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Uneasy State of Play Awaits New UN Envoy in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

The next envoy will be asked to find a quick path to peace where no obvious one exists, armed with little leverage for budging the emboldened and well-positioned Houthis.

With the announcement of a new UN special envoy to Yemen coming soon, peace seems as elusive as ever. Six-and-a-half years after Houthi rebels pushed the government out of the capital, one of the world's worst humanitarian crises has left thousands displaced and dead, many from lack of food or medical care. Designed to push the parties closer to peace, the recent uptick in international political will to end the war seems instead to have emboldened Houthi perceptions of their negotiating position. Even Omani intervention, long called for by outside powers, has not produced the immediate results some unrealistically hoped for. The new envoy's team will therefore inherit a seemingly intractable situation—they may be able to reinterpret their mandate in ways that open up new moves, but rearranging the puzzle pieces sufficiently to enable a quick deal seems unlikely.

Omani action and international political will are not the only factors that have changed in the past year. The overall context in Yemen has shifted—the Houthis [ramped up their fight in Marib](#) and increased their missile and drone attacks on Saudi territory; Riyadh offered public concessions to end the war; and the United States appointed a new special envoy of its own to rally regional support for a solution. Meanwhile, the country's various anti-Houthi forces remained split by internal squabbles and unable to unite politically or militarily against their common enemy.

The ramp-up in activity around Marib is largely what catalyzed the international community to sue for peace. The

Houthis have had more difficulty capturing the province than they hoped, with significant casualties reported, but many observers fear they may eventually be able to overrun it. Marib matters because it is the Yemen National Army's last major stronghold in the north, home to much of the country's resource wealth, and a potential gateway to the south, where the Houthis could directly exploit fissures between the government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). As a result, many believe the fall of Marib would constitute a point of no return for the conflict.

Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia has offered major concessions such as easing restrictions on Hodeida port and opening Sanaa airport to some destinations. Yet the Houthis have not budged, perhaps aiming to leverage the international community's obvious desire for a quick deal into further gains at little cost to themselves. For example, they have framed the port and airport issues as humanitarian matters in order to separate them from the ceasefire discussions, arguing that they should not have to concede much—if anything—to get those facilities open.

Amid this stalemate, Oman sent a delegation to meet with the Houthis in Sanaa—an unusual move because Muscat typically serves as a facilitator (i.e., hosting direct talks between the parties on its soil) but deliberately avoids being a mediator. Why have the Omanis suddenly embraced shuttle diplomacy, a style more often associated with Kuwait? The notion that they gave in to international pressure seems improbable, since such pressure has been applied for years to no avail. More likely, they have concluded that the war is getting to an untenable point, perhaps fearing it will eventually threaten their national security more directly.

Whatever spurred the Omani trip, it did not result in a deal. This was unsurprising—Muscat has goodwill with the Houthis but little diplomatic leverage, so the delegation's mission likely focused not so much on reaching an immediate agreement, but on establishing the necessary relationships in Sanaa for a future deal. Negotiators have often complained that deals made with the Houthis in Muscat tend to get scuppered in Sanaa. Knowing the cast of characters in the rebel-held capital may therefore be a win in and of itself. Yet it is unclear how this new Omani role will develop going forward and how it will align with the Saudi-Houthi negotiations.

Despite these developments, many Yemenis believe that the Houthis are uninterested in making a deal even with Omani pressure. Others hypothesize that the Houthis are using delay tactics so that their sponsor, Iran, can play Yemen as a card in the ongoing Vienna nuclear talks. This camp argues that reaching an agreement at the current stage would merely solidify the group's military gains into political gains. Instead, they believe anti-Houthi forces should close ranks and push the rebels out of Marib. Yet the ongoing disunity among those forces means that only some of their military units are near the Marib front and willing to carry out such a campaign. Moreover, the 2019 Riyadh Agreement [aimed at halting clashes](#) between government and STC forces remains largely unimplemented, and tensions are once again rising dramatically between these factions.

Besides thwarting the military solidarity needed to defeat the Houthis on the battlefield, the lack of unity has ensured that Yemen's "liberated areas" have no credible, unified governance structure capable of supporting the people. Consequently, many communities continue to experience high rates of malnutrition, disease, and other ill effects of war. The worst effects are rooted in the country's economic situation, particularly its [currency crisis and lack of salaries](#). Although food is available on grocery store shelves, most Yemenis are unable to afford it, and services remain poor or nonexistent because the government is unable to fully operate inside the country. Meanwhile, the Houthi offensive in Marib is raising fears of a refugee crisis.

Current UN envoy Martin Griffiths will soon transition to his new role as a top UN official focused on humanitarian issues like those unfolding in Yemen. Meanwhile, the world awaits the announcement of a new envoy whose mandate will be to find a swift path to peace where no obvious one exists. The path is more likely to be a long, hard slog that requires a renewed focus on laying the [groundwork for sustainable peace](#).

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