

Achieving Sustainable Peace in Yemen

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Articles & Testimony

A political settlement with the Houthis is important, but no agreement can last without local buy-in and concerted efforts to rebuild Yemen's infrastructure, institutions, and governance practices.

Since his appointment in February, US Special Envoy Tim Lenderking has engaged in a process that has been overwhelmingly focused on the regional aspects of the conflict, particularly the roles of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the potential utilization of mediation and facilitation powers like Kuwait and Oman. He has taken several whistle-stop tours to meet with key Gulf and Yemeni figures and served as a force-multiplier for ongoing UN ceasefire efforts. Despite the Houthis' at-best lukewarm reactions to both Lenderking's ceasefire [plan](https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-usa-int-idUSKBN2B41T4) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-usa-int-idUSKBN2B41T4>) and the publicly announced Saudi [plan](https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2205694) (<https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2205694>), the continued Houthi push in Marib, and the exit of UN Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths—all of which cast doubt on a quick-fix solution—negotiators hope that US political will to end the war and Lenderking's laser focus on regional players may eventually help create the first window of opportunity since 2016 for a political agreement.

The Problem of Political Will

The emphasis on regional partners is not without reason: it is hard to envision any settlement succeeding without the buy-in of key actors like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. Moreover, unlike in the

past, the regional actors are currently aligned in their desire to find a diplomatic solution. The war is increasingly a burden for those countries that must continue to expend financial and political capital on it, all the while being accused of complicity in Yemeni suffering. The Omanis have wanted a solution since day one, the UAE formally withdrew (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-drawdown-may-isolate-saudi-arabia-yemen>) from the anti-Houthi fight in 2019, and the Saudis increasingly want to end a war that has become a public relations disaster in the West and has tested trust in Saudi defenses at home. The Kingdom was particularly shaken by the September 2019 cruise missile and drone attack against ARAMCO facilities, which temporarily knocked half of Saudi oil production offline. But the Abqaiq attack, for which Saudi Arabia blamed Iran, also forced the Kingdom to recalibrate its priorities, suddenly shifting its military emphasis in Yemen to a diplomatic one.

Western countries' political will is similarly aligned toward diplomacy. The US and UK face increasingly mobilized opposition, largely coming from the left, for their continued backing of the Saudi-led coalition; other countries are under pressure due to arms sales to Gulf partners. As a result, regional and Western negotiators are working round the clock on an acceptable settlement that will lead to a ceasefire that might halt Yemen's further descent into famine and get the country on the road to peace. The only problem: external political will does not end civil wars.

Yemen's war began as a conflict between Yemenis, and it is Yemenis who must muster the political will to end it. Where Yemenis are discussed, it is often in the context of creating leverage over them. In particular, significant resources are devoted to debating which country has leverage over the Houthis and what could conjure up their political will to end the war. While the closest patron (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemen-matrix-allies-adversaries>) of any group in Yemen is most often a foreign one, Yemenis are not puppets. In fact, most Yemenis remain broadly opposed to foreign intervention at least in principle, aiming to guard their autonomy. For this reason, regardless of what external leverage allegedly exists, international pressure to end the war is viable only if the parties themselves are amenable to ending it.

At present, the Yemeni parties have little reason to strike a deal. The Houthis are pushing (<https://www.npr.org/2021/04/28/991503929/houthi-rebels-in-yemen-advance-on-saudi-stronghold-of-marib>) into Marib, lured by the province's resource wealth and aiming to strike a blow to a key government stronghold. The Houthis feel they have little comparative incentive to agree to a ceasefire. The coalition may well have to offer major concessions to get Houthi acquiescence, such as lifting the blockade or opening Hudayda port or Sana'a airport—all options it fears would allow the Houthis to resupply. Meanwhile, the Yemeni government is hardly incentivized to enter into peace talks with the Houthis dominant in Marib for fear that a transitional agreement now would simply codify Houthi gains on the ground into permanent political gains. The coalition, thus, is in a tight spot: conditions are not favorable, but its negotiating position risks deteriorating further as the war goes on.

The Solution Must Be Sustainable

Moreover, getting to a peace agreement is just one part of actually creating sustainable peace. The problems of governance that led to this war remain, and a quick-fix political agreement that creates a permanent Houthi fixture disproportionate to their popularity and leaves out important actors who can act as spoilers will inevitably lead to more conflict. Yemen will need help in ending that cycle by building a stable state and economy with buy-in from across society.

A political agreement would have a stronger foundation if there was already a framework for the restoration of infrastructure and state institutions, a stabilized economy, and alignment behind good governance models that serve as working options for a future (likely federalized) Yemeni state. Although much of the world focuses solely on the Saudi-Iran layer of the war (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-southern-hezbollah-implications-houthi-missile-and-drone-improvements>), the conflict has precipitated a fracturing of the centralized Yemeni state, ironically underlining the salience of the planned federal system of governance whose

implementation was sidelined by the conflict: prior to the war, an extended and inclusive Conference of National Dialogue concluded that a federalized Yemen was the future, even if the current six region federal system remains controversial. Still, a bottom-up model that seeks to create the conditions for sustainable peace would be a tough pill to swallow as it requires the international community to embrace Yemen's complexity and accept being in it for the long haul—a prospect none of the countries involved in Yemen prefer.

Of course, even with such support, it is Yemenis themselves who will ultimately do the work of restoring the peace and repairing the damage of the war. Yemenis continue to assert that, despite the horrors wrought by the conflict, there remains reason for hope. The international community has significant resources to aid those working to ameliorate the devastating effects of the war, which will ultimately help underpin any future political agreement. If international political will to end the war is channeled into creating the conditions for sustainable peace, it may create incentives for peace among the domestic parties to the war and thus buttress efforts to get to and maintain a ceasefire and political agreement.

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