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A break in the clouds over Yemen

The current rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran could promote peace in Yemen. Much depends on the seriousness of the actors involved

According to media reports, Saudi Arabia and Iran, in the course of talks mediated by China, agreed not only to resume diplomatic relations but also to seek a political solution to the civil war in Yemen, which has been highly violent since 2014. More than 230,000 people have fallen victim to attacks or the devastating aftermath of the war since 2015, and more than 25 of Yemen's approximately 31 million inhabitants are dependent on aid. Not only the economy but also the health, education, social security systems and key political institutions are in ruins. The agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran fits into a regional trend of stabilising authoritarian rule. 2022 saw a sharp decline in armed violence across the region, with simultaneous trends toward normalisation among various long-enemy actors.

Interests in de-escalation

The categorisation of the war in Yemen as a mere proxy war falls short due to the depth and complexity of the intra-Yemeni conflict lines. However, both states have significantly contributed to the escalation and internationalisation of the war since 2015. Iran, on the one hand, is considered the most important partner of the Houthi rebels, who have controlled the populous north, including the capital Sana'a, since 2014. According to the United Nations, several of the weapons destined for the Houthis that were confiscated in recent years, for example on the border with Oman, are very likely to have been manufactured in or proliferated by Iran. There are also credible reports regarding the presence of Iranian military advisers in the country. Although both have so far denied military cooperation, Iranian officials on the highest levels have repeatedly supported and encouraged the rebels publicly. In return for Saudi willingness to help Iran out of its current severely isolated situation with the diplomatic coup of March 10, one might hope that Iran would recognise the UN arms embargo and, at the same time, persuade the rebels to engage more seriously in the intra-Yemen negotiations.
Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is leading an international military

alliance formed in 2015 to reverse the prior ousting of the internationally recognised government (IRG) by the rebels and their allies. Air strikes alone have killed nearly 9,000 civilians and severely damaged or even destroyed vital economic or health infrastructure. After eight largely unsuccessful years of war, Riyadh is seeking a face-saving exit, partly because asymmetric warfare conducted by the Houthis, including drone and missile attacks on Saudi and Emirati targets, is driving up the price of intervention massively. Last April, the Saudi-led coalition halted airstrikes and eased the blockades of the Hodeidah seaport and Sana'a airport. Reports of direct talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, which could at least result in a form of cold peace, began accumulating in the fall and winter.

Like many Western states and littoral states of the Red Sea, China also has an interest in a further de-escalation of the conflict. Millions of barrels of crude oil are shipped daily through the Bab al-Mandab strait between Yemen and Djibouti in the direction of Asia. Hence, China is interested in ending the war, or at least in obtaining reasonably reliable security guarantees from the most influential parties to the conflict. In the shadow of China's strong involvement in the Horn of Africa, which includes a military base in Djibouti, an increased Chinese military maritime role is also emerging in the Gulf of Aden.

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The most important parties to the conflict within Yemen naturally reacted differently to the announcement. The Houthis explicitly welcomed it as a security gain for the region and, encouraged by their bilateral negotiations with Saudi Arabia, showed little concern about a future lack of Iranian support. In the camp of the IRG, on the other hand, there is uncertainty about whether much-needed success in the intra-Yemeni negotiations can be achieved without Saudi Arabia's support. At the same time, there is growing concern that the Houthis, emboldened by their diplomatic successes and the lack of credible deterrence, could take up a military offensive again.

Indeed, the UN's previous approach to negotiations, which focused on military de-escalation, has developed a dynamic over the past year that has primarily benefited the rebels, which may be detrimental to a sustainable peace solution. A truce from April to October 2022 has continued to bring relief, especially for the population in Houthi-controlled areas, due to the far-reaching concessions by their opponents.

A continuation ultimately failed due to a lack of compromise from the Houthis, who, instead of lifting the blockade of the city of Taizz as agreed, held military parades with new missiles, drones and sea mines. Since then, the Houthis' negotiating strategy has been aimed at jacking up the price of de-escalation. They are not only demanding payment of the salaries of government employees in areas under their control. In addition, they target critical oil production and export infrastructure in formally government-controlled areas to weaken the IRG while underscoring their claim to the revenues generated there.

The Houthis finance themselves through formal and illegal taxes and levies and through the confiscation of real estate or land holdings. The April-November 2022 revenues from the port of Hodeidah alone reportedly amount to more than 270,000 bn Yemeni rials (about half a bn euros), which, despite agreements to the contrary, are not being spent on public sector salaries, some of which have not been paid for years. In the areas under their control, the Houthis have increased the level of repression of their rule even further without a significant reaction from the international community. Arbitrary arrests, torture, unprecedented restrictions on the movement of women and girls, the indoctrination of schoolchildren and recruitment of child soldiers are some practices that stand in the way of peaceful and sustainable development in the country.

The urgent need for intra-Yemeni peace

The state of Yemen's political institutions, a key resource for peace, is dire. No parliamentary elections have taken place in 20 years, and dozens of members of parliament and representatives of political parties now live in exile in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan and even Malaysia. Within the existing anti-Houthi coalition, held together by President Rashid Al-Alimi, who also lacks a clear democratic mandate, visions for a future Yemeni state diverge widely. The eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) headed by Alimi includes, in addition to representatives of powerful tribes, parties, or militias, both the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Al-Islah Party and the Southern Transitional Council, which is backed by the United Arab Emirates and seeks independence for southern Yemen within its pre-1990 borders. Between the latter, even violent clashes took place in the past year.

Years of missed salary and pension payments have eroded the public sector, and instead of economic recovery, the war economy is flourishing. Space for Yemeni civil society is limited, and unions and media are not exempt from these trends. Institutions with the potential for reconciliation, such as the education system, face increasing politicisation and fragmentation.

European stakeholders should seize the opportunity and reinforce efforts for a lasting, sustainable and just peace at the local and national levels and especially in dialogue with neighbouring states.

The social, economic and political marginalisation of women remains a hefty burden for intra-Yemeni peace. In February 2015, the last remaining female member of parliament, Oras Sultan Naji, died, and since December 2020, women have not been represented in the government at the ministerial level either. In the informal wartime policymaking formats or negotiation delegations, women so far play a marginal role. Both the rebel leadership and the PLC consist entirely of men, many with military backgrounds. Even in the PLC's Consultation and Reconciliation Commission, just five women are among over 50 members. Even if women manage to enter the formal circle of decision-makers, the decisive, informal rounds of negotiations continue to be the exclusive domain of men.

Recent negotiation successes, such as progress in the exchange of prisoners and detainees, give a reason for hope, albeit, given the current strength of the Houthis, Iran's will or ability to pressure the rebels to far-reaching concessions should not be overestimated. Nor can it be assumed that Yemen's neighbouring states will no longer use the enormous influence they have gained due to the war in their interests. Rivalries over important geostrategic sea routes, territory and resources persist. A détente at the regional level can create a new scope and breathing space for negotiations that aim further than the division of power according to military strength and that focus on the reconstruction of political institutions that can moderate or solidify the nonviolent balancing of interests at the national level. A pure stabilisation of authoritarian para-state structures, with which the actors of the 10 March agreement could probably live well with given their internal constitution, is not expedient and harbours the constant danger of renewed escalation. European stakeholders, in particular, who, like Germany, have been engaged in Yemen for many years, should seize the opportunity and reinforce efforts for a lasting, sustainable and just peace at the local and national levels and especially in dialogue with neighbouring states.



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