The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen

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Preventing War. Shaping Peace.

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Principal Findings

What's new? The Yemen war is entering its seventh year. With U.S. support, the UN is pushing for a ceasefire and return to political talks. It envisions convening two primary antagonists: the government and the Huthi rebels. Important constituencies, including women and civil society, are currently excluded.

Why does it matter? Women and civil society organisations play a key role in local mediation and peacebuilding. Their support will be critical to supporting any ceasefire and subsequent stabilisation efforts. Leaving them out of talks dramatically reduces prospects for longer-term peace, even if the warring parties do agree on a ceasefire.

What should be done? Whether or not the warring parties agree to a ceasefire, UN peacemaking needs to involve other actors, including women's groups steeped in local peacebuilding. The UN can achieve inclusion by imposing quotas on the warring parties' delegations, combined with a parallel process that links civil society actors to political talks.

Executive Summary

U.S. President Joe Biden's election has given UN-led efforts to end the Yemen war a shot in the arm. Biden has cast Yemen as a pillar of his administration's Middle East policy, throwing Washington's weight behind stalled UN efforts to broker a ceasefire and reboot national-level political talks. The war stands at a critical juncture: Huthi rebels are at the gates of Marib, the last northern stronghold of forces allied with the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Preventing a battle for Marib city urgently requires a nationwide ceasefire. Whether reinvigorated U.S. diplomacy can convince the parties to stop fighting remains to be seen. But whatever happens in Marib, Washington and the UN need to rethink the international approach to ending the war, in particular the knotty question of who should participate in a nationwide ceasefire and national-level political talks. To improve prospects for both a truce and an eventual settlement, the UN should create space not just for a broader array of armed and political factions, but also for women and civil society groups who have made their mark in local peacebuilding.

UN-led efforts are built around a framework that was adopted in part on the assumption that it would lead to a quick return to an inclusive political process but has instead become an all-encompassing constraint on inclusion. As the war has dragged on, it has become increasingly clear that prevalent interpretations of UN Security Council Resolution 2216, adopted in 2015, have unhelpfully limited the UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, to two-party negotiations to end the fighting and lay the foundations for a new political order, with Saudi Arabia afforded an unspoken but powerful veto over proceedings. But to continue to restrict negotiations to the Yemeni government and the Huthis (aka Ansar Allah) is to misunderstand the premise of early UN diplomatic intervention in Yemen, which was to return the country to inclusive political talks. It has also proven an impediment to peace.

The Huthis and Hadi government do not hold a duopoly over hard power, territorial control or political legitimacy among Yemenis, as dominant readings of Resolution 2216 suggest. The Hadi government remains unpopular even after a reshuffle brought the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) under its umbrella in December 2020, while the Huthis' status in talks is a direct by-product of their having seized territory by force. Neither the Huthis nor the Hadi government can credibly claim to represent the full range of groups and interests that have sustained both the fighting and Yemeni lives over the course of the conflict, now in its seventh year.

Yemenis not aligned with the two sides have long asked whose interests and what purpose a nationwide ceasefire and political settlement between them would serve. They wonder why they should buy into a process that seems unlikely to reflect their perspectives in the substance of its eventual conclusion. Many armed groups that oppose the Huthis threaten to fight on if external powers force a settlement upon them that they believe will only empower the rebels. Diplomats working on the Yemen file, exasperated by the two main parties' intransigence and worried about a two-party settlement's sustainability, have started to ask similar questions about the UN framework.

Yet while adding other political and armed actors is critical, it may not suffice. Armed groups' acquiescence will doubtless be needed to stop the fighting, but building peace is something else entirely. Power, influence and local legitimacy in Yemen are diffuse; a broad range of actors will be needed to end the war for good. Inclusion should not be limited to those who have waged and fanned the flames of conflict. Local organisations have become influential advocates for peace and stability over the course of the war. Women's groups in particular have made important contributions to providing social stability as the country's social fabric has come apart. Women's insights into local dynamics and their practical experience in brokering local truces, reopening roads and freeing prisoners have been invaluable to the UN in its work to date. The UN will continue to need to draw on Yemeni women's knowledge as it attempts to hammer out a ceasefire and initiate national-level political talks.

The UN is receptive to arguments for expanded inclusion but faces a predicament. Griffiths is working to steer the Huthis (who control the capital, Sanaa, and much of north-western Yemen) and the now Aden-based Hadi government toward a ceasefire, confidence-building measures and political talks. His team, meanwhile, has begun planning a process for implementing that ceasefire and is asking what role other political and armed factions as well as civil society organisations might play in sustaining it. The answer matters because local and national groups will attach conditions to their support for a ceasefire, likely including a say in the UN-led process. But the two main parties and Saudi Arabia have thus far resisted any suggestion of expanding the talks to include a wider array of armed and political factions, let alone women and civil society groups. The few women who have attended UN-led talks since the war began were token representatives who were given no real say in negotiations.

For talks to be credible and stand a greater chance of success, they need to include a wider range of participants. If more Yemeni parties with consequential constituencies, including political parties and civil society groups, are directly involved in talks, it will encourage both the Huthis and the government to start making deals with local friends and foes to improve their overall negotiating power. Under pressure from Saudi Arabia, the government has begun heading in this direction by bringing the STC into the cabinet in December. But it needs to go farther. Importantly, including influential local peacebuilders, women in particular, will help generate much-needed local buy-in for the national-level process.

Until now, the U.S. has not seen fit to press Riyadh or the Hadi government on this issue. But it may change tack. Washington's stepped-up diplomacy under Biden could lead to a shift in the international approach to ending the war, particularly if the UN ceasefire initiative cannot be revived, and even if it can. Regardless of what happens in Marib in the coming days and weeks – a ceasefire, an extended stalemate or a Huthi defeat of government-aligned forces – the war, or more accurately the series of conflicts of which it consists, will continue for the foreseeable future. Even if mediators can broker a nationwide ceasefire to avert a battle for Marib, the need will remain for a more inclusive approach to ending the war and building peace. The UN already has plans to reopen the conversation around such an approach, likely at an international workshop convened with the U.S. If and when this conversation happens, participants should expand the process significantly, adding more than just a few well-known political and armed factions.

For this reason, the UN envoy should ask the UN Security Council to explicitly support a call to introduce a quota for women's participation and for more groups to be included in direct talks through a broader interpretation of Resolution 2216, regardless of the outcome in Marib. One way of doing so, whether or not a ceasefire takes hold, would be to institute a parallel process that provides a direct link between women and civil society actors and UN-led political deliberations. At a minimum, the UN should articulate how and when it will make the process more inclusive. The UN should also explain what mechanisms it would put in place to protect the rights of women and other politically marginalised groups both now and in a post-conflict Yemen. From their side, women and civil society groups, as well as political parties and sub-national groups such as tribes and local authorities, that feel they have been left out of UN-led peacebuilding efforts should seize the moment to press for their meaningful inclusion. Without that, prospects for the eventual success of any deal would be much reduced.

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I. Introduction

Political shifts in the U.S. could reinvigorate international efforts to end Yemen's six-year-old civil war. Yemen was at the heart of President Joe Biden's first major foreign policy speech on 4 February. He said he would revoke the Trump administration's last-minute designation of the Huthis as terrorists, announced the appointment of a new U.S. special envoy for Yemen, and promised a renewed focus on UN-led diplomacy, while ending "offensive support" for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, including the sale of U.S.-made precision-guided missiles to Riyadh. In doing so, he ended six years of ambiguous U.S. policy on Yemen, signalling in deed as well as word that the U.S. sees no military solution to the conflict and aims to reach a political settlement to end it.

For the time being, the U.S. will back UN-led efforts to broker a nationwide ceasefire, implement economic and humanitarian confidence-building measures, and convene talks between the Huthis and Hadi government over interim political arrangements and eventually a full settlement. What is not clear is how long the administration will support an initiative the UN first floated almost a year ago, or especially a two-party framework that is six years old, and which has yielded no tangible results to date. As a Western official put it, in comments echoed by counterparts, the UN is "handcuffed" to a framework that was meant to return Yemen to an inclusive transitional political process but in reality consists of two mismatched parties that seem loath to make the necessary compromises to end the war, has become largely unrepresentative of realities on the ground and provides a third party, Saudi Arabia, with a tacit veto.[1] In other words, the two main parties' zero-sum approach to negotiations – and mediators' inability to introduce incentives to change their behaviour – has impeded a political settlement.

This report explores ways to overcome this problem by broadening the negotiation process to include local groups, particularly those led by women. It is based on more than 100 interviews with Yemeni women, men and youth civil society activists, political party members, Yemeni and international aid workers, UN officials, Western government officials, gender experts, and Yemeni participants and foreign consultants involved in informal dialogues (so-called Track 2 dialogues) designed to augment the UN process, as well as officials from the Huthi movement and Hadi government. These interviews were conducted in Sanaa, Aden, Amman and Cairo, as well as online, in 2019 or 2020. The report reviews some history of Yemeni women's, youth and civil society groups' work in politics, outlines the roots of the current stalemate, and assesses how the main belligerents have shunted aside local groups, other political parties and civil society organisations over the course of the war. It concludes by arguing

[1] Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomat, August 2020.

that these groups must be included as key players in peacebuilding in order to render any political settlement durable.

A note on approach: in focusing on exclusion, this report refers to the exclusion of civil society groups, including women's groups, and women broadly speaking, from national-level peacemaking. Yemeni women are obviously not a homogenous entity. They include civil society leaders, political party members and affiliates of armed groups, as well as independent technocrats. Many politically active Yemeni women do not consider themselves civil society actors. Women-led groups in Yemen likewise represent diverse socio-political tendencies and pursue a variety of goals. In seeking greater inclusion, meanwhile, women and civil society groups both face a series of challenges that overlap in some cases and diverge in others. They are, however, mostly united in their fear that gains made in women's rights in the decade or so before the war are at risk, and with them the representation of 50 per cent of Yemenis. They argue, rightly, that stopping the fighting is not the same as building peace, which requires the buy-in and engagement of grassroots groups, and in turn the civil society figures, in particular women, who lead them.

II. The Exclusion of Local Advocates in Peacemaking

A. *A Conspicuous Absence*

In the early days of Yemen's civil war, the UN sought to quickly end the conflict and return Yemen to inclusive national-level talks over the country's future that had stuttered to a halt in late 2014. To do so, it limited its mediation efforts to the internationally recognised government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the group that had ousted him when it seized Sanaa, the capital, in September 2014, an alliance of Huthi rebels and loyalists of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. A UN Security Council resolution, 2216, and UN-overseen talks in Kuwait in 2016 enshrined the two-party approach to resolving the conflict. Six years on, the UN is locked into a narrowly focused approach to ending the war that consists of a ceasefire, economic and humanitarian confidence-building measures, and a political settlement between the two "sides" that allows for a return to non-violent competition through politics.

As the original premise behind two-party talks – to allow a quick return to the inclusive process – has faded into the past, a new, exclusionary status quo has emerged. Prominent local advocates for peace are largely absent from high-level UN-led talks about how to end the conflict and initiate a political process. Not surprisingly, the excluded non-combatant groups are broadly critical of the UN approach to peacemaking. Most argue, citing compelling evidence, that armed actors, the Huthis in particular, have taken an adversarial approach to independent voices throughout the conflict and have circumscribed human rights in the areas they control. The critics contend that such repression will only intensify if a political settlement legitimises the armed actors' rule.[2]

Women working in politics, civil society and government, along with women's activists, have laid particular stress on these concerns. Although by no means a homogenous group, these women have a common worry that gains made in women's rights and representation in the decade before the 2011 uprising, in which they played a highly visible role, have been all but erased, and that their near-absence from national political life will become permanent.[3]

Women's prominence in street protests and local activism in 2011 came as a surprise to many outside the country, but women have been active in politics and government, and have led numerous civil society groups, since the 1990s.[4] Civil society organisations were first given legal status in 2001 but had a rich history extending back at least 50 years before that. The 2000s witnessed a profusion of non-governmental and civil society organisations, many of them led by women, like the Nobel Peace Prize winner Tawakkol Karman, founder of Women Journalists Without Chains.

[2] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni activists, female members of political parties, peacebuilding consultants and NGO workers, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019. Crisis Group telephone interviews, activists, NGO and civil society workers, members of political parties, Aden, Sanaa, Amman, Cairo, March-December 2019.

[3] Crisis Group telephone interview, Sawsan al-Refai, November 2019.

[4] See Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge, 2009).

That decade also saw the first female minister appointed, and growing if still limited opportunities for women to participate in the private sector and government.[5]

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-brokered deal that provided President Saleh with immunity from prosecution in exchange for stepping down at the end of 2011 initially appeared to do little more than reshuffle the old elite, arguably sidelining most of those who had participated in the protest movement. But a group of female leaders linked to political parties or active in civil society had become energised by the uprising and the prominent stage they had occupied during it. With the support of Western diplomats, they successfully lobbied then-UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar for a 30 per cent quota for women at the National Dialogue Conference, a broadly inclusive set of talks over the country's future in 2013-2014 whose creation Benomar negotiated as an addendum to the GCC initiative.[6] Some women's groups had been making the demand for quotas in parliament and government since the mid-2000s.

While many (male) Yemeni political leaders at first resisted women's and civil society inclusion in the dialogue, and saw it as a token UN gesture to ensure international support for the conference, female and civil society delegates at the talks actively negotiated a series of important provisions for possible inclusion in a new constitution, reflecting overlap in their respective agendas. These included a permanent 30 per cent minimum quota for women's participation in electoral politics and a minimum age threshold for marriage at eighteen, both of which were passed into law by Yemen's National Assembly in January 2015.[7]

Yemeni women's diminishing political position, even starting from a low baseline, is a case study in how unarmed actors have been forced back into the margins over the past six years after playing an instrumental role in the country's 2011 uprising and subsequent political transition, even while they continue to make a vital contribution to helping stabilise local areas. The civil war brought the transitional period to a halt before a new constitution had been agreed upon or put to national referendum. The conflict has replaced political negotiation with violent competition and has eroded most of the formal gains that women and civil society had made during the transition. A young woman in a leading position in a local non-governmental organisation in Aden said:

[5] In May 2003, Amat Al Alim Alsoswa was named human rights minister, becoming Yemen's first female cabinet member. See "Amat Al Alim Alsoswa", her bio at the International Growth Centre website.

[6] Crisis Group interviews, National Dialogue Conference delegates and facilitators, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019.

[7] Saeed al-Batati, "Minimum age set for marriage in Yemen", *Gulf News*, 22 January 2015. On the women's quota, see "National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document", 1 January 2014, archived online at www.peaceagreements.org. The dialogue conference outcomes document contains twelve references to a 30 per cent quota for women's political participation or their representation in official bodies, and 114 references to women, including many references to women's rights. Article 76 of a draft constitution drawn up in late 2014 and early 2015 contains a clause stating: "To give effect to the principle of equal citizenship, the State shall enact legislation and take measures to achieve effective political participation for women to ensure access to at least 30% in various authorities and bodies". The draft constitution contains 38 references to women, including provisions on their rights, empowerment and participation in electoral politics.

> Military groups control the country, and in that environment women can't participate. Those who control the government are [military people]. They are the ones with positions and decision-making power in government institutions.

She added that important meetings that should take place in formal settings in reality take place during men-only social gatherings like qat chews: "How would women participate in [such a men-only] environment? The current environment is friendly only to men, and this limits women's participation".[8]

The government and the Huthis could address this issue by making space for women. The Hadi government cites the National Dialogue Conference and its outcomes, and the draft constitution, as symbols of its legitimacy, and the Huthis say they still see the conference outcomes as the basis for future negotiations. But both have chosen to ignore the quotas for women and civil society associated with the conference. Neither has made efforts to provide space for women in particular in government. When, for example, Hadi announced the formation of a new "unity" government as part of a Saudi-brokered deal with the pro-independence STC in December 2021, he named no women as ministers or deputy ministers.[9] Sawsan al-Refai, a public policy researcher, said:

> Women are being pulled out of the public sphere slowly and quietly, and no one realises that in ten years perhaps there will be no more women in the public sphere. … The women of the old elite will stay outside Yemen forever, and the younger ones inside the country are not sufficiently supported and don't have the required skill set and power relations to insert themselves [into political life].[10]

The war has cost women in other ways. They are the most likely to go hungry in a country where 80 per cent of the population now relies on foreign assistance and 14.3 million, almost half of the population, would starve without food aid.[11] As a result, they have been especially vulnerable to the COVID-19 outbreak's direct and indirect impact, for example becoming the sole breadwinner in homes in which husbands and fathers have died from the virus. Women would also be particularly susceptible to a future famine. They make up around three quarters of the estimated 4.3 million people displaced over the course of the war – a number that has risen during 2020 amid fighting in the north.[12] Some 36 per cent of girls are out of school.[13] As many men have been injured or died in combat, or lost income from state jobs – many public-sector salaries have gone unpaid in recent years – women have come to carry

[8] Crisis Group telephone interview, woman in senior position at local NGO, Aden, October 2019.
[9] "Yemen's president, separatists announce new power-sharing government", Reuters, 18 December 2020.
[10] Crisis Group telephone interview, Sawsan al-Refai, 19 November 2019.
[11] "Yemen: Situation Report", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, September 2020.
[12] "Yemen: UN Population Fund stresses women's needs, amidst world's worst humanitarian crisis", UN News, 4 March 2020. According to the UN, 4.3 million people have been displaced over the course of the war, one million of whom have since returned to their homes.
[13] "Being Kept Behind: The Impact of Conflict on the Education of Yemen's Children", War Child, May 2019. Some 36 per cent of girls in Yemen – versus 24 per cent of boys – are out of school.

the full economic burden of sustaining large families.[14] The strain placed on families has reportedly led to an increase in family and partner violence.[15] Divorce rates have reportedly increased.[16]

Less visible, but the source of mounting anxiety, are what many Yemenis describe as violations of unwritten social rules that protected women in the past, both during periods of conflict and in peacetime. Accounts of sexual and gender-based violence, including rape of women, girls, boys and likely also men, have increased exponentially over the course of the conflict. Several fighting forces reportedly have used sexual violence as a war tactic.[17] There were incidents of sexual and gender-based violence in past conflicts in Yemen, but they were isolated, and certainly not so widespread as to represent a pattern of behaviour. The number of reported incidents today thus arguably indicates that the present war has done deep damage to the social fabric.

B. *Limited Inclusion in the UN Process*

Much has changed since the heady days of Yemen's political transition. Although it has taken an increasingly active approach in promoting what it terms "women's inclusion mechanisms", the UN has assigned women and civil society representatives alike no formal or direct role in the two-party talks it has led since 2015.

The UN is far from the only party to blame for women's limited role in the national-level process. Structural barriers limit women's ability to participate as political representatives or negotiators in the conflict parties' delegations. In a country with high levels of gender inequality, prevalent gender norms pose significant structural barriers to women's participation in the public sphere in general, and in political parties in particular, especially in high-level positions or positions that the conflict parties consider most relevant to negotiations. Pre-war barriers that are likely to have been raised by the conflict include, for example, highly unequal access to education and employment, and social norms preventing women from travelling alone or participating in a sector – politics – deemed dangerous, which exposes them to gender-based attacks and defamation when they do participate. Many Yemenis, men or women, assume that women are insufficiently skilled or qualified to be effective negotiators.[18]

[14] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni NGO workers, women, men and youth civil society activists, female members of political parties, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019. See also "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War", Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, December 2019.

[15] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni NGO workers, women, men and youth civil society activists, female members of political parties, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

[16] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni NGO workers, women, men and youth civil society activists, female members of political parties, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

[17] "Situation of Human Rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses since September 2014: Detailed Findings of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts on Yemen", UN Human Rights Council, September 2020; "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nations Secretary-General", UN, 20 July 2020.

[18] Crisis Group interviews, women's rights and peace advocates/activists, and female members of political parties, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

Yet social norms are not an excuse in and of themselves, and the roles women played during the 2011 uprising, the transition and the National Dialogue Conference in particular, give the lie to the notion that they are unable to contribute. So, too, does the role women have played as local mediators and in Track 2 dialogues.

Whatever the UN's stated intent with respect to women's inclusion, the outcome has been clear: a bare minimum at best. At UN-led talks in Kuwait in 2016 and Sweden in 2018, only three women were delegates; these were representatives of the government and Sanaa delegations (the latter comprising the Huthis and members of the General People's Congress party).[19] When Saudi Arabia negotiated the Riyadh Agreement between secessionist southerners and the Hadi government in November 2019, no women at all were involved in negotiations, though Saudi officials invited a group of women to the signing ceremony.[20] When the new unity government was formed, not only were no women appointed as ministers, but women activists were also publicly attacked for suggesting that they should be.

Many so-called Track 2 and Track 1.5 dialogues convened by European organisations, which focus on security and political issues and are designed to feed into the UN-led process, only recently began reserving space for women. Many are still at a very early stage of considering how to do so, beyond introducing a quota system. Many of the women engaged in Track 2 talks complain that their recommendations seldom gain traction with the UN or the conflict parties, not so much because of the substance of what they are recommending but because of who they are.[21] Sawsan al-Refai, who has participated in Track 2 discussions, said of these discussions with women:

> [They] are happening in isolation from political parties, power relations and power dynamics. They are happening in a silo. I feel that at times this is no more than tokenism – a way for international organisations to say they are supporting the UN's Women, Peace and Security agenda in Yemen. But they design it in a way that doesn't stir the pot.[22]

In response to such criticism, UN officials say they are doing their best to include women, along with other civil society representatives, in the political process – as mandated, in the case of women, by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) – but that their priority is ending the war, which is being fought by armed groups led by men who have chosen to exclude women, at least until reaching an initial political settlement.[23] This response reflects the structural challenge of a six-year-old approach that envisioned an end to the conflict within months. Yet as time has passed, the Hadi government, Riyadh and the Huthis have turned what was meant to be a mechanism to allow for a speedy return to an inclusive process into an exclusionary political status quo.

[19] Crisis Group notes on file from Kuwait talks, 2016.

[20] Crisis Group telephone interviews, women's rights and peace activists present at the ceremony or familiar with the discussions, November and December 2019.

[21] Crisis Group interviews, women and youth activists who have participated in internationally funded and INGO/UN-facilitated meetings on the peace process, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

[22] Crisis Group telephone interview, Sawsan al-Refai, November 2019.

[23] Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Amman, September and October 2019, March and April 2020.

For its part, the UN has not been able to shake up this situation by unilaterally expanding negotiations. The Hadi government and Huthis both reject an expanded UN-led process, with each arguing that they are the legitimate representative of the Yemeni "state" and that their rivals are would-be dictators who hope to place Yemen under the control of foreign actors.[24] While each says they see inclusion as important to post-conflict reconciliation, their actions belie such claims.

Some UN officials add that women's and civil society groups lack a coherent platform for or understanding of how to fit their individual agendas into the architecture of a UN-led political process. But this contention clearly does not hold true across the board. Moreover, it also applies to the parties engaged in UN-led peace talks, which do not represent the full range of armed and political actors involved in the conflict, have shown little interest in brokering a settlement that accounts for the full range of Yemeni groups, are cushioned from the effects of the war, and have often arrived at talks unprepared for the serious business of negotiation. The UN has taken some steps to provide women an indirect voice at peace talks, but its efforts have at times prompted confusion and criticism, with one notable female activist and researcher describing them as "schizophrenic".[25]

In 2015, the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (known as UN Women) and the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen established the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, or Tawafuq. This platform was designed to allow women to "organise, debate, find common ground and leverage their collective voices to call for women's continued engagement in public decision-making".[26] Its goals, UN Women said, were to "end violence, improve living conditions, and amplify women's inclusion in the peace process".[27]

[24] The Huthis argue that they are in reality at war with Saudi Arabia, which they claim hopes to turn Yemen into a client state. Riyadh's "aggression" is aimed at overthrowing what they term the September 2014 revolution. They argue that their Supreme Political Council is the legitimate representative of the Yemeni state, and that the war should be ended by a deal between the de facto authorities in Sanaa and Saudi Arabia. The Hadi government contends that it is the true legitimate representative of the state – a position the international community backs – and that the Huthis are an Iranian proxy. In their view, the Huthis should hand over all territory and arms seized since 2014 and allow the true representative of the Yemeni people to take its seat in Sanaa. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°216, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen,* 2 July 2020, particularly Sections II.A.3 and II.B.1.

[25] Crisis Group interview, activist and researcher, December 2020.

[26] "Areas of Work and Programmes – Yemen", UN Women, undated.

[27] Ibid. UN Women handpicked the participants on the basis of geographical, political, socio-economic and age diversity. Their brief was to participate as advisers in their personal capacity, not as representatives of a broader group. As a result, other Yemenis have criticised the group for not being sufficiently representative, due to an alleged lack of diversity and a weak connection to the grassroots. Crisis Group telephone interviews, women, men and youth civil society activists and Yemenis working for Yemeni and international NGOs, March-December 2019. Women who are part of Tawafuq point out that its actions and success are also limited by organisational issues (including its direct management by UN Women-Yemen) and a lack of clarity about its role (including the unrealised expectation of participation in Track 1 negotiations). Crisis Group interviews, Tawafuq members, Amman, October 2019; and Cairo, November 2019; Crisis Group telephone interviews, ex-UN Women employee involved in Tawafuq, Sanaa, October 2019; and international consultant involved in Tawafuq, December 2019.

Seven Tawafuq members attended UN-led talks in Kuwait in 2016. But the selection process created tensions inside Tawafuq, with some members describing it as rushed and lacking transparent, fixed criteria.[28] Moreover, the women who attended were frustrated by their "observer" status, which gave them little to no influence over the talks, whose participants were the very parties that were excluding them from the political sphere and were unlikely to grant them authority. A number of members quit Tawafuq at the end of 2016 in response to what they said was the UN's mishandling of their role in Kuwait and other issues.[29]

Similar UN initiatives have since proliferated without becoming notably more focused or coherent. In 2018, the UN envoy's office formed its own women's Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which was to directly advise Martin Griffiths, a British diplomat who had replaced Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN special envoy overseeing the Kuwait talks, at the beginning of that year. In the view of some Tawafuq members, TAG was a confusing new initiative that in effect displaced their group without explanation and fostered unwanted competition among women involved in the different processes.[30] Some UN officials and Western diplomats say they did not know why the envoy's office set up TAG or what criteria it applied in selecting the advisers, giving rise to accusations of tokenism and lack of transparency.[31]

TAG soon faced similar issues to those Tawafuq had encountered. Its eight members (three of them also Tawafuq members) attended UN-led talks in Sweden in December 2018 that led to an agreement between the Huthis and Hadi government to demilitarise the Red Sea port of Hodeida and its environs, swap prisoners and work to reopen roads around Taiz. TAG members prepared papers in advance of the talks, but they say they were not assigned a clear role during the talks themselves, which they attributed to a lack of preparation, or perhaps seriousness about their involvement, on the UN's part.[32]

[28] Crisis Group telephone interview, Tawafuq Kuwait talks observer, September 2019.

[29] Crisis Group telephone interview, Rasha Jarhum, founder of the Women Solidarity Network, Ottawa, September 2019.

[30] Crisis Group telephone interview, former UN Women-Yemen official, December 2019. She said: "We [UN Women and Tawafuq] had to negotiate with the envoy [for Tawafuq members] to become members of this advisory board [TAG]. That was another misunderstanding: Tawafuq was born through the support of the envoy's office and UN Women with exactly the mandate to become the women participating in the peace process. And with the change of envoy, and I assume also with the change of the gender adviser, things weren't clear anymore for women, because suddenly other women were brought in from outside Tawafuq, who competed with them. The lack of transparency, of information, of internal governance structures – all of this contributed to a rather chaotic situation where at the end of the day you get the impression … that some women are there solely for the purpose of ticking the box of a gender-sensitive approach".

[31] Crisis Group telephone interviews, diplomats, TAG members, women, men and youth civil society activists, leaders of women's networks, female members of political parties, international and Yemeni NGO employees, international and Yemeni peace consultants, March-December 2019; and Crisis Group interview, UN adviser, Amman, September 2019. One of the facilitators at the UN-led talks in Sweden: "The role of TAG and the other advisers – [the UN special envoy's office] invited four other advisers as well – was not clear, so they had no impact. It was not well organised". Crisis Group telephone interview, Geneva, September 2019.

[32] Crisis Group telephone interviews, TAG members and facilitators/observers at the talks in Sweden, March-December 2019.

Many women's groups that have met with the UN argue that while it is interested in the perspectives they provide on local security and political dynamics, its approach effectively disempowers them by giving the impression that they are participants while providing them with no real say.[33] The result is that they have no tangible impact on the process, meaning that in the negotiations' limited framework, women cannot carve out space on the agenda to address the issues that concern them or offer their perspective on the conflict and how to resolve it. At best, the UN has offered a "voice, not a vote" in the political process, providing an outlet for their comments that does not translate into substantive changes in the UN's approach or parties' perspectives, argued an Amman-based activist, who has participated in a series of UN-led initiatives.[34]

Such critiques reflect a broader frustration among women, youth and other civil society participants in Track 2 dialogues, many of whom complain that they are either siloed off from real negotiations, ignored or pressured to support a UN approach they do not share.[35] A Western consultant who works on Track 2 and UN-led processes in Yemen and elsewhere argued that Track 2 organisations are failing to integrate the Women, Peace and Security agenda into their work, and that civil society organisations, including women's groups, are all too often treated as an "add-on" to the main political process rather than an integral part of the UN approach. If women and civil society are to have influence, this person said, they need to have access to key political actors. Track 2 organisations are well positioned to facilitate such contacts and should do so as a matter of course; while some have begun to adopt such an approach, it has not become universal practice.[36]

Some women argue that the UN approach to ending the war, which prioritises negotiating a settlement between armed actors, instead encourages parties to take up arms, making it harder to steer the conflict to a peaceful conclusion.[37] This argument fits within broader critiques of the two-party process's flaws. "They restrict negotiations to armed groups, giving a seat at the negotiating table only to them", said a women's rights activist. "This only encourages other groups to take up arms to take a seat at the table by force. So, it's important for unarmed, civilian actors to have a place at the table, including women".[38] The addition of the STC, the main body repre-

[33] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni women's activists and female leaders of local initiatives, leaders of Yemeni women's networks and Tawafuq members, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

[34] Crisis Group telephone interview, Yemeni activist, Amman, May 2020.

[35] Crisis Group telephone interviews, youth activist who has participated in several internationally funded and UN/INGO-facilitated meetings and consultations on the peace process, Aden, June 2019; Yemeni researcher engaged on issues relating to the peace process, November 2019; and other youth and women participants in such meetings and consultations, March-December 2019; and Crisis Group interview, international consultant involved in the facilitation of a number of internationally funded and UN/INGO-facilitated meetings and consultations on the peace process, Amman, October 2019.

[36] Crisis Group telephone interview, former UN official, April 2019.

[37] Crisis Group telephone interview, Yemeni women's rights and peace activist, September 2019.

[38] Crisis Group telephone interview, women's rights advocate in Sanaa, September 2019.

senting Aden-based secessionists, to the government delegation has only reinforced this perception, and activists' desire to counter it.[39]

For some women and civil society activists, the solution to their marginalisation is either for the parties to the conflict to include women in their delegations, or for the UN to expand talks to include women, and civil society more broadly, in a formal role along with other groups, or both.[40] Expanding UN-led talks would be challenging for a number of reasons. The main one is that the Hadi government and the Huthis have resisted efforts to include other armed and political factions in UN-led talks, let alone to invite women and other civil society representatives, and have displayed exclusionary instincts when it comes to their own delegations.[41]

Women and civil society activists offer different ideas as to best fixes. Most of those who spoke with Crisis Group agree that women should participate as representatives of the main negotiating delegations at UN-led talks (something that could theoretically be achieved through a quota). Others argue that while this measure might go some way toward adding a gender perspective in talks, it would do little to improve inclusivity more broadly.[42] The two possible remedies would achieve different aims that should not be viewed as mutually exclusive: quotas would ensure women's inclusion in existing structures, while the inclusion of civil society or women's activists in their own right would add a less partisan local or gender perspective.

In response to these additional criticisms, UN officials note that Yemeni civil society organisations, like political parties and armed groups, suffer internal fissures that complicate the effort to develop a unified women's, civil society or Track 2 platform of priorities to integrate into UN-led talks.[43] Along with other diplomats, they argue that women's advocacy is too often directed toward Western officials rather than Yemen's armed and political groups. Many women, they say, lack experience and capacity in political advocacy and would benefit from training on how to lobby and build influence with armed and political factions that, at best, pay lip service to their potential role. A Yemeni politician often noted for his relative liberalism underscored this point with the following argument:

[39] On the STC, see Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen,* op. cit., Section II.B.4.

[40] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni women, men and youth civil society activists, leaders of Yemeni women's networks, and female members of political parties, Amman, October 2019; Cairo, November 2019; and via telephone, March-December 2019.

[41] Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni diplomat, Brussels, October 2019; UN official engaged on the UN-led peace process, Amman, October 2019; TAG members and leaders of women's networks who have been involved in UN-facilitated meetings/consultations, March-December 2019.

[42] Many women interviewed for this report agree that women should participate in the process as part of political parties, based on gender equality, but others argue that these women will merely represent the party line, without making distinct contributions. A Yemeni woman working on peacebuilding in Yemen for an international NGO said: "As part of the peace process, you should have women as representatives of political parties, because it's good for society to see that these parties allow these women to be there, but there should also be independent women who can bring forward issues that are specifically important to women". Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019. Jamila Al-Raja'a, a Yemeni consultant and mediator, said: "If we push for women to be included as part of the political parties or the two sides, they're going to adopt the agenda of each side. … If I'm in a political party, I will represent the interests of my political affiliation; otherwise, I won't get the support of my political party". Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2019.

[43] Crisis Group telephone interview, UN adviser in Amman, May 2020.

> Of course, women are important and all that, but I don't see how talking to them or about them is going to end the war. It just seems like something Western diplomats feel they have to do.[44]

Indeed, women and civil society groups face a series of challenges in terms of capacity and representativeness both as political delegates and as Track 2 participants. An international gender adviser who has engaged with the UN process, for example, said many of the women activists attending UN-facilitated consultation meetings have been ill equipped to make structured contributions or propose concrete policy recommendations, but added that men who attend UN and European-led dialogues often have the same problem.[45] Those Yemenis who can make contributions – who are familiar with the UN "language", codes of behaviour and procedures – are often criticised by other Yemenis for being insufficiently representative of the country, a status as unachievable for women as it is for men.

In a similar vein, some local activists express resentment of the leading role played by university-educated women from Yemeni cities and the diaspora in setting the peacebuilding agenda for Yemeni women, prioritising different issues than do those working on the ground.[46] Yasmin al-Qadhi, the Marib-based founder and president of the Marib Girls Foundation, said:

> When I meet women from inside [Yemen], I see something different to those who live outside. Women outside Yemen just talk politics. Those inside Taiz city are working hard to reopen [roads], for example. [But] those outside Yemen [also] play a role: they make sure our voices are heard by the outside world.[47]

Conversely, a number of women who participate in UN-led initiatives say they risk losing credibility by taking part, because activists on the outside accuse them of enjoying the benefits of access while doing little that is meaningful to influence the UN or the conflict parties.[48]

Women activists note that foreign diplomats seem perfectly capable of dealing with men from political parties and armed groups that lack capacity and are internally divided, while seemingly demanding far more consensus from women as a condition for including them in talks. They say the UN should not expect women to automatically be in agreement, since obviously they are far from a monolithic group.[49] But their greatest challenge may be that they have not convinced diplomats working to broker an end to the war – and more importantly Yemen's major armed and political factions – that their inclusion would be of substantive benefit to the political process.

[44] Crisis Group interview, Yemeni politician, Abu Dhabi, November 2019.
[45] Crisis Group telephone interview, UN adviser in Amman, August 2020.
[46] Crisis Group telephone interviews, women, men and youth civil society activists who have been involved in UN-led meetings and consultations, December-March 2019; and Crisis Group telephone interview, youth activist who has participated in several UN-facilitated consultations, Aden, June 2019.
[47] Crisis Group interview, Yasmin al-Qadhi, Marib, January 2020.
[48] Crisis Group interview, Tawafuq member, Amman, October 2019.
[49] Crisis Group telephone interviews, two women activists, Amman, August 2020.

III. Benefits and Challenges of Greater Inclusivity

Women and local civil society organisations cannot resolve the conflict alone. Yemen's big and small confrontations will be ended, at least temporarily, by the men who direct the fighting on the ground.

But stopping the fighting is not building peace. UN officials acknowledge that the Yemen war is not the binary conflict the UN political framework would suggest it is. It is a multi-layered power struggle that weaves together any number of longstanding and emerging rivalries into a violent, three-dimensional game of chess. The UN team recognises the limits of its ability to make a ceasefire stick, and that a two-party settlement will likely be unsustainable absent grassroots support, development and peacebuilding initiatives. It is therefore exploring a potential role for local organisations in implementing a ceasefire.

Despite its terrible impact on women and gender equality in general, the war has, in some cases, created space for women to adopt new roles and expand older ones. Even as women have been gradually excluded from national-level politics, they have come to play a more prominent and accepted role in some parts of the country, running businesses and working in NGOs and even, in some cases, in local government.[50] An Adeni NGO worker recounted her personal trajectory:

> I came from a conservative family. I lived in a rural area. I'm the only girl, with four brothers. My parents didn't allow me to go to university, so my big dream was to complete secondary school. Step by step I changed their minds [about receiving an education and entering the workplace]. … Then the conflict started, and I found myself in charge of taking care of my family. I became the head of the household, and this means I have more freedom at home. It's kind of an economic power. And my family knows what projects my organisation is implementing, and they believe in what we do. They can see the impact of my work and how our NGO succeeded from being nothing to becoming a national NGO that works with the United Nations. They see how I'm working for the good of our country.[51]

Women-led organisations have been able to address issues that the UN-led process has not. They have negotiated the release of political detainees and prisoners of war, acted as mediators in efforts to reopen roads around Taiz city, and lobbied successfully for the reopening of the international airport in Mukalla, in south-eastern Yemen.[52] The Marib Girls Foundation is working with UK-based NGO Saferworld to build a conflict early-warning system underpinned by young people they train across Marib. In 2015, the foundation's founder, Yasmin al-Qadhi, was part of a group of women who negotiated the handover of government facilities by allies of former President Saleh to local authorities after anti-Huthi forces retook the area from the Huthis.

[50] See Lauren Mellows, "Abductees' Mothers Association: On the Front Lines of Yemen's Prisoner Swap", ICAN Peace Network, 13 November 2020; Brett Scott, "The Road to Peace Runs Through Taiz", Deeproot, June 2020; and "Women Peacebuilders in Yemen Advocate for the Reopening of al-Riyyan Airport", National Democracy Institute, 12 June 2019.

[51] Crisis Group telephone interview, Aden, October 2019. Numerous Crisis Group interviews conducted with women in Aden, Marib and other parts of the country in 2019 and 2020 reflect this pattern.

[52] Crisis Group interview, Yasmin al-Qadhi, Marib, January 2020.

She argues that women's unique status in various localities allowed them to prevent conflicts that would have destabilised the area.[53]

Dozens of similar stories underscore that Yemen's political parties and armed groups are all sensitive, to varying degrees, to local perceptions of their legitimacy, and rely upon local actors to promote stability in localities where (as in most of the country) they lack the capabilities and resources to do so themselves. Combined, such initiatives have played a valuable role in dousing local fires, thus providing much-needed stability and sustaining Yemen's social fabric during a combustible period. The women and men behind them have developed unique positions of trust and perceived neutrality in their own areas and across the country. Given that the road to peace in Yemen is likely to be long and treacherous, their input into and support for a UN-led national-level political process, while not the primary factor in sustaining and building peace, would likely be indispensable – a necessary if insufficient condition for a lasting peace.

Inclusion of women and civil society groups in political talks would be beneficial for other reasons as well. They often have been ahead of the curve in providing early warnings of factors that have come to plague efforts to end the conflict, based on their experiences, and in proposing ways to address them that are sensitive to local needs, thereby setting the agenda for building peace. Women's groups' key priorities – prisoner releases, reopening roads and airports, and paying salaries – have in fact become central UN confidence-building measures. Muna Luqman, an activist and consultant with international non-governmental organisations, presented two salient examples:

> Women had been advocating vigorously for the inclusion of southerners in UN-led negotiations [in the national-level process], but the UN would not listen to them until [the south] exploded. We have been advocating for humanitarian corridors since 2015 and now this has become a big issue in Taiz. … We could have prevented so much. But [the UN] never listens to women. They only listen to the people with the guns, and they are focused on power sharing. [The national parties] only advocate for their own concerns, not those of ordinary people. They don't speak in the people's interest.[54]

Finally, there is also an important and powerful normative argument for including women in a national-level political process: whereas women comprise 50 per cent of the population, the political process, as structured, does not make space for them. As noted, many civil society actors, and women's groups in particular, are concerned that they will face serious setbacks with respect to women's rights and freedoms following a peace settlement. "If men decide Yemen's future alone and we do not have a say, then our struggle will be set back 50 years, not ten", an Amman-based activist said.[55]

A number of challenges stand in front of any effort to make peacebuilding more inclusive. The biggest is the lack of connectivity between local dispute resolution and peacebuilding initiatives and the national-level UN-led process. This is a product

[53] Ibid.
[54] Crisis Group telephone interview, September 2019.
[55] Crisis Group telephone interview, female women's rights activist, August 2020.

of resistance from national actors, Western donors' absence on the ground, and a dearth of brokers who could help local groups build relationships with these donors and diplomats outside the country. Given the conflict's complex, multi-layered nature, it is not entirely surprising that there is no institutionalised way to convey local experiences and concerns to the national level. Some local groups are also wary of heavier UN involvement with key issues. They are worried that if they link up with the UN's efforts, their initiatives risk being politicised and even blocked.[56] Indeed, too often, when the UN takes a stance on issues of national and local importance, fighting groups turn them into a political bargaining chip, thus making them more intractable.[57]

Where the UN has adopted key local priorities – prisoner releases, reopening roads and airports, and paying salaries – as confidence-building measures, the civil society groups working on them complain that UN engagement pushed them aside, even as the UN marked little or no progress in resolving the problems. The December 2018 Stockholm Agreement, for example, led to limited UN involvement but no new mediation mechanism in negotiations over Taiz, prisoner exchanges or joint government-Huthi salary payments, all of which were already under way. Almost two years later, there has been little visible progress on any of these three tracks, with the partial exception of temporary measures designed to ease fuel shipments into Hodeida and prisoner exchanges.[58] Local civil society organisations say they have been slowly frozen out of negotiations over road access in Taiz, and that it has become more difficult to secure prisoner releases on a case-by-case basis, because the Huthis and Hadi government both want to acquire the maximum possible leverage in UN-led negotiations.[59]

Such concerns are heightened as the UN gears up for a potential ceasefire implementation effort and push toward national-level talks, for which it may solicit the help of local organisations to sustain a suspension of hostilities as part of its "joint

[56] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yemeni researcher, December 2019; Yemeni development consultant, October 2019.

[57] Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official in Amman, February 2020.

[58] In October 2020, the Huthis and the government exchanged 1,081 prisoners of war, in what international media described as a diplomatic breakthrough. But the exchange came almost two years after the parties first agreed to it in principle as part of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement, and those released represented around an eighth of the total number of detainees under discussion. The Abductees' Mothers Association, a Yemeni women's group advocating for the rights and release of detainees, has expressed regret that the Stockholm Agreement made no distinction between prisoners of war and arbitrarily detained or forcibly disappeared civilians. The association also lamented that the agreement broke up the exchange into phases. See "Statement Following Geneva Agreement Demanding Immediate Implementation and Releasing All Abductees and Forcibly Disappeared Persons", Abductees' Mothers Association, 29 September 2020. Yemeni women's rights activists and female political party members have also criticised the Hadi government and the Huthis for failing to release female detainees. Crisis Group interviews, Yemeni women's rights activists, Cairo, November 2019; and Crisis Group telephone interviews, leaders of women's networks and female political party members, March-December 2019.

[59] Crisis Group telephone interviews, person involved in negotiating road access in Taiz, Cairo, September 2019; Taizi individual involved in negotiations, October 2019; and Crisis Group interview, person involved in negotiations, Cairo, January 2020.

declaration" initiative.[60] But many such groups may not want to throw their weight behind a process they do not understand and in which they have no say. Civil society activists, moreover, have expressed concern in the past that they could become beholden to donors who seek to shift their priorities to fit international models, leading to mission creep from local needs to international demands.[61] Nadwa Dawsari, a Yemeni conflict analyst, said:

> When the central government collapsed [in 2015] … people felt they had to do things themselves. That's why we've see so much activism from civil society organisations and other groups over the past four years, and why we see such a huge level of maturity today, [including in] women's groups. … I would fight for that to remain local. It would be damaging if [community-level initiatives] were linked to the peace process. … [Local initiatives] will shift to fit within the narrative of the peace process and donors. This will corrupt the genuine women's movement that has emerged largely without the help of donors and international organisations. … But I do think these groups need to be supported. A lot of them need training to increase their impact. This will help the national process, whether the current UN process or any national process that will emerge in the future.[62]

Other activists argue that foreign diplomats and donors are unwilling to use political capital with the conflict parties to create space for civil society in talks. Many fear attracting the attention of, and reprisals from, the warring parties, particularly the Huthis, who have intensified their efforts to tamp down on dissent in areas they control since killing their erstwhile ally Saleh, the former president, in December 2017. Amal Lutf al-Thawr, a human rights activist, said: "Plenty of women who try to talk about peace are now taken to prison and accused of being prostitutes. International support – not just financial – and a level of protection for doing this kind of work [will give them space to operate in Huthi-controlled areas]".[63] Another activist noted that the Hadi government and its allies have been ruthless in their public attacks on women who agitate for representation by quota in government.[64] Without stronger international support, local activists will remain dangerously exposed.

[60] Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, Amman, September 2020. At present, a Huthi-Hadi "joint declaration" is the focal point of the UN-led peace process, which aims to restart national-level political talks. "Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen", Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 15 October 2020.

[61] Crisis Group interviews, youth activist, Sanaa, September 2019; women's rights and peace activist, Cairo, November 2019; Tawafuq member, Amman, April 2019; and Crisis Group telephone interviews, Kawkab al-Thaibani, co-founder of the Women4Yemen network, November 2019; Yemeni researcher engaged on issues relating to the peace process, November 2019.

[62] Crisis Group telephone interview, December 2019.

[63] Crisis Group telephone interview, Amal Lutf al-Thawr, leader, al-Amal Party, August 2019. Huthi officials reject such charges. They say that their approach to gender is based on Islamic principles. They deny discriminating against women in the areas they control, saying women have a right to pursue roles in government and the private sector if they have the requisite competencies. Crisis Group telephone interview, Huthi official, Sanaa, July 2020.

[64] Crisis Group interview, activist and researcher, December 2020. Shortly after the new unity government was formed in December 2020, Nadia al-Sakkaf, the former minister of information, was repeatedly attacked on social media platforms for criticising the formation of an all-male cabinet.

IV. Toward a Sustainable, Inclusive Peace

The inclusion of women and civil society organisations in efforts to end Yemen's war would vastly improve prospects for peace. These groups have exerted themselves, and excelled, at mediating and resolving disputes in various localities. As the war increasingly resembles a complex cluster of intertwined conflicts, such voices will be critical to local stability during a ceasefire and political process. Moreover, they are likely to condition their support for those arrangements on a say in the substance of what is being discussed and what is agreed upon. The time may be ripe for them to step up their advocacy, as UN Security Council member states are evincing a growing appetite for a new approach to ending the war, and may soon meet to discuss new steps, including expanded participation in UN-led talks.[65]

The question is what efforts to build an inclusive, more sustainable peace would look like in practice. Many activists seem to agree that the best way to restore the gains made during the post-2011 transitional period, and to connect local groups that can supply the grassroots glue needed to bolster national-level peace negotiations, would be to institute quotas for political parties and civil society groups, as well as women, in the UN-led political process. Quotas could either apply to the Huthi and government delegations or to the inclusion of independent representatives in their own right, or both.[66] But given that quotas are unlikely to change the substance of the parties' negotiation positions, talks should be enlarged to include a wider range of parties. In addition, a parallel track would allow women, civil society and other important but hitherto unrepresented groups to have a voice in the planning and execution of a ceasefire arrangement, the format of subsequent political talks, and the substance of a political settlement. It would, in other words, generate a more transparent process in which the negotiators could be held to account more publicly, thus putting pressure on them to compromise.

Arguments against expanding talks no longer hold water. Some UN officials and diplomats argue that adding more parties to the mix, be it armed groups, parties or civil society, would complicate efforts to end the war and prolong Yemenis' suffering.[67] Indeed, agreeing on quotas would likely be a lengthy process, as it was ahead of the National Dialogue Conference. Diplomats have long argued that if the war is to be ended quickly, and the inclusive national dialogue process resumed in some form, national-level talks must not be bogged down by adding new parties. Yet as the war has ground on, a new exclusionary status quo has arisen, which the government and the Huthis appear intent on sustaining long after the fighting stops. Six years in, it is hard to plug the line that expanding talks would represent an opportunity cost greater than continuing a purely two-party process that can halt the fighting only tempo-

[65] Crisis Group interviews, diplomats based in New York, January-March 2020.
[66] Crisis Group telephone interviews, Yemeni women, men and youth activists, leaders of Yemeni women's networks, female members of political parties, Yemenis working for local and international NGOs, March-December 2019.
[67] Crisis Group interviews, UN officials, Amman, September 2019; Huthi officials, Yemeni government officials, Amman, Cairo, November 2019, January 2020.

rarily and thus far has failed to do even that.[68] If the conflict parties continue to reject a ceasefire and political negotiations, arguments against an expansion on the basis of time constraints will crumble further.

There are limits, of course, to how inclusive an effective political process can be. A middle ground is conceivable between the current framework and an overly expansive one that is built on buy-in to the UN-led process but does not sink it under the weight of hundreds of voices. Finding that middle ground will require proactive measures from the UN envoy and, likely, action from the UN Security Council. Now that the Riyadh Agreement's provisions for the formation of a new, more inclusive government have been fulfilled, the major armed and political factions lined up against the Huthis – and not just the narrow group selected by Hadi and his circle – should have a greater say in what is discussed at UN-led talks. The new government, which unites the Hadi group with the STC and associated political and military factions, is an enormously positive step toward a more sustainable peacebuilding process, but it should not be seen as setting the outer limits of representation.

Whether or not it is successful, the push for a nationwide ceasefire, to which the U.S. has provided a new infusion of energy, should not distract mediators from the requirement for a more inclusive process. A quota would be one way of further improving the situation. If the new government were to introduce a quota for women's participation on its side as representatives of its constituent parts (eg, as members of the different anti-Huthi military/political factions), or the UN were to do so for all parties, the talks would feature a more diverse set of perspectives, even if concerns about tokenism and political control over those included would persist. In November, Griffiths proposed a 30 per cent quota at national-level talks but stopped short of calling for his office or the Security Council to enforce this as a rule, instead saying he would "encourage" the parties to adopt a quota voluntarily.[69] The Security Council is best positioned to turn this request into a demand.

Another or complementary option, would be for the UN Security Council to formally call for an inclusive process through a new resolution or presidential statement, giving the UN envoy a clear mandate to increase the number of parties he directly engages. As part of the statement or resolution, Council members could make explicit the requirement for women's participation in Track 1 negotiations and push for wider consultation on an agreement's substance.

Even then, if the Huthis, the Hadi government and, likely, Saudi Arabia stymie efforts to expand the range of participants in talks, the breadth of voices would barely exceed that for which the Riyadh Agreement already provides. Only a small group of additional people would enjoy no more than a limited voice, and then only once formal talks begin. At that point, the key players, the Saudis and Huthis in particular, may already have laid the groundwork for a settlement through back-channel meetings, resulting in an agreement based exclusively on their narrow interests and unlikely to end the war.

[68] Crisis Group has previously argued for such an expansion of the political process. Crisis Group Report, *Rethinking Peace in Yemen,* op. cit.

[69] "Briefing to United Nations Security Council by the Special Envoy for Yemen – Mr. Martin Griffiths, 11 November 2020", Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, 11 November 2020.

To circumvent this problem and push for a more inclusive national-level process, the UN with the support of other international actors could develop a parallel track of talks among representatives of local governments, women's and youth groups, and other civil society organisations. This track would provide a channel for the many groups left out of the main UN political process to work toward a broad platform of priorities to feed into Track 1 negotiations. The UN and other international stakeholders could thenceforth engage and build capacity among the broad range of groups needed to sustain a ceasefire, in the event that the parties conclude one, and give these groups direct input into a political settlement. It would also help sustain a ceasefire and build public buy-in to the UN-led process and a post-conflict transition.

This parallel track could – and should – be developed regardless of what happens in the Track 1 process, namely even if there is some expansion of the number of parties included in national-level talks, and even (perhaps especially) if the UN-led process stalls. It should not be seen as an add-on to be considered once a deal has already been drafted. Under an optimal version, a group of representatives from this parallel track, selected by participants, with a set quota for female representatives of women's groups, would have a clearly defined role in Track 1 discussions and hold something akin to veto power over the substance of a final political settlement. As a result, the principal belligerents would be forced to negotiate with a much wider array of actors. This group could discuss the extent to which the 2014 National Dialogue Conference outcomes, which all parties including the Huthis claim to support, and the 2015 draft constitution, which is more controversial, could form the basis for a post-conflict political framework.

To map, study, understand and build ties with key women's, civil society and local groups, which such a track would necessitate, will require pressure on all parties to give these groups space to operate. The foundations already exist. Numerous local non-governmental and civil society organisations on the ground and outside of Yemen are working on issues ranging from the economy to security and human rights. Many of them are already engaged in Track 2 dialogues, and some have developed their own recommendations for the UN and others. The principal challenge would be to identify which groups to engage, and then to develop mechanisms for dialogue concerning the substance of an agreement. Part of that process would require helping groups improve their ability to support a ceasefire and peace-building mechanisms, and to cogently argue for specific provisions in a workable political settlement.

Such an approach would require time and funding for event coordinators, capacity building, and travel and lodging – all items likely beyond the UN's financial and human resource capacity. International stakeholders could fill the gap. Donors could direct more funding toward strengthening local organisations that provide services and engage in peacebuilding based on what they see as local priorities. Crisis Group has advocated in the past for a UN-chaired international contact group for Yemen. Such a group could manage the division of labour among donors for funding and monitoring such initiatives, the development of a parallel negotiating track, and acceptance of its status on as close to an equal footing with the Track 1 process as possible. EU member states play an outsized role in supporting local initiatives, so it could make sense for the European External Action Service to take the lead in this instance.

Such a track could also be developed in coordination with the UN to ensure it is not seen as a sideshow, but independently of the envoy's office, so it is not treated as a subset of UN efforts. One idea would be for a consortium of Yemeni groups to take the initiative under European mentorship. Such a consortium might be more effective in producing a collective approach to peacebuilding in Yemen than UN officials tasked with harnessing successful local initiatives to their own.

In whatever way the parallel track takes shape, the UN and international stakeholders in Yemen's peace process should lay the groundwork now, not once the parties have finally convened. Track 2 participants will thus have more time to develop a unified platform, which could act as a pressure point on the parties the UN is engaging, as they see a broad and influential coalition forming with its own vision for Yemen's future.

V. Conclusion

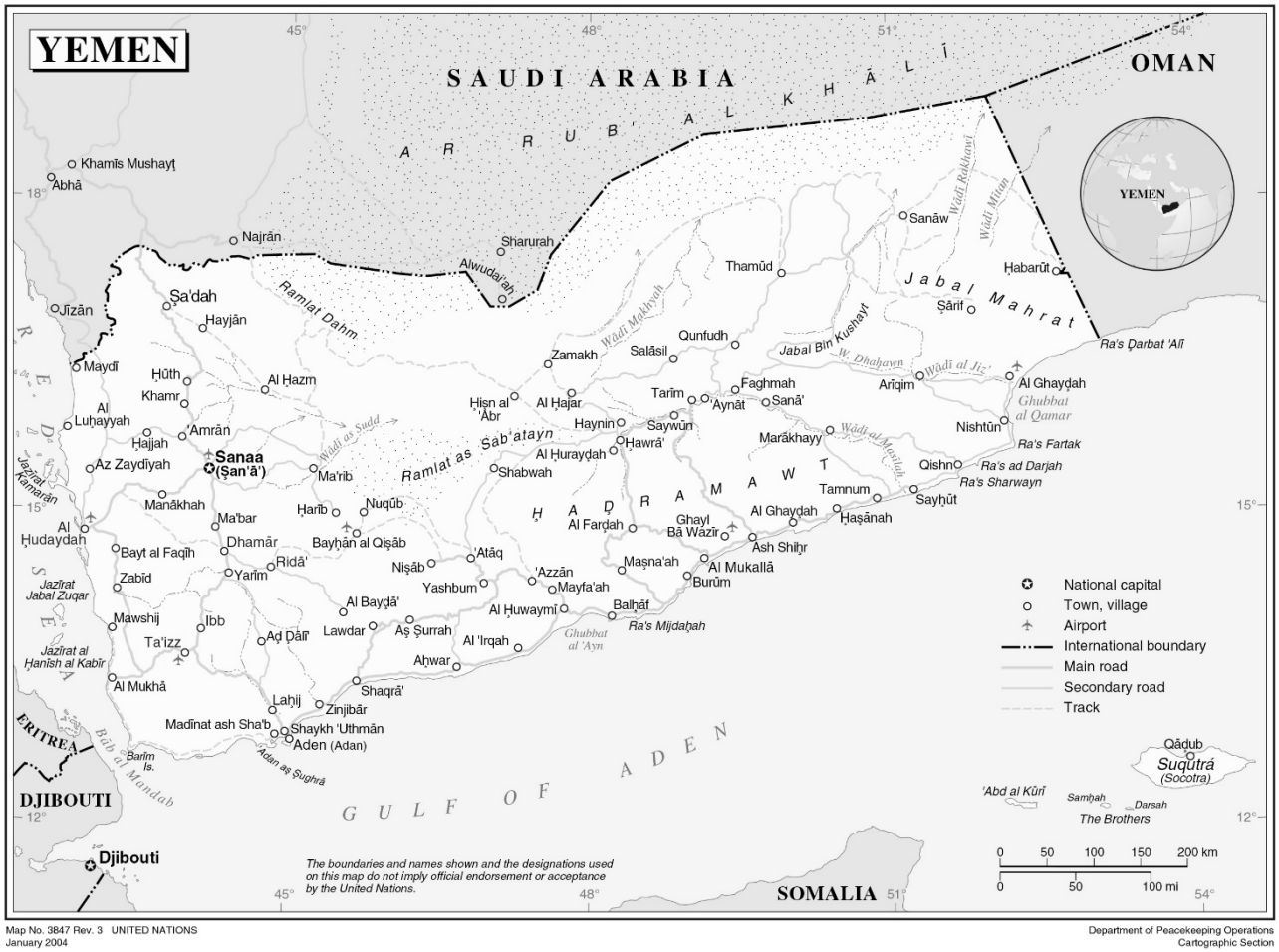
While the shifts in U.S. Yemen policy are encouraging, they have caused concerns among some Yemenis. This group fears that the U.S. is mainly focused on extricating itself and Saudi Arabia from the war. They worry that the U.S. may simply engineer an end to the "big war" between the Huthis, on one side, and the government and Saudi Arabia, on the other, leaving unaddressed the local "small wars" being fought among Yemenis and abandoning Yemen's pre-war transition to democracy.

The debate about civil society's, and women's, role in the peace process points to the questions of what peace in Yemen is meant to be and whose interests it is meant to serve. The substance of any agreement will reflect the interests of those who negotiated it. If significant constituencies are left out, the final settlement will not only sideline them, but remove their incentives to support vital local stabilisation and peacebuilding initiatives that could make or break a truce. Just as importantly, international stakeholders in Yemen should ask: how credible and durable can any settlement be that leaves out the perspectives of much of the country's population?

U.S. officials say they are in Yemen for the long haul. They agree that the peace process will have to be inclusive. But what is lacking for now is a clear architecture for such a process. Beyond pushing for a ceasefire, the U.S. can and should act as a catalyst in the design of that architecture.

Sanaa/Aden/Amman/Cairo/Brussels, 18 March 2021

Appendix A: Map of Yemen



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

After President & CEO Robert Malley stood down in January 2021 to become the U.S. Iran envoy, two long-serving Crisis Group staff members assumed interim leadership until the recruitment of his replacement. Richard Atwood, Crisis Group's Chief of Policy, is serving as interim President and Comfort Ero, Africa Program Director, as interim Vice President.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland, Japan International Cooperation Agency, the Principality of Liechtenstein Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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March 2021

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2018

Special Reports and Briefings

Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Israel/Palestine

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Rebuilding the Gaza Ceasefire, Middle East Report N°191, 16 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Defusing the Crisis at Jerusalem's Gate of Mercy, Middle East Briefing N°67, 3 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Reversing Israel's Deepening Annexation of Occupied East Jerusalem, Middle East Report N°202, 12 June 2019.

The Gaza Strip and COVID-19: Preparing for the Worst, Middle East Briefing N°75, 1 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Gaza's New Coronavirus Fears, Middle East Briefing N°78, 9 September 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province, Middle East Briefing N°56, 9 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Winning the Post-ISIS Battle for Iraq in Sinjar, Middle East Report N°183, 20 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Middle East Report N°186, 22 May 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°187, 21 June 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Cope with Iraq's Summer Brushfire, Middle East Briefing N°61, 31 July 2018.

Saving Idlib from Destruction, Middle East Briefing N°63, 3 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East, Middle East Report N°190, 5 September 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Reviving UN Mediation on Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries, Middle East Report N°194, 14 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°66, 21 December 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South, Middle East Report N°196, 25 February 2019.

The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°197, 14 March 2019 (also available in Arabic).

After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid, Middle East Report N°199, 27 March 2019 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).

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Iraq: Evading the Gathering Storm, Middle East Briefing N°70, 29 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Averting an ISIS Resurgence in Iraq and Syria, Middle East Report N°207, 11 October 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Women and Children First: Repatriating the Westerners Affiliated with ISIS, Middle East Report N°208, 18 November 2019.

Ways out of Europe's Syria Reconstruction Conundrum, Middle East Report N°209, 25 November 2019 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East, Middle East Briefing N°72, 27 November 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon, Middle East Report N°211, 13 February 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib, Middle East Report N°213, 15 May 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Pulling Lebanon out of the Pit, Middle East Report N°214, 8 June 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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*Exiles in Their Own Country: Dealing with Displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq***,** Middle East Briefing N°79, 19 October 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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Avoiding Further Polarisation in Lebanon, Middle East Briefing N°81, 10 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

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Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift, Middle East and North Africa Report N°180, 11 January 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

Libya's Unhealthy Focus on Personalities, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°57, 8 May 2018.

Making the Best of France's Libya Summit, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°58, 28 May 2018 (also available in French).

Restoring Public Confidence in Tunisia's Political System, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°62, 2 August 2018 (also available in French and Arabic).

After the Showdown in Libya's Oil Crescent, Middle East and North Africa Report N°189, 9 August 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Breaking Algeria's Economic Paralysis, Middle East and North Africa Report N°192, 19 November 2018 (also available in Arabic and French).

Decentralisation in Tunisia: Consolidating Democracy without Weakening the State, Middle East and North Africa Report N°198, 26 March 2019 (only available in French).

Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis, Middle East and North Africa Report N°200, 25 April 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Post-Bouteflika Algeria: Growing Protests, Signs of Repression, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°68, 26 April 2019 (also available in French and Arabic).

Of Tanks and Banks: Stopping a Dangerous Escalation in Libya, Middle East and North Africa Report N°201, 20 May 2019.

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Avoiding a Populist Surge in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°73, 4 March 2020 (also available in French).

Algeria: Bringing Hirak in from the Cold? Middle East and North Africa Report N°217, 27 July 2020 (also available in Arabic and French).

Fleshing Out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°80, 4 November 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°82, 11 March 2021.

Iran/Yemen/Gulf

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

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The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Briefing N°65, 6 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How to Halt Yemen's Slide into Famine, Middle East Report N°193, 21 November 2018 (also available in Arabic).

On Thin Ice: The Iran Nuclear Deal at Three, Middle East Report N°195, 16 January 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen, Middle East Report N°203, 18 July 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Averting the Middle East's 1914 Moment, Middle East Report N°205, 1 August 2019 (also available in Farsi and Arabic).

After Aden: Navigating Yemen's New Political Landscape, Middle East Briefing N°71, 30 August 2019 (also available in Arabic).

Intra-Gulf Competition in Africa's Horn: Lessening the Impact, Middle East Report N°206, 19 September 2019 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Four: A Requiem?, Middle East Report N°210, 16 January 2020 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen, Middle East Briefing N°74, 17 March 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Flattening the Curve of U.S.-Iran Tensions, Middle East Briefing N°76, 2 April 2020 (also available in Arabic).

The Urgent Need for a U.S.-Iran Hotline, Middle East Briefing N°77, 23 April 2020 (also available in Farsi).

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Rethinking Peace in Yemen, Middle East Report N°216, 2 July 2020 (also available in Arabic).

Iran: The U.S. Brings Maximum Pressure to the UN, Middle East Report N°218, 18 August 2020 (also available in Arabic).

The Iran Nuclear Deal at Five: A Revival?, Middle East Report N°220, 15 January 2021 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

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