

UN Peace Agreements: Yemen 2018

Theme: Conflict Resolution

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This article examines the role of the United Nations peace agreements in conflict negotiation and mediation, and the recurring obstacles that have hindered its success in the MENA region. Using the 2018 UN-mediated Stockholm Agreement as a case study, this article considers how the absence of details and a realistic timeframe ultimately undermined the agreement's efficacy.

Under the auspices of the current Special Envoy for Yemen to the UN, Martin Griffiths, a meeting was arranged in late-2018 between the representatives of the internationally recognized Government of Yemen, and its President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and the rebel Houthis. The latter of which have been fighting an insurgency in Northern Yemen since 2015 capturing several key cities including the Yemeni Capital Sanaa. Fighting has become protracted, causing an unprecedented period of suffering for stranded civilians in the country, and galvanizing calls for international action to provide some solution to the conflict. The purpose of this paper is not to explore all aspects of the conflict, however, but instead to examine said-meeting and the agreement, signed 20 December 2018, that emerged from the discussions in Sweden.

This accord, known as the Stockholm Agreement [\[2\]](#), outlined three points that both parties agreed upon. First, an agreement upon the status of the city of Hodeidah and the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Isa. Among points here were commitments to an immediate ceasefire, a mutual redeployment of all forces outside of the city and ports, and a “strengthened UN presence” in the city, specifically including chairing a joint-Redeployment Coordination Committee. The Agreement also specified that the full redeployment of all forces should take effect within 21 days of the ceasefire, which as the ceasefire was supposed to be implemented on 18 December 2018, would have been by 8 January 2019.

Second the Agreement included a mechanism to activate a prisoner exchange agreement. Finally, the Agreement specifically included a statement of understanding on Ta'iz. Here the parties agreed to set up a joint committee, including Civil Society Representatives and the United Nations, with the details to be agreed upon later. The Agreement was later endorsed by a UN Security Resolution 2451 (2018)[\[3\]](#) on 21 December 2018, which mostly supported the Stockholm Agreement by calling for the implementation of a UN advanced monitoring team in Yemen, while calling for greater clarity on the role of the UN in Yemen in general.

Challenging Outcomes:

However, in his 9 January 2019 briefing to the UN^[4], Griffiths stated that the ceasefire, though “*largely adhered to*”, was broken in some parts of Hodeidah as well as other areas outside of the city. The Redeployment Coordination Committee, though established, was still working out details of redeploying the parties and opening humanitarian channels to the city. Regarding Ta’iz, whilst acknowledging continued humanitarian suffering in the city, Griffith only spoke of a potential platform to reach an understanding on the city. As for the prisoner exchange, that the parties were still finalizing their respective lists of prisoners to submit to the exchange program.

What do we learn from this process? Though there were some small steps in implementation, the Stockholm Agreement was not comprehensively implemented, especially to its own timeframe. Two specific themes here that contributed to this:

- **Unrealistic Timeframes:** The Stockholm Agreement gave a limit of 21 days for implementation of the full redeployment of forces from Hodeidah, which from the outset was overambitious. The very fact that it had taken over three years of conflict for the parties to be brought to the negotiation table in Sweden demonstrates the urgent need to establish confidence between sides. A short deadline only serves to act as a new way for opposing sides to claim a breach of trust in the other when such a timeframe is broken.
- **Lack of Details:** The Agreement, only 5 pages long including a 1-page letter to the Security Council, provided scarce information regarding how to implement the UN role in Yemen. By not specifying how the Redeployment Committee was to monitor the redeployment of forces, and the ceasefire in general, it was open to ambiguity and calls regarding interpretation. Unsurprisingly then, it was still determining its roles and competencies in January. The Agreement also failed to specify the roles of the parties beyond a commitment to redeploy. Moreover, the discussions about Ta’iz emphasise these points, as though the city was discussed directly, there were absolutely no proposals on how to help the city beyond creating a joint committee. And of course, nothing had really changed by January here.

The Conflicted Role of the UN:

There is an urge from the international community for the UN to be publicly relevant in any international crisis, but what this relevance means is contested. Is it as key international mediator, or as human right defender, or both, or something else entirely? And clearly in Yemen the UN has a difficult task in establishing a process that all in the international community can agree on. This process, and the UN’s role is in general, especially at the level of the Security Council, has become a playground for states to play out their rivalries via the Yemen conflict. This has led for tit-for-tat vetoes^[5], and a general hinderance of a clear UN role. If, for example, the UN cannot send peacekeeping forces in Yemen, why can it not be honest about such limitations and instead build for something it can achieve? At least in Yemen, the necessity is to build confidence between the parties, and for this the UN needs to do more as a facilitator.

Despite these shortcomings of the actual Stockholm Agreement, a classic example of beneficial UN mediation persists even in Yemen. So-called Track II efforts, those informal, unofficial peacebuilding efforts in parallel to the official Track I diplomacy, have rightly been praised as of benefit to the Yemeni case^[6]. The involvement of civil society organizations, religious and community leaders, women’s groups, trade unions and the like on the ground level, with ordinary civilians are a crucial element of any peace process. They tend to be less glamorous than the large flagship conferences and peace summits, but nonetheless are incredibly important to establishing cooperation, and a sense of shared community and values.

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