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# Negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to End the War in Yemen

Unit for Political Studies

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## Unit for Political Studies

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In Sana'a, the Houthis have been conducting negotiations with a Saudi delegation headed by the Saudi ambassador to the internationally recognized Yemeni government, Mohammed bin Saeed Al-Jaber, and mediated by an Omani delegation. The first round, marking the first direct public negotiation between the two parties since the 2015 outbreak of war, ran from 8 - 13 April 2023 and made some headway on several issues. The second round is expected to be held in Riyadh in the coming weeks to discuss outstanding problems.

## The Saudi Shift on the Political Solution

In March 2021, Saudi Arabia announced an initiative to end the Yemen crisis that provides for a UN supervised ceasefire, directing customs and tax revenues for oil shipments into the port of the city of Hodeidah to a joint bank account with the Hodeidah branch of the Central Bank of Yemen, based on the 2018 Stockholm agreement. It also stipulates the opening of Sana'a airport to specific destinations and the negotiation of a political solution according to three terms of reference: the Gulf Initiative of 2011, the outcomes of the National Dialogue of 2014, and Security Council Resolution (2216/2015).<sup>1</sup>

This initiative is not the first in this regard. The Houthis, who refer to themselves as Ansar Allah, launched a similar initiative, a week after they allegedly attacked the Abqaiq and Khurais oil plants, east of Riyadh, in September 2019, calling for both sides to cease airstrikes.<sup>2</sup> The Houthis recalled their initiative in the context of a speech delivered by the President of the Supreme Political Council in Sana'a, Mahdi Al-Mashat, on "the National Day of Resilience and Steadfastness" on 26 March 2022. These initiatives have been the subject of continuous discussion between the various parties, under the auspices of the United Nations envoy, Hans Grundberg, who revealed, in his briefing to the UN Security Council in February 2022, the development of a framework for a comprehensive political settlement.<sup>3</sup> On 2 April 2022, he announced a ceasefire, to be renewed every two months, reducing the level of violence and improving the humanitarian situation. But the ceasefire ultimately handed the Houthis an opportunity to strengthen their military, security, and economic positions, without any clear gains for the internationally recognized government. Saudi Arabia also secured its defensive capacities against any potential Houthi airstrikes.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, Riyadh, under the auspices of the GCC, was hosting consultations with the Yemeni leadership, in the absence of the Houthis. The presidential leadership council consisting of 8 people, to which President Hadi's powers were transferred was subsequently formed. The document announcing the transfer of power stated that the council would negotiate with the Houthis in order

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1 "The Kingdom Announces an Initiative to End the Yemeni Crisis and Reach a Comprehensive Political Solution," the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), 22/3/2021, accessed on 18/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3GI5gUa>

2 "President Mahdi Al-Mashat announces an initiative to achieve peace and calls on all parties to serious negotiations," September 26 Net, 24/9/2019, accessed on 13/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/4190My6>

3 "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 15/2/2022, accessed on 13/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3AfzSZC>

4 "United Nations Initiative for a Two-Month Truce," Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, April 2022, accessed on 12/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3UyGrzP>



to achieve a permanent ceasefire, leading to a comprehensive political solution, which would include a transitional phase that brings the country to permanent peace.<sup>5</sup>

These arrangements facilitated the launch of direct negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Muscat, the capital of the Sultanate of Oman, during the second half of 2022.<sup>6</sup> They discussed the security of the southwestern regions of Saudi Arabia, and prisoner exchanges, but there was no significant progress until after Saudi Arabia and Iran, under Chinese mediation, reached an agreement to improve relations on 10 March 2023, after which direct public negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis began in Sana'a.

## Rationale

The Sana'a negotiations indicate important progress following years of lacklustre attempts. Before the Saudi delegation arrived in Sana'a, the head of the Houthi negotiating delegation stated that the agenda includes a complete cessation of "aggression and besiegement and the payment of employee salaries from oil and gas revenues" controlled by the internationally recognized government, the exit of foreign forces, fair compensation, and reconstruction.<sup>7</sup> Saudi negotiator Muhammad Al Jaber said that the negotiations aim to "stabilize the armistice and ceasefire, support the prisoner exchange process, and discuss dialogue possibilities between the Yemeni factions, in order to reach a comprehensive and sustainable political solution."<sup>8</sup>

Once the Saudi delegation departed from Sana'a, the head of the Houthi negotiating team revealed an agreement to continue the current truce, without specifying its new any of the conditions or time limits. Besides the ceasefire, the demands of both sides, including compensation and salaries, seem to remain unresolved files for now, but each party will have the opportunity to consult.<sup>9</sup> Member of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, stated that his group presented general political points and a vision of a comprehensive solution, while humanitarian issues dominated the discussion.<sup>10</sup> The Saudi Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 15 April with no indication of what was agreed upon but instead focusing on the discussion of humanitarian issues, the release of prisoners, ceasefire, and a potential political solution. It also confirmed that these negotiations will soon resume to develop a comprehensive and sustainable political solution

5 "Full Text of President Hadi's Announcement to Form a Presidential Leadership Council and Transfer Power to Run the State and the Transitional Phase," *Al-Masdar Online*, 7/4/2022, accessed on 14/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3L10nIt>

6 "Chairman of the National Committee for Prisoners: We received a Saudi Delegation to See Their Prisoners," *Saba Net*, 13/10/2022, accessed on 15/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/41zt8S5>

7 "An Omani delegation, accompanied by the Chief Negotiator, Muhammad Abdul-Salam, arrives in the capital, Sana'a, to put the final touches to peace," *First Eye*, YouTube, 8/4/2023, accessed on 15/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3L5LEvW>.

8 See the Saudi Ambassador to Yemen's Twitter account, 10/4/2023, accessed on 12/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2DFOW6w>

9 "Breaking: Chief Negotiator, Muhammad Abdul-Salam, Reveals the Latest Developments in the Sana'a Negotiations and the Reason for the Departure of the Saudi Delegation," *First Eye*, YouTube, 14/4/2023, accessed on 15/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3ohJ3pJ>

10 "Mohammed Ali al-Houthi to CNN: 'We Look Forward to Ending the War and We do not Want to Monopolize Power'", *CNN Arabic*, 15/4/2023, accessed on 16/4/2023, at: <https://cnn.it/40fi5fN>

acceptable to all Yemeni parties.<sup>11</sup> Controversy over the Saudi role plagued the negotiations. While the Saudis presented themselves as mere mediators between Yemeni warring parties, the Houthis insisted that Saudi Arabia is a founding party to it, especially because of the relevance of this issue to compensation and reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

## Motives

By 2020, the war in Yemen had clearly hit a dead end, with a military settlement out of reach. In addition to the humanitarian and political burdens, the war began to constitute a huge economic strain on Saudi Arabia. Combined with the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on the economy and the collapse of oil prices in 2020, this had major repercussions on Saudi Arabia's development projects and strategic plans, foremost of which is "Vision 2030". Furthermore, the Saudi oil sector found itself in crisis following the attack on the Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais, and subsequent suspension of half of Saudi oil production. Notably, the US refused to act in response to the attack. The UAE withdrew its main forces in the Arab coalition from Yemen in 2020, which, along with a shift in the US position on the war, left Saudi Arabia feeling isolated. Riyadh thus decided to exit gradually, rearranging the ranks of its allies in the internationally recognized Yemeni government according to its new calculations, and activating channels of communication with the Houthis.<sup>13</sup> The Biden administration's decision to stop its military aid to Saudi Arabia and remove the Houthis from its list of terrorist organizations further pushed Saudi's new direction.<sup>14</sup>

The ceasefire announced on 2 April 2022 represented an essential step in the Saudi approach to untangling itself from the Yemeni war. The truce is part of a general Saudi trend in its regional environment, in response to what it considers a change in the US commitment to its national security. The Arab-China summit, which was held in Riyadh in December 2022, reinforced Saudi Arabia's conviction of its intention to end its role in the Yemeni war, and its need to create internally safe and stable climates in its Yemeni neighbourhood. This further explains Saudi Arabia's reconciliation with Iran.

Meanwhile, the Houthis are motivated by several factors to take part in negotiations with Saudi Arabia, including the shift in Iran's position after signing the Beijing agreement to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, and the potential impact of this on the military support it provides to them pressuring them to reach a settlement. The continuation of the war and siege entails political and economic costs that can no longer be borne if the Houthis insist on continuing a confrontational approach. The direct public Saudi dealings with the Houthis amount to a recognition of them as

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<sup>11</sup> "The Saudi Team, Headed by the Kingdom's Ambassador to Yemen, Held a Series of Meetings Featuring Discussions Related to the Humanitarian Situation." *The Saudi Press Agency*, 15/4/2023, accessed on 15/4/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/43N9xjc>

<sup>12</sup> "Mohammed Ali al-Houthi to CNN: 'We Look Forward to Ending the War...'"

<sup>13</sup> Saudi Arabia worked to form the Presidential Leadership Council, and established armed formations, with which it created balances of power, to guarantee its interests and its new direction towards the end of the Yemeni crisis.

<sup>14</sup> "Biden's Decision to End US Support for Saudi "Offensive Operations" in Yemen", Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 11/2/2021, accessed on 14/4/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/40PGt70>



political players and no longer simply as rebels who usurped power. The Houthis insisted that they negotiate with Saudi Arabia directly and not with the internationally recognized government. The Houthis are also seeking gains from the negotiations and the reinforcement of the ceasefire.

## Prospects

A second round of negotiations between the two parties is scheduled to start in the coming weeks in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognized Yemeni government will first discuss the controversial issues that the Houthis have listed under the heading of “humanitarian agenda” as a basis for continuing the armistice and a gateway to peace. These issues include making the government pay the salaries of civil servants across the country, including areas controlled by the Houthis, the unrestricted opening of airports and ports, and the release of all prisoners, in addition to the demand for the exit of foreign forces, whose presence represents a “cause for renewed violence”. However, given the complexity of the issues at hand, the two parties may resort to extending the ceasefire and approving partial solutions to the opening airports and ports, and sharing the burdens of employee salaries between the various parties, including Saudi Arabia, determining measures related to oil and non-oil resources, banks, and currency. They may relegate the final negotiation of controversial issues to a new round of negotiations, during which measures for the comprehensive peace process that take into account the demands of all parties will be determined. However, the possibility remains that the negotiations will hit a stalemate, ramping up the pace of violence once more.

## Conclusion

Negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis have not yet resulted in a political solution to Yemen’s issues, or any change in the positions of the dominant forces on the ground. Perhaps the direction of the relations between the two parties may lead to a political solution, or an agreement may be reached that facilitates such a solution, and if this is not achieved, then the Houthis may remain as a de facto government in Sanaa under a permanent truce. It should be noted that the rushed Saudi exit from the war represents an important motive for ending the conflict, but the Houthis may perceive it as a sign of weakness. This will tempt them to become more intransigent and try to impose conditions, especially as they feel that their persistence is bearing fruit, that the time factor is in their favour, and that there is a possibility of a repeat of the Afghan scenario. They may monopolize power and impose a fait accompli, which will not enable any true peace.