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Abaad Studies & Research Center

Will "Proxy Peace" be Negotiated in Yemen?

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Case Analysis

Political Analysis Unit

May 2023





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Summary

In light of the dominance of the term "proxy war," its opposite, "proxy peace," is popular and is little discussed or used. Yet, many in conflict zone experiments suggest that proxy wars can lead to proxy peace, when the parties supporting the war and patronizing the conflicting parties shift their positions from a state of indirect fighting to a state of peace and seek to find a way out through a peaceful resolution based on dialogue between the local parties. In this case, peace by proxy materializes in view of the role of the outside powers that were active in supporting the war, but changed their position and supported efforts of peace.

This study discusses the recent efforts and negotiations to end the war in Yemen. These efforts are informed by experience and understanding, especially after the Saudi-Iran rapprochement that culminated in the China-brokered agreement of March 10, 2023.

The study assumes that the agreement will stimulate peace efforts, especially. Many indications show that the parties to the internal and external conflict have reached what experts call the "ripe moment," when neither party is ready to return to war, and all parties realize that resuming hostilities will be costly.

Nevertheless, the path of peace is not paved yet. Several internal and external obstacles still hinder peace. These obstacles will be even greater if the intra-Yemeni dialogue is not all-inclusive, but leaves parties and issues that, if left unaddressed, would reignite the conflict. Besides, some of the partially dominant forces aspire to take full control over strategic oil-rich areas before going to dialogue.

Introduction

Last April, a Saudi delegation headed by Muhammed Al Jaber, Saudi ambassador to Yemen, arrived in the Houthi-controlled capital, Sana'a and initiated a new round of talks with the Houthis. The visit came in the context of pushing forward the peace process efforts and ending the war in Yemen.

This was the first visit of its kind since the outbreak of the war following the Houthi coup and takeover of Sana'a and most of the Yemeni governorates in late 2014. Although this visit was preceded by several meetings between the Saudis and the Houthis during the preceding months, brokered by Oman, this meeting comes after the Saudi-Iranian agreement brokered by China in March 2023. Although that round in Sana'a did not result in an agreement on the course of forthcoming negotiations, the Yemenis are still awaiting what the Saudi-Houthi negotiations will lead to. The outcome of the initial contacts in this round are viewed as a litmus test of the seriousness of the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement.

This view is also held by observers outside Yemen since the conflict in Yemen is the most important issue in the broader conflict between the two countries. Reaching an agreement to end the Yemen war depends on the credibility of the two parties, Tehran and Riyadh, to normalize relations and put an end to the state of conflict, or proxy wars in Yemen and other Arab countries, including Syria, Lebanon and Iraq.

Therefore, the question is: will understandings between Iran and Saudi Arabia lead to achieving a "proxy peace" in Yemen? And to what extent is this kind of peace compatible with the Yemeni case, as long as the designation "proxy war" applies to the Yemeni case, in view of Riyadh's backing of the forces of the internationally recognized government and Tehran's backing of the Houthi group in the eight-year war in Yemen, before new external backers stepped in and supported other parties to the Yemeni conflict giving rise to additional complications?

The study attempts to answer these questions, focusing on the most important trajectories and efforts to end the war in light of recent developments in the country, and in view of the positions and visions of Saudi Arabia and Iran, whether in the context of the war or peace.

What does "proxy peace" mean?

Proxy wars dominate most zones of armed conflicts in the world, especially conflicts that erupted in the wake of World War II and in subsequent decades. In particular, some Arab countries, including Yemen, have been an arena of proxy wars over the past decade.

The term "proxy war," which is widely used in the analysis of developments and events in the Middle East, indicates that "the conflicting parties on the ground are not merely motivated by their own interests, but also by the interests of the external powers that support them."¹ Proxy war is defined as "indirect confrontations between foreign powers on the territory of a third country."²

The various definitions of proxy wars refer to internal parties directly taking part in the conflict, and external parties participating indirectly, through backing, financing and logistic support. The internal party acts as a 'proxy' of the external one, called 'patron' or 'sponsor'. Each of these affects and is affected by the proxy relationship depending on several factors, including each party's ability to manipulate the sponsor- proxy relationship to serve their desired goals and maximize gains. The nature of the relationship also plays a major role in producing the desired outcomes.

A sponsor-proxy relationship is one of the oldest forms of relationships, or modes of social interaction. It arises between two or more parties, in which the first party, the proxy, performs tasks on behalf of the second party, the sponsor. This requires the delegation of some decision-making powers by the latter.³

Although international relations literature is still reluctant to apply the notion of 'proxy' to the area of peacemaking due to the dominance of the narrative of proxy wars, some recent studies affirm that “the intervention of sponsors (external parties or patrons) to pressure their armed proxies (internal parties) to stop a war by proxy represents a kind of interaction that may be applicable in the field of proxy peace.”⁴

It can be said that whoever leads a war by proxy can also lead peace by proxy through agreement between sponsors. Observers holding this opinion cite the Turkish-Russian talks regarding the war in Syria as the most evident case of proxy wars and of the relationship between sponsors abroad (Russia, Turkey and Iran) on the one hand, and their proxies at home (the Assad regime and the opposition) on the other.

If Syria is the most representative arena of a proxy war relationship between foreign patrons and internal proxies, according to the term 'proxy war' as previously indicated, then it could also be a suitable case for establishing peace by proxy. This is what the EU high representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, stated when she said that Syria needs a “proxy peace,” supported by the international community, instead of the proxy war that has raged for years and claimed about 320,000 lives.⁵ The EU official's statement confirms that there is proxy peace as much as there is proxy war. The same statement reinforces the need for conflict zones to stop proxy wars and start making peace, even if it is peace by proxy. Therefore, external powers and parties involved in proxy wars by supporting one or more internal parties with money and weapons shift grounds and pressurize their local proxies to opt for peace. If the involvement of external parties in the conflict, however indirectly, makes it a proxy war, then the involvement of these external parties themselves to pressure for establishing peace makes it peace by proxy.

Sponsors and proxies in the Yemen war

Most researchers and observers believe that the Yemen war, which broke in September 2014 following the Houthi coup, is a proxy war between two vying regional powers: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which supports the internationally recognized Yemeni government, on the one hand, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, which supports the armed Houthi group, on the other. Proxy relationships apply to the relations of the conflicting Yemeni parties with their external patrons and supporters, as each local party engaged in the war has external backers.

In the following, references will be made to the two significant regional powers supporting each side of the war in Yemen; namely, Saudi Arabia and Iran, and their respective relationships with local proxies.

Saudi Arabia in Yemen

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the most prominent external ally and supporter of the Yemeni government, especially in the post-2011 revolution period, after Saudi Arabia intervened strongly to prevent eruption of violence between the ruling regime and the opposition. The two parties signed the Gulf Initiative and the supplementary Implementation Mechanism, which provided for the transfer of power from President Saleh to Vice-President, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

In addition to the transfer of power, the agreement provided for the formation of a National Consensus Government, in which Saleh's party, the General People's Congress (GPC), and the opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties, shared power on a 50-50 basis. It also provided for organizing a National Dialogue Conference (NDC). However, the Houthis turned against the outcomes of the NDC, despite their representation and participation in the conference. They began escalation against the government and President Hadi in August 2014, after they managed to take control of Amran governorate, north of the capital, Sana'a.

During the transitional period in Yemen, 2012-2014, Houthi discourse grew persistently anti-Saudi, in clear agreement with the Iranian discourse. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia chose to remain silent about the new developments in Yemen, and adhered to the international position that supports the Houthis' participation in the NDC as a prelude to engaging them in the political process, and then trying to persuade them to give up their weapons and get integrated in politics, while at the same time detaching them from Iran. However, none of this materialized. On the contrary, the Houthis continued their expansion, taking control of more and more areas by force of arms and with Iranian support. Their relationship with Tehran was strengthened in an unprecedented manner, to the extent that they were able to overthrow the government and seize state institutions after controlling the capital, Sana'a, and several Yemeni governorates. In the meanwhile, the Saudi position remained unchanged. It was obviously based on undisclosed miscalculations and considerations. In March 2014, Saudi Arabia announced placing a number of organizations, including the Houthi group, on its terrorist groups list. Yet, it did not take any further practical measures against the Houthis.

Observers attributed Riyadh's inaction towards the Houthis in the period preceding the coup and the fall of Sana'a to the success of the UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal bin Omar, along with the United States and some other actors,

in pushing Saudis into the backseat. Saudi Arabia was content with observing the behavior of the Houthis without intervening to curb their military actions or prevent the flow of weapons to them. The fact that Yemen was under direct international supervision at that time also played a role in delaying a Saudi reaction.⁶

The Houthis continued to expand after controlling Sana'a, and headed south to control the central and southern governorates. In conjunction with this expansion, they conducted a military maneuver near the Saudi border, as part of their growing defiant rhetoric and provocation of Riyadh. President Hadi, who managed to escape from his residence in Sana'a in February 2015, settled in Aden, and asked the Arab Gulf states to intervene to protect Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi coup. Riyadh responded by the forging a military coalition from several Arab countries, "the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen," in late March 2015; i.e., six months after the Houthi coup and takeover of Sana'a and a number of northern governorates.

The Saudi-led Arab coalition supported the Yemeni government and the forces loyal to it in confronting the Houthis, who were expelled from many regions in southern and eastern Yemen. However, the war went on in several Yemeni governorates, paramount among which were Taiz, Marib, Hodeida, Al-Baidha, Al-Jawf, and parts of Shabwa, Al-Dhali' and Abyan. About a year after the outbreak of the Yemeni war and the intervention of the Saudi-led military coalition, Saudi-Iranian relations witnessed a new development, represented by Riyadh's announcement of severing its relations with Tehran after the Saudi consulate in the Iranian city of Mashhad was attacked by Iranian demonstrators, against the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a Saudi Shiite dissident who was involved in political agitation against Riyadh. Tension continued between the two countries, especially with the escalation of conflicts in several Arab countries, including Yemen and Syria.

Iran in Yemen

The relationship between the Houthi group and Iran began more than 20 years ago, and grew especially during the six wars between the government and the Houthis 2004-2010, which led to strained official relations between Yemen and Iran. However, Iranian support for the Houthis has increased in recent years to include various quality arms deals. Yemeni security forces managed to seize Iranian weapon shipments on their way to the Houthis,

including Jihan 1 and Jihan 2 in January and March 2013, respectively. The Yemeni government officially requested the UN Security Council to conduct an investigation into the matter. A delegation of UN experts visited Yemen to investigate the arms shipments seized in Yemeni territorial waters. UN reports proved that Iran had been providing weapons to the Houthi rebels since 2009.⁷

According to observers, Iranian support for the Houthis took various forms, including regional and international political support with the aim of introducing the Houthis as a major actor in Yemen, religious support by mobilizing and recruiting young people into the ranks of the Houthis from a sectarian standpoint, and military support through training and arming Houthi militants with quality weapons.⁸

After the outbreak of the Yemeni popular revolution in 2011, relying on Iranian support, the Houthi movement began to expand in northern Yemen. Iran viewed the Houthis a local ally with whom it shares affiliation to the Shiite sect, and together they share hostility to Saudi Arabia and its Yemeni allies. Iran also provided the Houthis with logistic support in terms of training in the various military, political, media and security fields. Immediately after the Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a, Iranian officials expressed their joy at the fall of "the fourth Arab capital to the Iranian revolution."⁹

After nearly 6 years of war, General Rostam Qasemi, assistant commander of the Quds Force, a branch of the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said that all the weapons the Houthis possess are the result of aid provided by Tehran, especially in weapons-manufacturing technology, pointing out that the weapons, including drones and ballistic missiles, are made in Yemen. He acknowledged the presence in Yemen of Iranian experts "whose mission is to provide counsel."¹⁰ This statement is the first Iranian admission of Tehran's support for the Houthis in the current war. Some researchers believe that Iran's relations with its proxies in conflict zones are no longer indirect, or even secret. Rather, in some cases the proxy relationship transforms into a geopolitical pattern to establish extended regional relations and roles. This is evident in Iran's endeavor to "connect Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, as a strategic influence zone in the Middle East, by attracting identity-based proxies who support its sectarian influence."¹¹

Internal roots and causes of the Yemen war

Besides the external factors and support for both parties to the Yemeni war, there are internal roots and influence, too. The Imamate movement, linked doctrinally to Zaydism and politically to the Hadawi theory, has been trying to seize power ever since it lost it in the wake of the September 1962 revolution. The Imamate movement's pursuit of power is based on the doctrine that power is the exclusive right of the Hashemite dynasty, who call themselves "ahl al-bayt" (descendants of the Prophet's House). The Imami Hadawi theory faces resistance that began at an early stage, especially as it contradicts the gains achieved by the Yemenis, and is antithetical to the progress they have made by adopting the republican system of government, democratic practice, and the principle of a peaceful transfer of power. Currently most Yemenis reject this theory and believe that the Houthi movement is merely an extension of the imamate state that was based on the Hadawi theory, which makes access to power a divine right restricted to the claimants of the Hashemite lineage of the descendants of Hassan and Hussein, who are supposedly the chosen seed favored by God, and have the uncontested right to power forever. Because of this theory, armed conflicts flared up sometimes between followers of the Hadawi Imamate on the one hand and the various components of Yemeni society on the other, and sometimes between the Hadawi imams themselves. Wars broke out between brothers and between members of the same family or clan, with each contender claiming his exclusive right to the imamate and subsequently to power.¹²

On the religious and sectarian level, there are Yemeni Salafist (Sunni) schools that view the Houthi group as an enemy that must be confronted for religious reasons, especially since the Houthis are the ones who started their war against the Salafi groups and their main centers in Saada, blowing up the Hadith Center in Dammaj, Saada in early 2014. Dammaj confrontations were the first between the two parties (the Houthis and the Salafis), and the most vocal expression of the ideologically-charged sectarian nature of the war. The Salafis said at the time that "the Houthi group launched war with the aim of full control [of power], and eradication of the Salafis."¹³

On the political level, Yemeni political forces believe that the Houthi group has undermined the Yemeni state by orchestrating the coup, which destroyed state institutions and foundations. Therefore, the task of restoring the state begins with confronting the Houthis and their project, which is supported by Iran. To large segments of the Yemeni society, the Houthi group also seeks to destroy social cohesion through war, especially in view of the killing of hundreds of thousands of Yemenis, the displacement of millions of citizens, destruction of public and private facilities,

and destroying the already exhausted economy by triggering more conflicts, and economic losses. The National Alliance of Yemeni Parties affirms that "establishing a comprehensive and just peace in Yemen cannot be attained unless the China-brokered Saudi-Iranian agreement contributes to dismantling and disarming of the Houthi militia, to restore security, stability and a peaceful political process."¹⁴ On the other hand, the Houthis believe that all they are doing is targeting "Saudi puppets who are manipulated by the Saudis to create crises and wars."¹⁵ Thus, internal factors and roots of the Yemeni conflict and external factors and motives represented by regional conflict between Riyadh and Tehran go side by side. An increasing body of evidence points out to proxy war in Yemen as the entangled web of patrons and proxies involved in this war becomes clear. The conflicts and divisions that erupt on the margins of the Yemeni war affirm this fact as external and internal factors and reasons for continuation of the war overlap. Sometimes, this takes the form of minor conflicts within a specific team, as happened in the war between the government forces on the one hand, and the forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which was established in May 2017 with UAE-backing. Armed confrontations also occurred on the other side between the Houthis and their ally, former President Ali Saleh, and led to the death of the latter in December 2017, and the prosecution of his family members and supporters of his party, the GPC. Therefore, the current Yemeni war can be viewed as an extension of a long series of political and military conflicts that Yemen has witnessed over short intervals since the revolution against the Imamate in the north and the revolution against British occupation in the south six decades ago.¹⁶

Overlapping that complicates war and motivates peace

Proxy wars endow sponsors with many gains, guarantee their interests and preserve their influence beyond their national borders, in exchange for providing support and guidance to their proxies in conflict zones, such as Yemen, without having to get involved directly in the war. However, a point about the Yemeni war and the relevant web of proxy-patron relationships is noteworthy. Saudi Arabia directly intervenes in the war and led the military coalition that targeted Houthi sites, camps and reinforcements with air strikes. There are also direct confrontations between the Houthis and the Saudis along the Saudi-Houthi border, in addition to the fact that the Houthis have launched drone and ballistic missile attacks into Saudi territory for years,

which means that the war is partially fought by a sponsor and the proxies. Moreover, despite the continuous denial of Hezbollah— Iran's strongest ally in the region, of any military role in Yemen, a number of intelligence reports confirm the active presence of Hezbollah fighters in several Yemeni governorates. Besides, western media quoted US officials as saying that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah were active in Yemen.¹⁷

It has become clear that there is another problem which further complicates the Yemen war, making it a special case in that it is not limited to the direct involvement of domestic parties. This indicates that, in this respect, the patrons lose some the advantages of the proxy war as they get directly involved in the battlefield. They also become responsible for some political, economic, military and security consequences of the war. This complex issue turns to be an important incentive for making peace, despite the internal and external complications.

According to some conflict resolution theorists, “at a certain stage of the conflict, the warring parties show their willingness to negotiate settlement proposals that they have rejected in the past, due to their realization that any alternative to negotiations will have disastrous outcomes, in addition to the fact that no signs of the possibility of a military settlement looms on the horizon.”¹⁸ Reflecting on the military situation in Yemen over the past year or so, we find that this argument almost applies to the parties to the war in Yemen. Except for the Houthi escalatory measures, such as targeting oil facilities in southern Yemen in October 2022 and launching attacks in Taiz and Marib, the stalemate almost dominates the entire military scene.

The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and the Yemen war

Although the declaration of resuming relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 seemed surprising to many observers, it won the support of various Arab and Islamic countries, in that it constituted a glimmer of hope and a prelude to resolving many conflicts that have erupted in various countries, including Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, over the past decade, in addition to issues that have remained unresolved for many years due to regional rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran.

This shift was surprising to many, especially in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia and Iran are sworn enemies and two main parties to conflicts in several countries. Each accuses the other of fueling the situation in the region. However, the new variable in the equation was the role of China, the largest buyer of Saudi and Iranian crude oil, and one of the few major powers that enjoy healthy relations with both countries.¹⁹

Beijing and Tehran struck a big economic deal worth \$400 billion in July 2021. A year later, Tehran agreed to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an organization that brings together China, India, Russia and several Central and South Asian countries.²⁰

In the wake of this rapprochement, which came after more than 7 years of estrangement, observers and analysts expected a breakthrough in the Yemeni situation, even though the war has almost stopped since the United Nations declared a temporary truce in April 2022, because the Yemen war is the most evident manifestation of the Saudi-Iranian conflict. The war continued to rage whenever indications of hostility and regional competition escalated between the two arch-rivals. Therefore, a rapprochement between the two rivals must be reflected in the situation in Yemen, especially in light of the efforts of the United Nations and regional and international actors to push the Yemeni parties towards ending the war that entered the ninth year when the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement was announced in March.

Although, from the point of view of some observers, the rapprochement raised hopes of the possibility of ending the conflict in Yemen, some observers believe that "this agreement does not entail peace in Yemen, especially if things stop at broadening the scope of Saudi-Houthi talks that may lead to Riyadh's withdrawal from the battlefield."²¹

About a month after the China-brokered rapprochement, two Saudi and Omani delegations arrived in the Houthi-controlled Yemeni capital, Sana'a, to hold talks with the Houthi leaders with the aim of reaching a comprehensive agreement to end the war.

The important stations in the Saudi-Houthi dialogue during the past years are as follows:

- Negotiations between the Saudis and the Houthis began for the first time in March 2016, in the so-called "Abha-Dhahran Track," which focused on security issues. The Sultanate of Oman played the role of preparatory mediator. Negotiations began with informal meetings in Abha and Dhahran Al-Janoub, then took the form of official meetings and negotiations in Riyadh.²²
- In September 2019, the two sides conducted indirect negotiations under US-Omani sponsorship. The talks resulted in mutual de-escalation, a restricted access to Sana'a Airport, and allowing vessels to enter the port of Hodeida.

About two months later, contacts stopped, and the Houthis resumed targeting Saudi facilities. In January 2020, another round of negotiations started, but it was short-lived, and the Houthis resumed their attacks, targeting Saudi oil facilities.²³

- In April 2020, the Saudi-led coalition declared a unilateral cease-fire for a period of two weeks to deal with the Coronavirus crisis. The Houthis rejected the ceasefire and continued their escalation, launching several attacks on targets inside Saudi territory.
- In March 2021, Saudi Arabia proposed an initiative that suggested a universal ceasefire, initiating inclusive intra-Yemeni consultations, under the auspices of the United Nations, and opening Sana'a airport and the port of Hodeida. Again, the Houthis rejected the initiative and continued their military escalation.
- In April 2022, the Yemeni factions agreed to a UN-brokered temporary truce, which was renewed for another three-month period. The truce led to decrease in military escalation, resumption of flights from Sana'a airport and the opening of the port of Hodeida to fuel ships.
- In October 2022, media reports revealed resumption of Saudi-Houthi talks, in which several issues, including southern Saudi border security and lifting restrictions imposed on Sana'a Airport and the port of Hodeida, were discussed.

Riyadh continued to talk to the Houthis over the last few years, despite their continuous attacks against Saudi infrastructure. However, the Houthis have recently adopted a more conciliatory rhetoric towards the Saudis, both in secret and in public. Yet, the two sides did not find common ground due to divergent negotiation approaches and irreconcilable demands. The Houthi insist on a detailed written agreement endorsing their demands; mainly opening Sana'a Airport and Hodeida port, paying the salaries of all state employees—including their security and military personnel, Saudi withdrawal from the war and stopping Saudi support for the Yemeni government in return for a long truce, and paying “reconstruction” funds to the Houthis. On the other hand, the Saudis hold to their approach of reaching an understanding with the Houthis on a roadmap to end the war, and reject the Houthi demand of a written commitment. Each side believes that the other side is bound to accept the other party's demands sooner or later.²⁴



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Rounds of Saudi-Houthi Negotiations

March 2016

Initiating the Abha-Dhahran negotiations, brokered by Oman

September 2019

Backchannel negotiations, brokered by the US and Oman, started. The talks resulted in mutual de-escalation, partial access to Sana'a Airport and the port of Hodeida

January 2020

Another round of negotiations started, but it soon came to an end. The Houthis resumed their attacks, targeting Saudi oil facilities

April 2020

The Saudi-led coalition announced a two-week ceasefire to deal with the Covid-19 crisis, but the Houthi group carried on its attacks of targets in Saudi territory

March 2021

Saudi Arabia proposed an initiative that included a comprehensive ceasefire and initiating of inter-Yemeni consultations. The proposal was rejected by the Houthis

April 2022

A three-month UN-brokered truce was concluded, and then renewed for another three months

October 2022

A new round of Saudi-Houthi talks on security in the border areas and partially lifting the restrictions imposed on Sana'a Airport and the port of Hodeida

April 2023

A Saudi delegation headed by Saudi ambassador to Yemen visited Sana'a and held talks with the Houthis on reaching an agreement to end the war



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Between stalemate and the ripe moment

Several conditions must be met to end the war, including the desire of the warring parties to reach a settlement. In the event belligerents in the field are proxies of external patrons and supporters; that is, a proxy war is involved, then the willingness of the sponsors is an essential prerequisite of the peace process, i.e., proxy peace is applicable as stated earlier. This is identical to the Yemeni case in both aspects of war and peace.

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement may constitute an incentive to establish peace, assuming that the internal and external warring parties have reached the “ripe moment,” as William Zartman calls it. Zartman believes that the timing of negotiations is necessary to resolution because the conflicting parties only settle disputes when they are ready to do so, and when alternative unilateral means are unattainable, or when the parties feel that they are entangled in a costly and uncomfortable quagmire. Only at that moment do the proposals that have long been in the air seem attractive and reasonable.²⁵ Although it is important that sponsors shall reach this moment in order to initiate negotiations, ripeness of internal parties to the war is even more important because peace is not possible unless the belligerents themselves are ripe for negotiations.

Iran has delivered many reassuring messages to Saudi Arabia, affirming an Iranian role in ending the Yemen war. For example, the Iranian mission to the United Nations affirmed that reconciliation “will accelerate the ceasefire, help start a national dialogue, and form a comprehensive national government in Yemen,”²⁶ which reveals that sponsors of the Yemen war are approaching the ripe moment.

If Zartman talks about the “ripe moment,” former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who has a long and active role in conflict resolution in different regions of the world, and is described as “the architect of the peace process in the Middle East,” considers “stalemate” the most suitable condition for a settlement between two warring parties. According to observers, obviously neither of the two parties in Yemen is ready to return to war as both of them realize that a return to fighting will be costly.²⁷

Apparently, the necessary, yet inessential, condition of resolution; i.e., that the two warring parties should reach the “ripe moment” or a “stalemate” cannot be overemphasized. Ample evidence suggests that the two main warring parties in Yemen have reached that moment. This also applies to their patrons in Riyadh and Tehran,

especially as they reached an agreement to resume bilateral relations, which, according to analysts, confirms that negotiations have become desirable for both parties, especially in view of their declining prospects of achieving gains through hostility or through their local proxies.²⁸ Despite the risks associated with the ripe moment, it offers an opportunity to come up with a narrative of what a peace agreement in Yemen means; i.e., that it is neither the Houthi vision of domination nor the government's demands for the Houthi rebels to surrender. Rather, it is an agreement based on a series of concessions through multilateral talks.²⁹ According to Zartman, a successful mediation process hinges on the recognition of the conflicting parties that they have reached the ripe moment. This takes place when the parties to the conflict are both affected by a mutually hurting stalemate that portends a looming catastrophe, or when all channels to unilateral resolution are blocked so that a multiparty resolution is the only viable option.³⁰ The ripe moment occurs as a result of changes in the "balance of power" within each party, and the new and old leaders alike have a fresh look at the conflict.³¹ Although recognition of that moment by the parties to the conflict is necessary, as it reflects their willingness to negotiate a way out of the mutual stalemate, the essential thing is the extent to which the third parties (peace mediators) realize that ripe moment to intervene and facilitate negotiations.³²

Obstacles to peace

This section will deal with the key obstacles associated with peace by proxy. Some of these obstacles are restricted to proxy peace, while others apply to peace talks in general.

- sponsors and proxies did not reach the "ripe moment". The importance of ripeness has already been shown. Both external sponsors and local proxies should reach and realize this moment. That the external parties have reached this moment, but one or more internal party/parties is/are still striving to achieve more goals, or vice versa—which means that the internal parties have reached the ripe moment while one of the sponsors continues to flare up the conflict—means that such a sponsor lacks both the intent and will to favor peace, even if it claims otherwise. The tendency to deny the Houthi group's affiliation with Iran in the statements of Iranian officials has been considered by some observers as an admission, albeit indirectly, that Tehran is unwilling to end the war on the pretext that the Houthi decision is independent,

and it is the Houthis, rather than Iran, who refuse to end the war. Nevertheless, there is an Iranian assertion of playing a role in ending the war, which has already been shown.

- Multiplicity of external sponsors and the emergence of new ones supporting one or more local proxies. This state of affairs may prompt the new patron to push its proxy to obstruct any resolution efforts if such efforts are seen as incompatible with that patron's interests, especially in view of the divergent agendas of patrons. Such is the case with the UAE, which backs some of the warring parties. The UAE has an agenda and goals different from those of Saudi Arabia, even though they entered the war together as allies to achieve the declared goals of the Arab coalition led by Riyadh since 2015. The UAE role is linked to the complications of the issue of southern Yemen, and the ongoing demands for secession, which are supported by Abu Dhabi, and raised by some factions, including the STS, which champions the demands for secession of southern Yemen. Therefore, a settlement in Yemen shall engage all external sponsors. Otherwise, thwarting such a settlement is possible, especially as Yemen has been open to the intervention of external parties from the region and beyond for more than ten years. The matter is no longer limited to Riyadh and Tehran only, although they are the most important and active actors, especially in the armed conflict.
- The declining role of sponsors and the increasing independence of proxies. The transition from the state of war to a state of peace results in a change in the nature of the sponsor-proxy relationship, with a remarkable decline in the sponsor's influence, while the proxy's capacity for independence increases. This state of affairs makes proxies act independently of their sponsors,³³ as the latter essentially give the former a margin of independence in the dynamics of peaceful agency since proxies are more experienced and informed than their patrons. The proxy theory assumes that sponsors are in a weaker position when it comes to information.³⁴ A problem arises here: when proxies do not implement the goals assigned to them, or tend to channel external support in directions that do not achieve the sponsor's objectives of reaching a peaceful settlement.³⁵ It may be noted that one or more Yemeni parties may consider reaching a certain formula of resolution incompatible with their interests and that the sponsor abandoned or sacrificed them in order to reach a settlement. Therefore, these proxies strive directly or indirectly to keep the conflict aflame, either by relying on their own capabilities or by looking for a new sponsor.

- Failure to settle the main issues and disputes that led to the outbreak of the war, even when an agreement is concluded by the sponsors. The fact that these issues are not addressed is enough to keep the conflict ablaze. It may subside for a while, but it will soon be re-ignited. The Saudi-Iranian agreement, and the subsequent Saudi talks with the Houthis, can settle the regional dimension of the conflict, while the local dimension is left unaddressed. The local dimension has its roots, causes and complications that can push the parties to go to war at any moment. According to Dina Esfandiary of the International Crisis Group, "If it's just a Saudi-Houthi deal that we're about to see, it has to be the basis for a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue. Otherwise, we're going to have an issue inside Yemen with the grievances of various other parties that aren't being addressed."³⁶ Observers believe that the foundations of the conflict in Yemen are mainly local, not regional, and that the Yemen war is characterized by multilayeredness, changing dynamics, and multiplicity of internal and external actors.³⁷
- The main (local) parties do not agree on a specific transitional period formula or the mechanisms of state administration in the post-war phase; that is, before holding general elections or a referendum that would confer constitutional and legal legitimacy on the new status quo. Without such agreement, incentives for conflict remain unchanged. Peace efforts often collide with this obstacle, especially in cases of Yemeni conflicts, and in this war in particular. This reality may be explained in terms of Yemen's lack of the basic components of a stable state that can act as the guardian of rights and freedoms and the guarantor of the implementation of the articles of the agreement. Therefore, the party that dominates the transitional period is accused by the other parties of appropriating power and wealth in order to guarantee its control of power for the longest possible period of time. The Houthis are a case in point. During the war, they monopolized all capabilities of the state, plundered resources, and confiscated public and private property, using state institutions in order to seize power and wealth. They also changed educational curricula, recruited children, and mobilized society in a sectarian manner. They did all that in a way that makes the task of national forces in the next phase more difficult and challenging.



Obstacles to proxy peace in Yemen



Both internal and external parties have not reached the "ripe moment," of realizing that ending the war is necessary



Multiplicity of external sponsors and the emergence of new patrons who push their proxies to flare up the conflict in order to forward their interests



The declining role of the patrons and the growing independence of their proxies



Failure to address the main issues that led to the outbreak of the war



Failure of the main (local) actors to negotiate, let alone reach, consensus on a formula of the transitional period and state administration mechanisms in the post-war stage



Conclusion

The study discussed the status quo in Yemen in light of recent developments and efforts to end the war, especially after the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two major supporters of the two warring Yemeni parties to the extent that the conflict was described as a proxy war between Tehran and Riyadh. Nevertheless, it was shown that their involvement in Yemen predates the war.

The study assumes that the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement may push peace negotiations a step forward. It was found that rapprochement might lead to proxy peace in Yemen, after reaching an agreement to end the proxy war, which was initially instigated by domestic issues, but persisted and broadened due to external support and instigation by Riyadh and Tehran, the first through its support for the internationally recognized government and the forces loyal to it, and the second through its support for the armed group in the north of the country.

The roles of Saudi Arabia and Iran, though necessary, are insufficient to end the conflict. Achieving the desired goals of reaching a stable and lasting peace will not be met unless the international community— represented by the UN and its envoy to Yemen, as well as the major powers which have declared their support for the political process in Yemen since the outbreak of the 2011 revolution— plays a role in the resolution. The international role to end the war would provide reassuring messages and guarantees of a fair resolution and more objective solutions, especially in light of the multiplicity of parties to the conflict, overlapping issues, and the numerous existing and expected challenges.

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