

Framing Yemen Peace Negotiations

by [Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](/experts/elana-delozier)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Elana DeLozier \(/experts/elana-delozier\)](/experts/elana-delozier)

Elana DeLozier was the Rubin Family Fellow in the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy from 2018-2022, where she specialized in Yemen, the Gulf states, and nuclear weapons and proliferation.



Brief Analysis

Prodding the main parties to compromise on entrenched demands and make room for more factions at the negotiating table would be a good first step in moving from escalation to transition.

Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy for Yemen, is expected to present a new framework for peace negotiations to the Security Council in mid-June. Although he is a respected, seasoned, and capable diplomat, his biggest stumbling block may be his timing rather than his skills. His call for negotiations coincides with a military escalation in Yemen, as the Houthi rebel group continues to [lob missiles at Saudi Arabia](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-europe-can-punish-irans-missile-smuggling-while-preserving-the-nuclear) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-europe-can-punish-irans-missile-smuggling-while-preserving-the-nuclear>) and coalition forces [prepare to take Hodeida port](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hodeida-campaign-part-1-humanitarian-and-political-role-of-red-sea-port) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hodeida-campaign-part-1-humanitarian-and-political-role-of-red-sea-port>). For the time being, neither side is likely to heed his warning that military escalation could "in a single stroke take peace off the table."

PAST NEGOTIATIONS AND CHANGING REALITIES

Griffiths is the UN's third Yemen envoy since the conflict began in March 2015. At the time, the internationally recognized government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi was pushed out of the capital by the Houthis and loyalists to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had been forced to step down during the 2011-2012 Arab Spring protests. In response, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates formed a military coalition with the Hadi government in a bid to retake the country with U.S. support, while Iran backed the Houthis.

Several attempts at peace have failed, including June 2015 talks in Geneva, September 2015 talks in Muscat, and December 2015 talks in Biel, Switzerland. The spring 2016 talks in Saudi Arabia offered the best chance to end the

conflict because they were the first direct negotiations between the Saudis and the Houthis, who surprisingly agreed to de-escalate the fighting and swap prisoners. Both parties also changed their rhetoric: a Houthi spokesman publicly criticized Iran for exploiting the war, and the Saudis began to call the Houthis a "movement" rather than "militants."

Yet the secret to the success of these talks was also likely their downfall: the negotiations did not include delegations from the Hadi or Saleh camps. Thus, when the Saudis tried to pass the baton to the Hadi government for follow-on negotiations in Kuwait, the momentum was lost. Perhaps as retaliation for having been excluded, President Hadi appointed a high-profile Houthi enemy, Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, as vice president a week before the Kuwait talks opened, contributing to their eventual collapse in August 2016. Two months later, Hadi rejected a new UN plan, and a last-ditch effort by outgoing secretary of state John Kerry failed that December.

Since then, additional complexities have arisen and allegiances have shifted. The war has always included strange bedfellows more aligned by common adversaries than common interests, but even these tenuous ties have now fractured. The Houthi-Saleh camp has mostly split, with some Saleh loyalists joining the coalition. Similar divisions have emerged between members of the coalition itself, who are all anti-Houthi but not all pro-Hadi. Most notably, members of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is supported by the UAE and led by the former Hadi-appointed governor of Aden, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, have repeatedly skirmished with pro-Hadi forces. As a result, the conflict and negotiations may no longer fall within the simple framework of two main parties and their backers.

ISSUES TO RESOLVE IN NEW TALKS

The next round of negotiations will need to include a wider range of factions, as called for by Yemenis across the political spectrum. At the moment, Griffiths appears to have the trust of the main players—a critical element in making sure that no one party becomes a spoiler. In addition to the Hadi government and the Houthis, he has met with women's groups, the STC, and both factions of the General People's Congress, among others. He may decide to expand the number of parties involved in negotiations, either right away or during an eventual transition—in fact, the GPC and STC are already claiming that they will be involved.

The next round of talks will also have to confront old issues. Past talks have failed in large part because the parties disagree on the order of concessions: the Hadi government wants the Houthis to disarm and withdraw from seized territory prior to reaching a political agreement, while the Houthis want to retain their arms until said agreement is in place, arguing that Hadi's demand would be tantamount to surrender.

Griffiths may also have to contend with each side's general unwillingness to compromise. In past negotiations, President Hadi has appeared reluctant to make decisions or offer any concessions that might undermine his political position, while the Houthis have often played the waiting game, believing the coalition cannot oust them from the capital. As one analyst with access to the Houthis told the author, "War sucks, but they know war." In a report issued this January, the UN Panel of Experts suggested that neither side's leaders have suffered enough to make them compromise—in sharp contrast to their civilian constituents.

If talks do occur, each side's main conditions will likely be consistent with past negotiations. The Hadi government has generally emphasized three demands: (1) the Houthis must disarm and withdraw from all seized territory, including areas of their northern home province, (2) the transition plan must fit within the framework of the 2011 Gulf Initiative, the National Dialogue Conference outcomes, and UN Security Council Resolution 2216, and (3) any future president must be chosen in elections.

For their part, the Houthis have insisted on the following: (1) the establishment of an interim transitional government led by a presidential council or consensus vice president before elections, (2) their participation in government, and (3) the removal of President Hadi and Vice President Ali Mohsen. Other unconfirmed but likely conditions are the integration of Houthi fighters into the military, reconstruction funds for their home province, and

the removal of international sanctions.

The Saudis probably have their conditions as well—mainly ensuring that the Houthi-Iran bond is broken and demining the border and waterways. The Houthis may still be willing to deemphasize Tehran as a political ally in favor of a relationship with Riyadh. During the 2016 talks with the Saudis, the lead Houthi negotiator gave an interview denying a close relationship with Iran and emphasizing Yemen's shared history with Saudi Arabia. After two years of additional Iranian support, it is unclear whether the Houthis could see reaching out to the kingdom as more in their long-term interests than partnering with Iran.

U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The path to peace in Yemen is fraught, so the United States should back the UN special envoy's negotiation strategy in four ways:

1. Publicly support the envoy's mission and encourage the coalition to lean on President Hadi to do the same.
2. Encourage the expansion of talks to ensure that every party powerful enough to be a spoiler can join the process at some stage.
3. Encourage the Hadi government to revisit its strict interpretation of Resolution 2216 and other past agreements and precedents, ensuring sufficient room for compromise.
4. Encourage the Saudis to either join talks directly, as they did previously, or lead back-channel discussions to foster a locally and regionally backed peace initiative.

Even if Griffiths manages to achieve a basic ceasefire, the work of creating a transition plan and new state structures will take months, if not years, of negotiations. The war has stirred up other unresolved internal conflicts and brought on additional calls for autonomy from various corners of Yemen. Having a star negotiator at the helm does not guarantee peace in the near term, though de-escalating the main conflict would be a considerable step in the right direction.

Elana DeLozier, a Yemen specialist and political analyst, is the founder of the Sage Institute for Foreign Affairs. ❖

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