



## [The Status of Houthi-Saudi Negotiations](#)

By Jacob Van Veldhuizen

Hopes are high as the five-day meeting between Houthi and Saudi negotiators. This meeting marked the first time Houthi delegates have traveled to Saudi Arabia for negotiations. These are a separate precursor to the larger-scale UN-moderated negotiations. The goal has been to create a preliminary agreement to create a foundation for a more comprehensive peace deal. Participants and observers alike think the meeting went well. Though no agreement was reached, forward progress was made on some of the key sticking points. The main hurdles that remain include creating a timeline for foreign troops to exit Yemen, creating a mechanism to pay public wages, and lifting the Saudi embargo on air and sea ports controlled by the Houthis. The talks seemed to end on a positive note with both sides claiming to have made progress. Future talks are to take place “very soon.”

The situation on the ground has been relatively unchanged. There was a fragile truce, but small skirmishes were still fairly common. The truce originally went into effect in April 2022 but ended on October 2. Despite this, fighting has not escalated. The military situation in Yemen remains relatively stable. There is still military activity on the front line. The citizens on the ground remain very skeptical of the peace talks. Many Yemeni people have yet to see any sort of benefit from the ongoing peace talks.

Saudi Arabia’s main goal seems to be to extract itself from the conflict. There are multiple reasons why they want to remove themselves. The first is this war has been counterproductive to Saudi Arabia’s recent efforts to rebrand itself. There are multiple instances where the Gulf state has faced criticism for their actions in the war, including the killing of Yemeni civilians. The second reason comes from increasing pressure from the United States to pull out of the war. They have linked some military aid to Saudi Arabia’s withdrawal from the war. This further motivates Saudi Arabia to remove itself from the conflict. The third reason is simply because this conflict is expensive to fight. As Saudi Arabia looks to expand and diversify its economy, it makes sense to opt for peace. This option would allow Saudi Arabia to divert funds to its economic endeavors.

Saudi-Iranian rapprochement also seemed to have played some type of role. The Houthi forces are widely seen as a proxy of Iran and the larger conflict as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The recent China-brokered deal may have at the very least assisted in starting negotiations.

These negotiations should be applauded, but there are still some potential issues that must be addressed. The first and foremost is that these preliminary negotiations are between only the Houthis and the Saudis. There are many other groups, including the internationally recognized government, that were not present. It is very important to at least include all parties in negotiations, especially if they are primarily to build a foundation for a more comprehensive peace deal. Waiting to include these groups until the larger negotiations. Another potential issue that needs to be addressed is that Saudi Arabia could make a separate peace with the Houthis. This would be a faster and easier way out of the conflict than participating in the UN-led negotiations. If Saudi Arabia elected to do this, there would be potential consequences. The first is that the Houthis would launch an attack on the now weakened government forces, escalating the conflict. It would likely be drawn out for many months and increase

the already high death toll. Another potential consequence is that the withdrawal of Saudi Arabia would also harm the chances of finding a comprehensive peace agreement during the UN negotiations. It would significantly shift the power dynamic. This shift would require the parties to shift negotiating strategies and expectations, leading to longer conflict.

These issues are easily fixed. The first and most important thing is to begin including all parties in the negotiations, even if they are preliminary. Saudi Arabia must also be pressured to not take the easy way out, or if they do, at least make parts of the agreement conditional on the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement.

From a humanitarian and strategic standpoint, continued pressure on Saudi Arabia to bring about an end to the conflict in Yemen is beneficial to the United States. This being said, caution should still be exercised and contingency plans put into place. There are many things outside of the United States' control that could throw a wrench into negotiations. The Biden administration must do everything in its power to ensure negotiations go smoothly.