

## YEMEN'S ELUSIVE PEACE PUZZLE

By  
**Arhama Siddiq**  
Research Fellow

*Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA), ISSI*

Edited by  
**Amina Khan**

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



Recent high-profile visits indicate that talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen are progressing, albeit slowly. The conflict began in March 2015 when Saudi Arabia led a coalition to oust the Houthi rebels. Back-channel discussions started in April 2022, resulting in a two-month United Nations (UN) mediated ceasefire that was renewed twice. Although the ceasefire has formally ended, it provided some relief. Diplomatic efforts have included a UN-brokered ceasefire in May 2022, which, while not entirely effective, allowed for humanitarian aid. The UN has been actively involved in facilitating negotiations to address key issues. Additionally, in February 2021, the United States ceased support for the Saudi-led coalition's offensive operations in Yemen and revoked the Houthi rebels' terrorist designation, facilitating dialogue with all the conflicting parties.<sup>1</sup>

On October 18, 2023, Saudi Defence Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman engaged in a meeting with Rashad Al-Alimi, Chairman of the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, on 14 September 2023, in the latest high-profile contact, Houthi representatives paid a visit to Riyadh, where they met with the Saudi Defence Minister. This was the first announced trip by Houthi representatives to the

<sup>1</sup> "Revocation of the Terrorist Designations of Ansarallah," US Department of State, February 12, 2021. <https://www.state.gov/revocation-of-the-terrorist-designations-of-ansarallah/>

<sup>2</sup> "Saudi Defense Minister Meets with Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council Chairman," Arab News PK, October 19, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2393726/saudi-arabia>

Saudi capital since the Houthis removed the internationally recognized government from power in 2014. Yemen has been divided since then, with the Houthis controlling most of the populous north; the government operating from the port city of Aden in the south; and various other armed factions pursuing their own interests.

For the first time in years, Yemen – scene of one of the cruelest conflicts and humanitarian tragedies in recent decades – offers some real grounds for hope. The Saudis and Houthis clearly want to avoid a resurgence in the fighting: they both have (with some exceptions) kept observing the ceasefire even though it formally expired a year ago. It is evident that both sides are interested in reaching a deal beyond an informal ceasefire. However, as the talks have dragged on, it has become equally apparent that major differences separate the sides. Hopes surged in April 2023, when the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jaber, visited Sanaa, where the Houthis hold power. <sup>3</sup>Word leaked out that Jaber's discussions with the Houthis were focused on a deadline for announcing an agreement, perhaps as early as the third week of April 2023, which marked the end of Ramadan. That there was no accord and statements issued made clear that the gaps between the two sides remained significant.

In recent months, direct talks between Yemeni parties, including the internationally recognized government and the Houthi rebels, have taken place in regional capitals. These exchanges aim to reach a comprehensive peace agreement and demonstrate a commitment to a political solution. Saudi Arabia and the Houthis are engaging in direct, transparent dialogues, with the involvement of high-level Saudi and Omani delegations. This process should gradually include other relevant parties. Riyadh must ensure that these talks do not hinder negotiations between the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis. Parallel discussions are defining a roadmap for the peace process, involving various Yemeni, regional, and international actors. Close coordination with the UN Special Envoy is crucial, and consultations with a diverse range of stakeholders, including women, youth, and civil society, are contributing to conditions for inclusive intra-Yemeni political dialogue.

In the broader region, positive developments are emerging, including Saudi-Iran talks in Baghdad and Muscat, and most importantly the culmination of Saudi-Iran rapprochement, brokered by China in March this year. Two key events offer further optimism. In April, a significant prisoner exchange, facilitated by UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg and the Red Cross, initiated a positive chain of more

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<sup>3</sup> "Al-Jaber Visits Sanaa to Discuss Reaching Comprehensive Political Solution in Yemen," *Awsat*, Asharq Al, April 11, 2023.  
<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/4265826/al-jaber-visits-sanaa-discuss-reaching-comprehensive-political-solution-yemen>

prisoner agreements. Additionally, efforts have begun to address the deteriorating Floating Storage and Offloading (FSO) Safer ship, following an agreement between Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and the Houthis. This initiative could prevent an environmental disaster four times the size of the Exxon Valdez. Moreover, there has been a gradual increase in flights departing from Sanaa, with the first commercial plane leaving the Yemeni capital in six years in May 2022. In June, Hajj pilgrims departed from Sanaa airport for Jeddah for the first time since 2016. These agreements, driven by humanitarian and technical considerations, lay the groundwork for addressing more complex political issues.

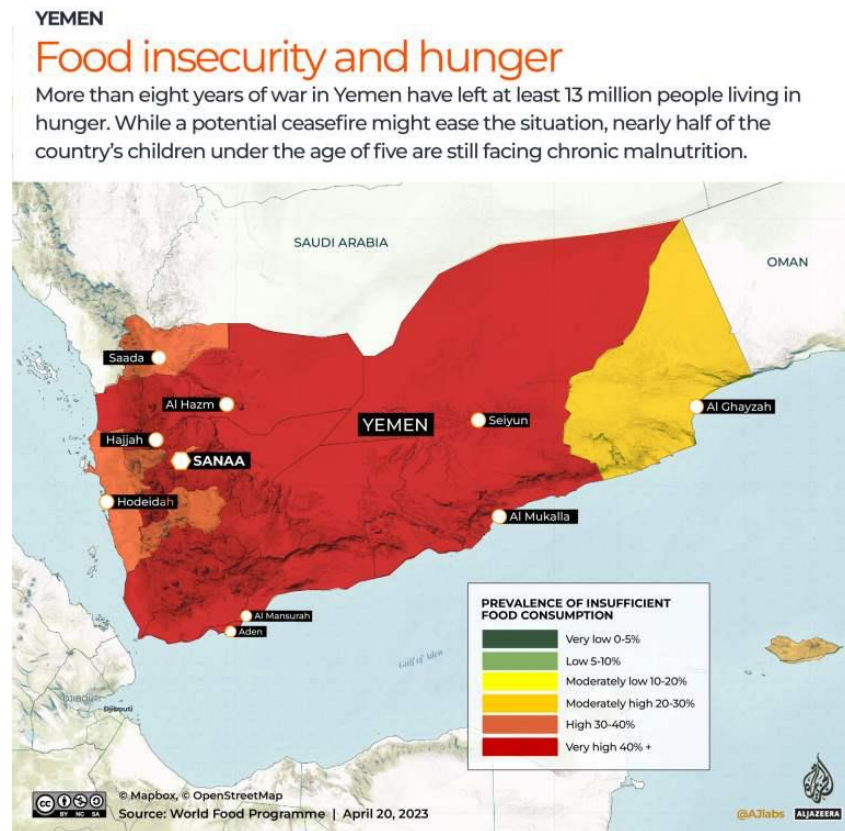
Nevertheless, significant gaps persist as evident from reports about recent talks. Despite initial optimism, the mid-September Houthi delegation's visit to Riyadh and the Saudi ambassador's April trip to Sanaa did not yield tangible outcomes. The Houthis have taken actions to strengthen their negotiating position, including frequent attacks on Yemeni adversaries. A drone strike on Bahraini soldiers at the Saudi Arabia-Southern border in late September resulted in casualties and was cited as a response to Saudi violations. An additional complication is the unpaid public-sector salaries in Houthi-controlled areas since 2016. The Houthis insist on funding these salaries through oil and gas export revenues, primarily controlled by the government.<sup>4</sup> In November 2022, they targeted oil facilities, temporarily halting exports, and demanded the use of funds from the Hodeida port, telecommunications services, and taxes in their areas. Disagreements also arise over fund allocation, with the Houthis wanting central bank deposits in Sanaa and control over disbursement, while the government prefers Aden's central bank and direct distribution based on the 2014 payroll structure, which the Houthis dispute due to their subsequent recruitments.

Despite all the obvious challenges, there are grounds to be hopeful that the Saudis and Houthis will reach a political settlement eventually, based on their mutual interests. Positive statements from both sides and active Omani mediation reinforce this notion. The restoration of Saudi-Iranian relations has played a central role in sustaining the negotiations. Yet, a **bargain** between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis will not necessarily spell an end to the war. By excluding other key parties to the conflict, chiefly factions affiliated with certain PLC members (although the talks are also notably marked by the exclusion of groups including women and youth), the talks could yield an agreement that the parties who are left out will start actively undermining the moment the Saudis and Houthis reach it. Understandably, there is a long way to go before these encouraging signs are transformed into a comprehensive resolution of the conflict. This requires a coordinated approach among all key

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<sup>4</sup> "Conquering Roadblocks to Salary Framework in Yemen's Houthi-Held Territories," Emirates Policy Center, May 17, 2023.  
<https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/conquering-roadblocks-to-salary-framework-in-yemen-s-houthi-held-territories>

actors both to develop a viable way forward and then to persuade all parties to stick to it. Reactivating coordination formats and developing innovative means of sitting together are needed.



(Source: Al Jazeera)

Yemen's journey toward lasting peace clearly depends on the Yemeni people themselves shaping their political destiny, a fundamental fact that often goes unnoticed. The recent positive developments should not be squandered, considering the protracted suffering endured over the past nine years. However, it is vital to acknowledge the persistent challenges in the Yemen conflict, which remains a complex web of multiple actors and divergent interests. The ongoing humanitarian crisis, characterized by food insecurity, displacement, and the looming specter of famine, continue to exacerbate the already immense suffering of the Yemeni populace. The presence of extremist groups, most notably Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), further complicates the situation. Hence, it is imperative that continuous efforts are directed toward addressing the root causes, ensuring compliance with ceasefires, and alleviating the profound humanitarian crisis affecting millions of Yemenis. Strengthening local authorities' capacity to deliver essential services is a critical component of this endeavor, and the international community, including Western nations, must prioritize Yemen in its efforts to address complex, multifaceted crises. Swift and inclusive peacemaking is paramount to prevent the loss of valuable momentum.