

Navigating Yemen's Ongoing Quest for Peace: Key Challenges and Prospects for 2025



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Cover photo: UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg exits Sana'a International Airport during a visit to the Yemeni capital for talks with Houthi officials on January 6, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

A year of war across the Middle East has profoundly reshaped the region, shifting power dynamics and redrawing the lines of local conflicts. For Yemen, the Gaza war and its repercussions have served as an intensifier to the conflict, driving peace to a stalemate and exacerbating local divisions. The end of 2024 saw an increase in fighting on several fronts, a further escalation in Houthi-Israeli tensions, and renewed hope for a Houthi retreat within the anti-Houthi camp. International efforts toward a peace settlement continued, with the process following a familiar yet flawed approach in search of a still-elusive breakthrough.

The International Approach: A Recipe for Failure

In the past three months, little has changed regarding the international community's approach to achieving peace in Yemen. The Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) remains weak and divided, serving merely as a vehicle for its members to promote their own agendas. In response, local actors are increasingly meeting with **international officials** on their own. Afrah Nasser, a non-resident Fellow at Arab Center Washington DC, underscored the council's weakness, saying, "The PLC does not have autonomy. It always goes back to what the Saudis and the Emiratis want, and it stays because its sponsors want it to stay. It is the most convenient actor for the two countries... it is counterproductive and makes the Houthis more confident that there is no strong anti-Houthi camp."

In November 2024, a new **coalition** of Yemeni parties was formed under the auspices of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The US-led initiative, consisting of 22 political parties, was boycotted by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the powerful secessionist party led by PLC member Aiderous al-Zubaidi. Although more inclusive than previous such efforts, this new formation exemplifies the international community's flawed approach to Yemen – a reliance on urban-based political parties and the absence of representation from key players on the ground, such as tribes and the STC, underscores the weakness of the initiative.

Saudi-Emirati competition remains a key obstacle to uniting the anti-Houthi camp and Yemen's peace process. Abdulghani al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Sana'a Center, noted that "as long as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are competing in Yemen, the possibility of forming a united command is almost impossible." Farea al-Muslimi, a research fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme, noted that the divergence in priorities between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh is reflected in how they have engaged in ongoing peace efforts. "As long as Saudi Arabia's borders are secure, Riyadh does not care about the Houthis and believes [it has] neutralized the Houthi threat. They have rebranded themselves as peacemakers and find themselves increasingly busy in other contexts, such as Syria."

Yemen has historically been perceived as a potential threat to Riyadh, and the need to contain it has driven Saudi involvement in the country for decades. This view may partly explain the lack of Saudi support for its allies in the government to counter the Houthi threat.

America's Non-Policy

With the Trump administration taking over in January, the US's non-policy toward Yemen remains an issue. The United States had quietly backed direct Saudi-Houthi negotiations, hoping they would lead to a resolution of the conflict. Once the Houthis started attacking ships in the Red Sea, however, the Biden administration had to reevaluate its approach, eventually leading to an enhanced sanctions policy with direct strikes against strategic Houthi targets. Operation Prosperity Guardian, inaugurated in December 2023 to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea, was supported by a new "deter and degrade" strategy **announced** in October 2024. Overall, the US campaign has focused on targeting Houthi military capabilities. November and December witnessed numerous reported **strikes** against Houthi facilities, but they did not deliver a decisive blow to the group's capabilities.

So, what are US President Donald Trump's options for Yemen and the Houthis? To begin with, the new president has come forward with an agenda to end all wars in the Middle East and focus on domestic issues, similar to his first term in office. On the foreign policy front, this continuity will also likely include a return to maximum pressure against Iran, which will, in turn, affect the Houthis. In January, the White House **redesignated** the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and said it was reviewing UN partners, NGOs, and USAID contractors in Yemen for potential links to the group. However, given the new administration's stated intent to reduce its involvement in the Middle East, there is a possibility that it may pursue a **political solution** rather than a military one. Engaging in military action would require interacting with an already weak and divided government, which could ultimately benefit the Houthis. Nasser argued that a more aggressive military approach targeting Houthi leaders could lead to a "power vacuum that will allow other terrorist groups to take advantage of the situation - such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS - since the pro-government camp is weak on many levels." Al-Muslimi agrees that military strikes will not change Houthi behavior. "The US is waiting for the Gaza war to be over to talk about Yemen, even if it is not a good approach," he said.

Escalation between the Houthis and Israel

Meanwhile, the past few months have witnessed significant regional developments, the most prominent of which was the fall of the Assad regime after more than 50 years of rule in Syria. Al-Muslimi says the loss of another valuable Iranian ally has left the Houthis as "the last standing horse" in the Iran-backed Axis of Resistance. "This will make [the Houthis] more reckless," he said. "The Houthis don't depend on Iranians as much as we think anymore, except in smuggling matters. If smuggling routes with Iran are disrupted, they could be weakened, but it will take a lot of time until it makes an actual difference."

Houthi aggression has become more evident in recent months, which saw a considerable uptick in attacks against Israel. In response, Tel Aviv targeted vital infrastructure and facilities in Houthi-held areas, including **Sana'a airport and the port of Hudaydah**, but its response was rather restrained, considering December saw the most Houthi **attacks** against Israel since the beginning of the war in Gaza. This may have been due to Israel waiting for the new US president to take power, aiming to coordinate and bolster its pressure on the Houthis with the support of a more favorable administration in Washington. Meanwhile, there are renewed hopes in the anti-Houthi camp that continuing conflict between the group and foreign powers could result in the critical weakening of Houthi military capabilities.

The Path Forward

While peace in Yemen remains elusive, experts agree there are ways to reach a resolution. However, these require newfound flexibility from all actors engaged in the conflict. A crucial step in this direction would be to lower Houthi expectations of what they can achieve on the ground, particularly when it comes to seizing control of Yemen's oil and gas resources. "The Houthis do not show any interest in having serious conversations with Yemenis," says Al-Iryani. "They just want to deal with Saudi Arabia and then turn their attention to destroying competition." A potential way to change this dynamic would be to put forward a reconstruction and economic recovery plan to incentivize them to come to the negotiating table.

For Nasser, "Yemen is closer to war than peace. The civil war is coming back with a second phase, where the anti-Houthi camp wants to take back Sana'a." Al-Iryani is more optimistic and believes that with the "ceasefire being announced in Gaza, the Houthis will stop [attacks on Israel and the Red Sea]." For Al-Muslimi, "In the long term, the Houthis will have to either sign a peace agreement or [face] their end. An inclusive peace is possible, but it is up to them."

Engaging all Yemeni actors in the process and putting forward local solutions to the country's myriad problems is key to securing a lasting settlement. For this to happen, the Saudis and the Emiratis need to make concessions to one another, abandon their rivalry, and adopt a more constructive approach.

Meanwhile, Iran's loss of influence, the election of a new US administration, and the Gaza ceasefire are all critical developments that will shape Yemen's future in 2025. For now, the country remains stuck in a precarious equilibrium between war and peace, but drastic action could push it toward one direction or the other.

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