

# Political Settlement in Yemen: Challenges and Future Prospects

by [Adel Dashela \(/experts/adel-dashela\)](#)

May 23, 2023  
Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/thdyat-altswyt-alsyasyt-fy-alymn-wsynarywhat-almstqbl\)](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Adel Dashela \(/experts/adel-dashela\)](#)

Adel Dashela is a Yemeni writer and academic researcher with a PhD in English Literature.



## In order to reach a sustainable political settlement in Yemen, all parties must be involved in negotiating the geographic and military dimensions of the country's future.

Yemen is currently facing major economic, political, territorial, and humanitarian challenges as a result of the war that began eight years ago, producing a failed state. However, there are signs of serious efforts to end the war and achieve political reconciliation. The recent Iranian-Saudi [agreement \(https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html\)](#) brokered by China, as well as the recent [exchange \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/14/red-cross-announces-exchange-of-nearly-900-prisoners-in-yemen-war\)](#) of 900 prisoners and detainees between the Houthis and Yemeni government, have created optimism about a political settlement to prevent the disintegration of Yemen and alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

The Sultanate of Oman has engaged in intensive diplomacy in order to bring the Saudis and Houthis to the negotiating table. For its part, Saudi Arabia wants out of Yemen in order to focus on Saudi Vision 2030, but this will require security guarantees in order to protect new installations and projects. Meetings were recently held in Sanaa between the Saudi ambassador to Yemen and the Houthis to discuss such guarantees.

Although there appears to be some efforts to broaden the dialogue, facilitating a transitional process that includes all parties to the conflict in Yemen, Saudi Arabia simultaneously seems ready to achieve political settlement at any cost. However, a tenuous agreement that fails to address the roots of the conflict will not lead to a lasting peace. Furthermore, Gulf countries are still split on a formula for peace, with some supporting the partition of Yemen and others opposing it. These divergent stances have thus far prevented the Gulf from developing a united vision on the crisis in Yemen.

### Obstacles to Political Settlement

There are many barriers to reaching a political settlement in Yemen, both internally and externally. First, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is still [insisting \(https://en.stcaden.com/news/10952\)](#) on a special negotiating framework that keeps the possibility of partition open, signaling the south's continued concerns within the political process. At the same time, the STC is trying to extend the scope of its military control to include the Hadhramaut region, likely due to the oil reserves in Shabwah and Hadhramaut. Capturing these two governorates—in addition to al-Mahrah, which borders Oman—could bolster the STC's capacity to impose its conditions on a political settlement. Of course, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and Saudi Arabia are opposed to such steps, yet the STC is unlikely to give up pursuing secession.

The STC realizes that the international community opposes the separation of northern and southern Yemen and that achieving this objective will be impossible at the moment. As such, the group is leery of any potential settlement, especially any agreement grounded in internationally-recognized legal frameworks as set forth in resolutions from the [UN Security Council \(https://osesgy.unmissions.org/security-council-resolutions\)](#) and the [GCC Initiative \(https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/YE\\_111205\\_Agreement%20on%20the%20implementation%20mechanism%20for%20the%20transition.pdf\)](#). These documents affirm that all remaining issues in the Yemeni crisis must be resolved through national consensus.

The second obstacle is that the Houthis (Ansar Allah) are aware their efforts will not be successful without taking control of oil-producing areas in Marib, which they have continued to try to seize despite the ongoing dialogue with Saudi Arabia. The Houthis are also pursuing a direct political settlement with Saudi Arabia in order to confront local adversaries using military force. It has become clear during rounds of talks between the Saudis and Houthis that the latter are not ready to compromise with their local rivals, likely feeling that a settlement with them would undermine everything that the group has won through military might during the war.

Third, Saudi-aligned political forces, including the Yemeni Congregation for Reform, are worried about the potential fallout of Houthi-Saudi agreements. Already, they are monitoring the talks closely and searching for other alternatives in case Saudi Arabia recognizes the Houthis.

Fourth, security issues and weapons held by the Houthis, the Southern Transitional Council, and other groups remain a major obstacle to any future political settlement. As it stands, these concerns have not yet been sufficiently addressed

### Potential Scenarios for Political Settlement

In light of these considerations, there are three potential scenarios for a future settlement in Yemen. First, there could be a political agreement that allows regional actors to save face without actually addressing the underlying roots of the crisis in Yemen. Such an agreement could still lead to major societal rifts and sectarian conflicts in the country, as has happened in other countries.

It is likely that the Houthis and the STC could reach a tenuous political agreement as long as they are allowed to keep their weapons. In previous conflicts, however, parties have similarly agreed on political issues and refused to implement security and military provisions, ultimately leading to the failure of the political settlement down the line. Case in point, the failure to implement the security and military [provisions \(https://osesgy.unmissions.org/ar/%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%85-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9%D8%8C-](#)

[%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A8%D8%B1-2014\)](#) of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement of 2014 between the Yemeni government and the Houthis resulted in the Houthis taking full control of Sanaa.

A second scenario is a settlement that involves acceptance of the status quo, in which the internationally-recognized government persists in its current precarious state and the country remains divided between armed groups. This is similar to what has happened in other countries in the region such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Somalia. However, the international community is unlikely to let this scenario unfold because it would neither serve Yemeni interests nor the interests of countries involved in Yemen, including permanent members of the UN Security Council.

The third scenario could be a genuine reconciliation between local actors. This would require clearly laying out regional and international stances on peace and unity in Yemen and ending the support of some regional actors, specifically Gulf countries, for opposing sides on the ground. Armed groups would need to give up their weapons and become incorporated within a unified Yemeni national army, and a humanitarian and economic plan would need to be developed to address the fallout of the war. To achieve such a settlement, all parties to the conflict would need to be involved, including the tribal groups in eastern Yemen, especially in Hadhramaut. These groups, which do not want to join northern or southern entities, hope to become key players in any future political settlement.

In conclusion, reaching a true settlement will require a resolution to the country’s military and security tensions before entering into a political agreement. This will prevent armed groups from later overturning the agreement, as has happened with previous settlements. Undoubtedly, it will also require concerted international efforts from actors such as the United States in order to maintain pressure on regional entities, urging them to make political concessions in the ultimate pursuit of a state that provides equal citizenship and protects the rights and interests of all Yemenis. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Hizbullah and Russia's Nascent Alliance

May 23, 2023

Aurora Ortega,  
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/hizbullah-and-russias-nascent-alliance)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

What to Do With Families of Islamic State Foreign Fighters

June 1, 2023, starting at 12:00 noon EDT (1600 GMT)

Austin C. Doctor,  
Devorah Margolin,  
Martyn Warr

(/policy-analysis/what-do-families-islamic-state-foreign-fighters)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Turkey's Presidential Runoff: What to Expect May 28 and After

May 25, 2023, starting at 12:30 p.m. EDT (1630 GMT)

Humeyra Pamuk,  
Emre Peker,  
Elcin Poyrazlar,  
Soner Cagaptay

(/policy-analysis/turkeys-presidential-runoff-what-expect-may-28-and-after)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)