the US, UK, and France.

This narrative, however, oversimplifies the on-the-ground realities. In fact, there are multiple overlapping conflicts and drivers for the current instability, among them: the fight between the Houthis and the Yemeni Sunni tribes; the Southern Transitional Council's (STC) independence claims; the Islah party's conflict with the Houthis; the expansion of terrorist cells and international anti-terrorism campaigns; the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict; the diverging interests within the Saudi-led coalition; and local conflicts related to water and land, and numerous militias operating outside the control of the central structure.

Mediation in Yemen

Mediation is a special, non-military and voluntary form of third party conflict management. Quantitative studies on mediation show that higher conflict intensity, internationalization, longer duration of conflict, and the presence of territorial disputes all increase the likelihood of mediation to occur. It is important to keep in mind that while mediators can help parties to achieve a settlement, at the end of the day any agreement's successful implementation will depend on the conflict parties. Powerful mediator strategies – bigger sticks and carrots – can push parties towards settlement, but the quality and sustainability of those deals are questionable.

Our analysis is the first that overviews mediation throughout the entire GoY-Houthi conflict by including pre-2011 events. For our research, we reviewed 37 studies on mediation in Yemen, coded mediation actors, strategies, outcomes, and implementation. We identify three different phases of mediation in the GoY-Houthi conflict.

The first period (2004–2009) entailed the six round Saada wars. These conflicts were localized clashes waged in the original stronghold of the Houthis in the northern governorates of the country. Qatar was the only mediator in this period.

The second phase (2011–2015) began with the Yemeni episode of the Arab Spring and ended with the Saudi Arabia-led intervention in March 2015. This period did not centre on the GoY-Houthi-conflict exclusively, but aimed to negotiate a peaceful transition of power from former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and to establish a unity government. Three mediators were involved in the second phase: The Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC), the UN, and the EU. All these actors participated in negotiating the power transition, but the overall framework was set by the GCC Initiative of 2011.

The third and current phase of the conflict (since 2015) marks the internationalization and the fragmentation of the conflict, mediated by the UN. Table 1 summarizes mediation efforts in the GoY-Houthi conflict from 2007 to 2018.

Phase I: Saada Wars and Qatari Mediation (2007–2009)

Between 2004 and 2009 the Houthis fought six rounds of war (Saada wars) against the GoY headed by then president Ali Abdullah Saleh. In June 2007, Qatari mediation efforts resulted in a joint ceasefire agreement, which broke down after only a few months. The February 2008 Doha Agreement envisioned a more comprehensive solution for the conflict and included provisions for the Yemeni government to release prisoners, grant amnesties, and reconstruct war-torn areas. The Houthis were expected to disarm as part of this agreement, and, to sweeten the deal, Qatar offered political asylum to rebel leaders and a \$500 million reconstruction assistance for Saada Province.

This agreement fell through in May 2009 when Saleh declared Qatari mediation to be a failure due to disagreements over the disbursement of reconstruction funds. Qatar then withdrew its promised investments. Fighting quickly resumed after this action and Qatar withdrew its mediation activities as well.

The conflict ended with the direct military intervention of Saudi Arabia and a GoY-offered ceasefire in 2010. Despite being perceived as a

Year	Mediator	Outcome
2007	Qatar	Ceasefire
2008	Qatar	Doha Agreement
2011	GCC	GCC Initiative
2014	Jamal Benomar (UN)	NDC concluded
2015	Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad (UN), John Kerry (US)	Geneva Peace Talks
2016	Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad (UN), John Kerry (US)	Kuwait Peace Talks
2018	Martin Griffiths (UN)	Stockholm Agreement

Table 1: Mediation in between the Government of Yemen and the Houthis (2007–2018)

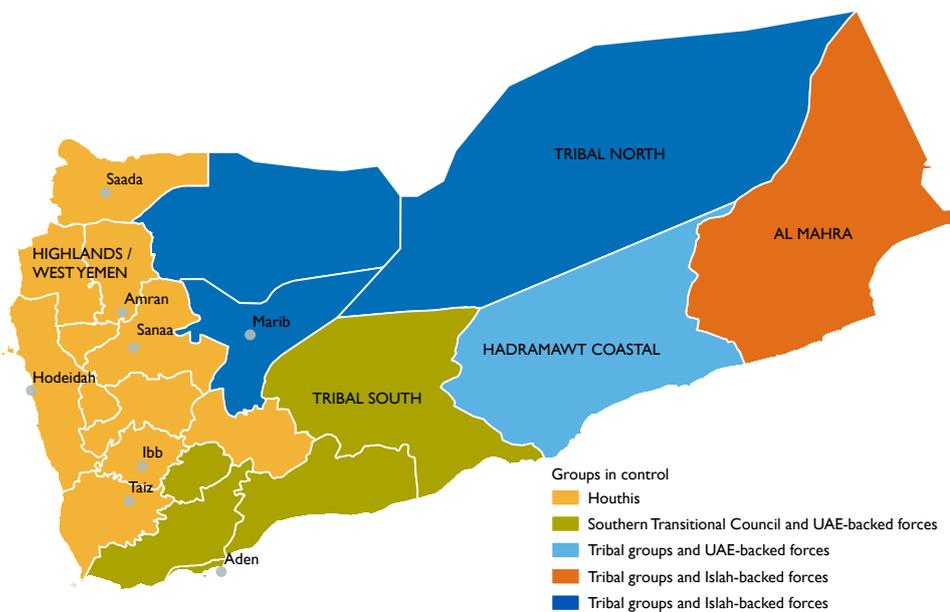


Figure 1: Key actors operating in Yemen

credible and impartial mediator, Qatar lacked the institutional capacities to translate the Doha agreement into a sustainable resolution. Qatar did not have sufficient leverage over the Houthis and the failure to deliver on its reconstruction policies prevented it from making any further substantial engagements. More importantly, while the Houthis were expected to make significant concessions, no such concessions were required from GoY.

Phase 2: From Power Transition to Intervention (2011–2015)

In 2011, when the Arab Uprisings reached Yemen, at least three distinct conflicts broke out: The GoY-Houthi conflict, the independence movement in southern Yemen, and the elite struggle in the capital city of Sanaa between the Saleh-led General People's Congress (GPC) and the opposition. For the first time in its history, the GCC, alerted by the potential violent escalation of the Yemeni conflict in its immediate neighborhood, offered its mediation services.

But the GCC focused only on finding a solution to the elite-struggle in Sanaa and neglected the other drivers of the uprising. The resulting Gulf Initiative demanded Saleh to step down and envisioned the establishment of a unity government consisting of the GPC and the opposition parties, dominated by the Sunni reformist

Islah-party. After months of protracted protests and negotiations, Saleh agreed to resign in exchange for immunity. The ultimate goal of the GCC-brokered deal was to negotiate a power rearrangement, rather than a real transition of power.

In November 2011, the government and the opposition parties signed the UN-led *Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council* (Implementation Mechanism). The implementation mechanisms placed former Vice President Hadi in power of the GoY, as an interim president, and included measures on security-sector reform, transitional justice, and created the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). The NDC (2013–2014) was tasked with reaching national consensus on a new political system for Yemen by including all previously marginalized groups, such as the Houthis, the Southern Movement, women, youth, and civil society. The NDC was the first forum that specifically addressed women's issues and required a 30% quota for women in all state authorities.

The most contentious recommendation of the NDC was to transform the political organization of Yemen from 21 governorates into a six-region federation. This proposal, however, was rejected by both the Houthis and the

Southern Movement. Despite the NDC's unprecedented inclusivity (565 members participated in the conference), the transition government remained an intra-elite bargain and excluded the Houthis and Southern Movement. Furthermore, there was no discussion of disarming any parties.

After the conclusion of the NDC, the security situation deteriorated rapidly; in early September 2014, former President Saleh and his military allies joined forces with the Houthis. This step marked a significant shift in the balance of power and the Houthis were able to capture Sanaa. As a last attempt to reverse the developments on the ground, the UN (led by Special Envoy Jamal Benomar) brokered the Peace and National Partnership Agreement between Hadi and the Houthis. The new agreement was never implemented.

In January 2015, the Houthis placed president Hadi under house arrest. Later, he escaped to the port city of Aden and then to Riyadh, where he established a government in exile. Subsequently, the Houthis dissolved the parliament and established the Supreme Revolutionary Committee as an interim authority, which remains unrecognized by the international community today. By late 2014 it became evident that none of the NDC outcomes would be implemented.

Intervention and Mediation Impasse

Saudi Arabia's military intervention in March 2015 further complicated any potential mediation efforts. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been accused of human rights violations, and yet they are also the largest humanitarian donors to the country. Thus, the lines between being a mediator, a conflict party, and humanitarian donor have been blurred.

In April 2015, the UN appointed Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed to replace Benomar. Ahmed took a leading role and facilitated the conclusion of UN Resolution 2216 in April 2015, which required the conflict parties to resume the political process, called for the Houthis to unconditionally withdraw from government and security institutions, recognized the Hadi government as the legitimate government, and established an arms embargo on the Houthis and Saleh loyalists. This resolution, however, placed substantial restrictions on the mediator's room for

maneuver, since the UN Special Envoy's main task has been to convince the conflict parties to resume the political process in accordance with the GCC Initiative and the NDC outcomes. Recall that those political processes had already been rejected by the Houthis in 2014.

Ahmed's term saw the conclusion of five short-lived ceasefires and prisoner exchanges. Four separate rounds of talks in 2015–2016 did not produce any tangible results. After the final set of talks in Kuwait in August 2016, then-US Secretary of State John Kerry stepped in to find a political solution to the conflict. In November 2016, the Hadi government refused to sign the Kerry plan for fears Hadi would be politically sidelined. After this meeting, the Houthis refused to engage in any subsequent mediation efforts for two years.

Phase 3: Resuming Talks

In September 2018, peace talks in Switzerland collapsed because the Houthi delegation refused to attend. They claimed the Saudi coalition prevented the delegations from traveling to the talks. Then in December 2018, after a two-year deadlock, a third UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, initiated a new round of peace talks in Sweden, still based on UN Resolution 2216. The GoY and the Houthis signed the Stockholm agreement which consists of agreements on the exchange of prisoners, a ceasefire in the port city of Hodeidah, the establishment of humanitarian corridors in Taiz, and a handover of the three Red Sea ports (Hodeidah, Al-Salif, and Ras Isa) to the United Nations Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen. As of May 2019, no significant steps towards implementation have taken place yet. However, the Stockholm Agreement must be seen as a significant step: it was accompanied by Security Council Resolutions 2451 and 2452, which both endorsed the Agreement

and established a UN Mission to support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA) to oversee the implementation of the agreement for an initial period of six months.

Mismatch between Mediation Attempts and Political Realities

There is an urgent need to implement the provisions of the Stockholm Agreement. But mediators need to recognize and address the fractured nature of the Yemeni Civil War. Even if the GoY-Houthi conflict is resolved, the international community will have to find a comprehensive resolution to the myriad of conflicts between armed non-state actors, especially in the South and in the Sunni tribal territories. In addition, since 2011, women have been largely absent from peace negotiations. The 2018 peace talks in Sweden included only one female representative, Rana Ghanem (assistant secretary of Yemen's Nasser organization and member of the government delegation), and the resulting Stockholm Agreement makes no references to women's roles in the peace process and implementation.

Mediators also should recognize that UN Resolution 2216 is not a viable framework for negotiations. Since 2015, the Houthis have not only occupied territories, but also consolidated their gains, and, as such, any peace initiative based on UN SCR 2216 would be considered as a setback from a Houthi perspective.

Moreover, in January 2018, violence erupted in Aden between Hadi's troops and the Southern Transitional Council, which, prior to this conflict, had been on the same side in principle. Thus, there is a need to recognize that Hadi's legitimacy is only technical, and externally supported.

Given this unique and multi-faceted history of

conflict in Yemen, we offer the following recommendations to mediators:

- **Recognize changed realities on the ground.** UN SCR 2216 is not an acceptable framework for negotiations for the Houthis. The resolution limits the Special Envoys' bargaining space and it does not address the influence of other conflict parties.
- **Integrate other conflict parties into ongoing mediation efforts.** Engage actors from each governorate in the upcoming talks, especially representatives from the Southern Transitional Council, who have demanded independence for South Yemen.
- **Include women in the peace process.** There is an urgent need to ensure that the fragile gains women acquired during the NDC are implemented and not reversed.
- **Condemn indirect supporters and prolongers of the war.** While the EU had a constructive role during the 2011 transition process, punitive measures are needed against member states who are providing military support for the coalition. ■

Further Reading

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THE PROJECT

The Conflict Trends project aims to answer questions relating to the causes, consequences, and trends in conflict. The project will contribute to new conflict analyses within areas of public interest, and work to produce thorough and high-quality analysis for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

PRIO

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