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# Prospects for peace in Yemen

**O**bservatoire du monde arabo-musulman  
et du Sahel

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## INTRODUCTION

Three and a half years into the internationalised war which has caused the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, what are the prospects for a solution? While 22 of the 28 million Yemenis are suffering the four horses of the apocalypse: hunger, disease, poverty and military annihilation, neither national nor international decision makers involved are showing any sign of compassion for Yemenis, children, adults or the elderly. Scandalous and outrageous coalition air strikes continue to occasionally massacre civilians (recently in Sa'ada when 40 young boys were killed and Hodeida where a family of 30 were bombed to smithereens). Said to be 'on the brink,' evidence is now emerging from the few media reaching into the country that deaths by hunger and emaciation are already at famine level.

## I – Origins of the War

After more than 30 years of Saleh's autocratic rule in Sana'a, the Arab Spring uprisings were the culmination of a decade of worsening crises in the Republic of Yemen, established in 1990 by the merging of the Yemen Arab Republic and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Politically the informal compact between Saleh's ruling General People's Congress (GPC) and the official opposition of the Joint Meeting Parties (including the influential Islamist Islah party) was breaking down, while two major regional opposition movements emerged: first in the far north the Huthis movement waged a series of wars against the Saleh regime. Second in the former PDRY a separatist movement coalesced the frustrations of many who felt swindled by the reality of Yemeni unity under Saleh. Economically, deterioration included a systematic rise in unemployment, particularly of youth, increased poverty, and the absence of development

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opportunities while social fragmentation was already an important element of daily life everywhere, mostly marked by a widening gap between a microscopic minority of super wealthy and the vast majority increasingly impoverished.

The 2011 indecisive struggles led to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Agreement for a two-year transitional regime headed by former Vice President Hadi. It comprised a government of national unity, a reform of the security sector, and a 10-months long National Dialogue Conference (NDC) leading to a Constitution Drafting Committee. During this period, the Huthi movement consolidated control over its own region and beyond. After the completion of the NDC in early 2014 its new alliance with Saleh enabled it to expand control further south, including the capital Sana'a in September 2014. By early 2015, relations with the Hadi regime collapsed leading to the exile of the internationally recognised government (IRG) and the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015. While the coalition was able to expel Huthis from much of the country by the autumn of that year, this left the most populated highlands under Huthi control.

Now, all parties directly and indirectly involved in the war loudly proclaim that there is no military solution and that negotiations towards a political solution are the only way out, their behaviour clearly suggests that this is mere lip service to public opinion as they continue to maintain stubborn uncompromising 'negotiating' positions, pursue failing military offensives and completely disregard International Humanitarian Law. This paper examines the status of negotiations, the role of the UN, internal political and military developments and concludes with some suggestions for possible French and other European states' actions.

## 2 – The UN and negotiations

After a series of failed negotiations in the first 18 months of the war, military stalemate has been complemented by a diplomatic one since mid-2016, with nothing more than shuttling of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy (UNSE) between the different official parties to the war: the Hadi government, the then Huthi/Saleh alliance in Sana'a, the Saudi Arabian and UAE capitals, those of the coalition's main supporters, the USA, UK and occasionally France. A third UNSE, the Briton Martin Griffiths, was officially appointed in March 2018, with widespread support from all international quarters. His appointment raised hope among the millions of suffering Yemenis. Initially, he wisely announced that he would listen to all and present a new draft peace plan to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and concerned parties in June. His shuttle diplomacy seemed more promising than that of his predecessor as, not only did he visit Sana'a frequently but even met the top Huthi leadership. To what extent was optimism at his

appointment justified? He has access to top decision makers, and benefited from a positive image as he was praised for a range of skills. However none of this was complemented with action which might lead to success.

The Hadi government and the Saudi-led coalition have remained consistent on their preconditions for peace negotiations. These are uncompromising, effectively demanding complete Huthi surrender, which goes a long way to explaining the lack of progress. Their demands focus on the implementation of 'three references' repeated *ad nauseam*. How useful are they as negotiating points? They are

- ➔ First: the Outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference. Completed in January 2014, the NDC had more than 1800 'outcomes,' including sometimes incompatible proposals. This reference could be adjusted to reach agreement. The NDC was followed by the draft Constitution of January 2015, which was the trigger for the final take-over of government by the then Huthi-Saleh alliance as it included a clause totally unacceptable to the Huthis, Saleh and, indeed, most southern separatists, namely a six-region federal state. However this is also negotiable as the issue was not the number of regions, but rather their borders.
- ➔ Second is 'returning to the GCC Initiative', a largely meaningless reference, as it refers to the entire transition process initiated in November 2011. This should be negotiable, and indeed contains elements which are to Huthi advantage, for example the statement that the transition was to last two years [February 2012-2014], thus ending the 'legitimacy' of Hadi's presidency in 2014, regardless of the unilateral extension of his tenure by then UNSE Jamal Benomar. A government of national consensus should also be acceptable to the Huthis while the proposed financial support from the country's international partners would be welcome by most Yemeni parties.
- ➔ Third is UN Security Council Resolution 2216 of April 2015. This resolution, which is repeatedly stated to be non-negotiable by both the Saudi-led coalition and the Hadi government, is the most contentious. It has two main features which explain the intransigence of its upholders: by 'reaffirming its support for the legitimacy of the President of Yemen, Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi,' it endorses the continuation of Hadi's position beyond 2014. Second, under chapter VII of the UN Charter, it 'demands that the Houthis immediately and unconditionally a) end the use of violence, b) withdraw their forces from all areas they have seized, including the capital Sana'a.' Additional clauses demand the Huthi give up their weapons, including missiles and refrain from provocations to neighbouring states.

While there is scope for negotiations within the confines of the first two references, the third is a fundamental obstacle to finding a peaceful solution to the Yemeni crisis. Most agencies and even states seeking a solution have actively encouraged the UNSC to discuss and approve a new resolution which would be more realistic and recognise the actual situation on the ground, namely the fact that the Huthis control the areas where most Yemenis live. This would enable the UNSE to engage productively with all parties concerned. These efforts have come up against a stone wall from both President Hadi and the Saudi leaders of the coalition. With respect to Hadi, the resolution is essential precisely because it confers on him the only 'legitimacy' he has, given his lack of control and influence even in the 'liberated' areas of the country.

Saudi intransigence is due to the regime's belief that 2216 is the sole legal justification for its military intervention. While some may question the authority of Saudi Arabia in a council of which it is not a member, it must be remembered that the 'pen holder' on Yemen at the UNSC is the UK whose close relationship with the Gulf monarchies takes precedence over the fate of Yemenis. The UK perceives its economic relationship with the GCC as essential to its post-Brexit economy, a perception which has been challenged.<sup>1</sup> Thus, UNSC Resolution 2216 is unlikely to be replaced as long as the leaders of the coalition, Saudi Arabia and the UAE want it retained. But there are signs of exhaustion on their part: UAE leaders have expressed more than once their desire to see an end to the war and, according to any logic, so should the new Saudi regime for whom the mere fact that it is still ongoing represents a defeat.

The first UN-sponsored official meeting of the Yemeni warring parties for two years scheduled to take place in Geneva on 6 September simply failed to happen, dealing a serious blow to the credibility of the SE Griffiths and raising questions about the commitment or competence of his team. Ill-prepared, announced in haste, their failure seriously jeopardises Griffiths' future interventions. Previous experience (after the Kuwait talks in 2016, the Huthi delegation was stranded in Muscat for three months as the UN could not safely bring them home) demonstrated that effective guarantees had to be provided to enable the Huthis to attend, a reasonable demand. Why was this issue not resolved with the Coalition prior to announcing the meeting?

Moreover only the 'official' parties, the internationally recognised government and the Huthis were invited, excluding coalition forces which determine and determine Hadi government positions, as well as the many Yemeni political forces involved, starting with the GPC, the various Southern Separatist groups, as well as those emerging from the 2011 uprisings, women, youth and civil society. As usual, Hadi government and Coalition public relations used Huthi absence from Geneva as an opportunity to blame them, rather than expressing regret that the meeting did not happen. However, regardless of

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<sup>1</sup> A new report <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/uk-saudi-arabia-security.pdf> suggests that Britain does not in fact benefit financially from its relationship with Saudi Arabia

failure in Geneva, as long as the UNSE operates within the constraints set by Resolution 2216, success will remain elusive. Unfortunately there is no indication of change on this crucial issue.

### 3 – Coalition views and positions

While the 2015 military intervention was initially explicitly designed to return the 'legitimate' government of President Hadi to power in Sana'a, lack of progress has contributed to shifting Saudi-Emirati discourse away from this limited objective to give priority to their main geopolitical concern, rivalry with Iran. Increasingly, what limited attention international media are giving to the war, systematically prefaces the word Huthi with 'Iran-backed.' Focusing on Iran serves different objectives: first it clearly aligns Saudi-Emirati positions with those of Israel and the US under Trump. They all share the view that Iran is their main enemy in the region, preventing their hegemony. Anti-Iranian rhetoric and actions are becoming increasingly strident and dangerous in the second half of 2018.

Second, it helps to explain the failure of the military campaign against the Huthis: after all the Huthi movement is nothing but an ill-armed assortment of militias lacking the sophisticated weaponry and years of training from the best and most powerful western military powers. How could it, on its own, have resisted the Saudi-led Arab coalition for so long? The only rational explanation is that the failure to defeat them is the result of significant Iranian military involvement. The fact that Iran almost certainly provides the Huthis with the advanced technology, enabling old Soviet and North Korean Scud missiles to reach Riyadh and other sites in Saudi Arabia, supports this discourse in two ways: it amplifies the Iranian threat propaganda and also confirms the importance of the Huthi/Yemeni threat to the stability of these absolute monarchies.

The coalition, which officially includes up to 11 states, is basically a Saudi-Emirati operation, with official support from their major international allies, the US, UK and France. All three are selling them billions of dollars' worth of weapons and ammunition. The US is also providing logistical support, in the form of aircraft maintenance and in-flight refuelling, without which the air strikes would end within days. The US and Britain are also providing 'targeting' advice whose quality can be gauged in recent airstrikes breaching any definition of International Humanitarian Law as seen in the dozens killed in schools, hospitals, weddings, funerals, and markets.

## 4 – Internal Yemeni Politics

Since the war started, significant developments in internal Yemeni politics have been few. The main event for the Sana'a-based faction has been the violent end of the Saleh-Huthi alliance. After months of deteriorating relations and military clashes, former president Saleh (in power from 1978-2012) renounced his alliance with the Huthi movement and offered to deal with the coalition. Unfortunately for him (and for peace in Yemen), by then, the military balance of power between his forces and those of the Huthis had shifted decisively in favour of the Huthis and they killed him on 4 December 2017. This removed from the political scene an extremely skilful and wily personality who might have been able to reach agreement with the coalition.

A major victory for the Huthi movement in the short term, this is causing a fundamental weakening of their position in the medium and long-term. Indeed, they are now in sole control of decision-making in Sana'a, but they have lost Saleh's military elite forces, many of whom have re-grouped around his nephew Tareq and are now fighting alongside the coalition forces both on the Tihama coastal plain and north-east fronts. These forces are lost to the Huthi who now have to fight an additional set of enemies whose support base is in the same geographical and socio-cultural area as theirs.

Equally, if not more significantly in the long-run, the General People's Congress, Saleh's political formation established in 1982, no longer supports the Huthis. Although it includes a rump under Huthi control in Sana'a, and another aligned with president Hadi, but most of its leadership are 'independent' with members dispersed in and out of Yemen, mostly in Cairo. Despite its divisions, the GPC remains the only significant Yemeni political organisation with the potential to become the kind of social-democratic party envisaged by one of its founders, Dr Abdul Karim al Iryani (1934-2015) and his successors.

The internationally recognised government of President Hadi is found mainly in Riyadh with a few rotating members in Aden, the 'interim' capital. It is mainly characterised by its inability to provide any of the services expected of a government anywhere, even in Aden itself. The limited security provided comes from an opportunistic alliance between southern separatist elements, including Salafi elements, and the UAE military. The numerous assassinations of religious leaders and others in Aden itself demonstrate either collusion or their lack of control over the city's streets. But it must be noted that most victims are associated with the Islah Islamist party, hated by the UAE. Elsewhere the UAE-supported Salafi forces are complemented by some administration from old and newly emerged community based groups influenced by local potentates.

Usually described as a major threat worldwide, Al-Qaïda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) presence and activities in the country have significantly decreased in the past



two years, largely as a result of successful drone and missile strikes from the US.<sup>2</sup> There have been few recent incidents, though it remains present in southern remote locations. Readers must also note that serious analysts have cast doubts on the determination of the coalition to defeat AQAP, demonstrating collusion and deals between these supposedly mutually hostile forces.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of any AQAP activities outside Yemen since 2010, the organisation poses a greater, if limited, threat to Yemenis than it does to northern states. Given the dysfunctional state in Yemen and the absence of attractive political ideologies, the surprise is how few youth join it, rather than how many.

In the liberated areas of the northern governorates, around Mareb, administration and military control are exercised by forces loyal to Vice President Ali Mohsen, himself a senior member of the Islah Islamist-tribal party. Originally from Saleh's village and closely allied to Saleh for decades, he broke off from that regime in March 2011, became Hadi's Vice President in April 2016, and is ideologically on the more extreme end of the Islamist spectrum.

In summary, politically, Yemen still has two main parties, the GPC which needs to regroup and re-organise after Saleh's death, and Islah which remains a combination of largely incompatible forces, and whose unity is also debatable. Yemeni internal politics since the war started have caused fragmentation within the country. Huthi control is imposed by force and fear and includes remaining remnants of the earlier administrative system. The liberated areas are far more fragmented, with various separatist movements in the south, a multiplicity of UAE dominated localised security organisations, while administrative structures operate at levels substantially lower than the governorate. In the north-east, Islah connected forces dominate, while the Red Sea coastal area is a military front.

## 5 – Military developments

Within a few months of the Saudi-led coalition's intervention, the military situation reached stalemate with only marginal changes between September 2015 and the summer of 2018. The Huthi movement is fully in control of the northern and central highlands, holding the 'pocket' of the country with the best climatic conditions and therefore the highest population density. While coalition forces claim that the rest of the country is 'liberated,' this terminology requires a very flexible interpretation: while it is true that

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Kendall, "Contemporary Jihadi Militancy in Yemen, How is the Threat evolving", Middle East Institute, July 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.apnews.com/f38788a561d74ca78c77cb43612d50da/AP-investigation:-Yemen-war-binds-US,-allies,-al-Qaida>

any remaining Huthi presence there is underground, it cannot be said that any of these areas are administered by the 'internationally recognised government' of president Hadi. Instead, these areas are either military fronts or managed by a range of competing and sometimes opposing factions.

Most military fronts have seen little movement in the past 3 years, with Taiz<sup>4</sup> city and al Baidha governorate both suffering from a multiplicity of rival forces and constant fighting, though it is more localised and less intense in the largely rural governorate of al-Baidha while in Taiz most fighting takes place in the densely populated city. Fronts in Mareb Governorate and in Nehm [Sana'a Governorate] have remained largely static, while the coalition has made limited progress in northern Tihama around Haradh and the small port of Midi, and in Sa'ada governorate. In Southern Tihama, early 2017 saw some significant progress with the expulsion of most Huthi forces from the Bab al Mandab region and Mokha, where Tareq Saleh's forces have become dominant since mid-2018.

Having been postponed in 2017, the long anticipated offensive to expel the Huthis from Hodeida started on 13 June this year, led by the UAE and including a range of Yemeni forces. There was a temporary lull in July and August, supposedly to give the UNSE the opportunity of reaching a peaceful solution. He persuaded the Huthis to hand over the port to UN management and use the port revenues to pay the salaries of the civil servants (mainly teachers and medical staff) who have not been paid for now 2 years! The seriousness of this Huthi commitment was not put to the test, as the Hadi government, fully-supported by the Saudi and Emirati rulers, promptly rejected the deal and demanded that all of Hodeida be surrendered to their forces, rather than to the UN, thus instantly putting an end to this hint of progress in the peace process.

Among the many unanswered questions is the timing of the initial coalition offensive on Hodeida. As it coincided precisely with the proposed dates when SE Griffiths was to present his peace initiative, was it deliberately intended to scupper the initiative before it even got off the ground? The rejection of the Hodeida handover deal by the coalition is yet another indication that negotiated peace is not on their real agenda, another blow to the UNSE's efforts anticipating failure in Geneva in September.

Since then the offensive has resumed at full throttle and is likely to be both protracted and very bloody locally with, as usual, civilians suffering more than anyone else in the city and beyond. In view of the gradually worsening of an already disastrous humanitarian situation, it is little wonder that death rates from starvation are rising and that emaciated children and people eating leaves have now become the daily media fare of those who follow Yemen news. With national food stocks expected to last no more than two

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<sup>4</sup> A detailed analysis of the situation in Taiz was recently published: <http://www.deeproot.consulting/single-post/2018/08/16/Caught-in-the-Middle-A-Conflict-Mapping-of-Taiz-Governorate>

months,<sup>5</sup> the absence of fuel supplies resulting from the offensive and the closure of the road to Sana'a, the nightmare will worsen beyond imagination.

## 6 – Opportunities for France, the EU and others

In addition to the constraints imposed by UNSC 2216, the failure of the UN sponsored September 2018 Geneva talks to even take place have challenged UNSE Griffiths; credibility among Yemenis as well as limiting his room for manoeuvre for months to come. The desperation of the situation of millions of Yemenis demands action from any international actor able to take initiatives beyond the framework imposed by UNSC 2216. France is in a position to take a leading role and has advantages over others in taking an initiative: its international importance as a member of the UNSC P5, President Macron's recent success in 'solving' the Saudi crisis with Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri; Seen by many as a negative factor, its arms sales to the coalition leaders and its base in the UAE demonstrate its close relationship and potential influence with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE: this is an opportunity for honest and open dialogue.

France is therefore in a position to intervene to save the lives and livelihoods of millions of Yemenis; its commitment to humanitarian law and to human rights must bring about firm action. The following steps could contribute to finding a solution: first separating the Yemeni issues from the rivalry with Iran; both need to be addressed but they are different. France should remind the Saudi and Emirati leadership of the minimal role played by Iran in the Yemeni conflict and urge them to address the Huthis and the war in Yemen independently of their rivalry with Iran. Second, in Yemen itself, the immediate priority is to prevent further deaths from hunger and disease: this means keeping Hodeida port and the road to Sana'a open so that supplies can travel to the areas in greatest need, in the remote mountains, as well as nearer to the city itself. France should challenge coalition strategy of blockading the port and preventing the delivery of basic necessities to the population; actively starving civilians, including children, women and older people, is not an acceptable military strategy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regardless of being contrary to International Humanitarian Law. Third, France should remind UNSC members, the coalition, and the internationally recognised government that negotiations and reaching a political solution require flexibility and compromise. France can offer to help draft a new UNSC resolution which would enable the UN system to intervene effectively. Fourth, France should engage in active dialogue with Saudi Arabia and UAE to develop a new and productive approach to reaching peace in Yemen. While all these suggestions should be implemented by French diplomats, they are also opportunities for

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/yemen-food-supplies-two-months-charity-warns-a8551481.html>

France to work with its natural allies, the European Union and beyond who have a record as successful mediators, Norway being an obvious example.

The war in Yemen is an opportunity for President Macron to achieve a major foreign policy success. Although by no means easy, the situation in Yemen is possibly marginally less challenging than that in the Sahel where France's involvement appears to be stuck in its own quagmire. France must use its considerable diplomatic experience to succeed where others cannot and take any initiative possible to alleviate the suffering of millions of Yemenis.