Yemen's Multiplying Conflicts

As 2020 approaches, Yemen confronts two acute security challenges: avoiding further entanglement in the wider regional conflict between the U.S., Saudi Arabia and Iran, and preventing a war within a war among anti-Huthi forces. On 14 September, the Huthis claimed responsibility for an attack on Saudi oil facilities that temporarily cut off nearly 50 per cent of the country's oil production capacity. Riyadh, Washington and several European governments accused Iran of the attack, and the Huthis' claim has tied the group more closely to Tehran in the eyes of its opponents.

While the conflict could turn into a true proxy war or trigger a wider regional confrontation, there is still a chance to avoid such outcomes. Signs are tentative but promising. A week after the Aramco attacks, the Huthis unilaterally suspended cross-border attacks into the Kingdom and called for the Saudis to freeze airstrikes in exchange. Riyadh has reportedly responded positively, limiting but not entirely halting its aerial campaign in Yemen. The fragile arrangement needs to be preserved and built upon.

As Yemen's war intersects with and fuels regional tensions, it is also becoming more internally complex and harder to resolve. An August 2019 takeover of the internationally-recognised government's temporary capital of Aden by separatist forces aligned with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – Saudi Arabia's main coalition partner – could set off a larger battle between UAE- and Saudi-aligned components of Yemen's anti-Huthi bloc for control of the country's southern governorates. Here too, there has been progress toward an understanding, but it is far from done.

International actors, including the EU, need to move quickly to turn the fragile de-escalation between Saudi Arabia and the Huthis into an agreement that ultimately yields a ceasefire and restarts UN-led negotiations among Yemeni political groups to end the war. Continued diplomatic support is also needed to reconcile opposing forces within the anti-Huthi camp. A deal between the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and separatist southern forces, in particular, would offer an opportunity to update the UN peace process for Yemen and make negotiations more inclusive.

Recommendations for the EU and its member states include:

- Support EU-wide and French initiatives to de-escalate tensions between Iran and the U.S., and between Saudi Arabia and Iran; push local and regional parties to the Yemen war toward a political settlement.

- Coordinate diplomatic pressure on Saudi Arabia and the Huthis to reach a de-escalation agreement that includes a halt to cross-border attacks, which in turn could enable a return to UN-led intra-Yemeni talks.

- Advocate for broadening the UN-led peace process to include Yemeni actors beyond the Huthis and Hadi government, both in official negotiations and in informal Track II meetings.

- Work with the office of the UN special envoy to coordinate all EU-sponsored Track II initiatives, especially those related to the south and women's participation in the peace process, so that these talks better inform UN-led negotiations. To do this, the EU could fund a coordinator role within the envoy's office.

- Swiftly deliver technical assistance and staffing support to the UN Mission to Support the Hodeida Agreement (UMMHA) to which the EU and its member states have already committed, and increase support to the mission.

Preventing Further Escalation in the Region

Huthi claims of responsibility for the 14 September Aramco attack threatened to drag Yemen deeper into the regional power struggle between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other. Although the Trump administration decided against a military response and there have been signs of potential Iranian-Saudi engagement, the situation remains fragile. Another major attack of this kind, attributed to Tehran or its allies, could raise again the threat of retaliatory measures, with consequences throughout the region, including in Yemen.

In the eyes of Iran's regional and international rivals, by claiming the Aramco attack the Huthis signalled their complicity with Tehran in its regional power struggle against Saudi Arabia and broader struggle with the U.S. Some Huthi officials seem to see a major regional war involving the U.S. and Iran as inevitable, and argue it would benefit them, as it would divert Riyadh's attention from its southern neighbour. Others want to avoid such an outcome and have offered de-escalatory measures.

On 20 September, the Huthis announced a unilateral suspension of cross-border attacks against Saudi territory. The move offered an opportunity for direct Saudi-Huthi talks and mutual de-escalation. Although Saudi officials remain sceptical of the Huthis' intentions, wary that they might use a pause to replenish and reposition their forces, they have signalled both publicly and privately an interest in testing the proposition. The Saudis reportedly reduced airstrikes in response. Huthi hardliners mirror Saudi scepticism and question the logic of the move. Any resumption of Huthi strikes on Saudi territory – notably a successful attack on critical infrastructure or one that results in civilian casualties — could spark a broader conflagration, especially if any of the victims were American. Such a resumption would be hard to avoid if the two sides fail to reach agreement not only on cross-border strikes but also on easing Saudi-led coalition restrictions on access to Huthi-controlled territories, particularly limitations on fuel imports.

Yemen's Multiplying Internal Conflicts

Yemen now hosts multiple overlapping internal conflicts driven by three central belligerents: the Huthis in the north west, the UAE-backed separatist Southern

Transition Council (STC) in the south and Saudi-backed Yemeni government forces, whose main hub is Marib in the north east. Both the STC and government-aligned forces are battling the Huthis, but the two nominal allies are also fighting each other, reflecting deepening divisions between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. On 10 August, UAE-trained and -equipped forces affiliated with the STC seized control of Aden, the Hadi government's interim capital, in what the government described as a UAE-backed coup. After Saudi-aligned government forces mounted a counter-attack, UAE airstrikes stopped them in their tracks. In an escalating war of words, the UAE claimed it had targeted "terrorists", while the government asked the UN to intervene against what it described as a direct assault on its sovereignty by a foreign power.

Left unresolved, the power struggle between the STC and the government could ignite another war within Yemen's civil war, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia on opposing sides. In September, the Saudis stepped in to mediate between the Yemeni sides, gathering the parties in Jeddah. But tensions remain high, and both STC- and government-backed forces are reportedly preparing for another round of fighting over oil-rich Shabwa governorate. Tensions are also high in neighbouring Hadramout between the government and the UAE-backed governor, Faraj al-Bahsani, who remained neutral during the August battle for Aden.

There are some grounds for optimism. At proximity talks in Jeddah, Riyadh proposed forming a technocratic government with a prime minister acceptable to both sides. Also under discussion is an STC quota in the government's negotiating team that would participate in future UN-mediated talks with the Huthis. If agreed, this would be an important step toward greater inclusiveness in the peace process, potentially paving the way toward a more credible and durable political settlement. Any deal to end the war will require buy-in not just from the Hadi government and the Huthis, but also from the STC and other Yemeni groups, such as Islah (the country's main Sunni Islamist party), the former ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party and non-STC affiliated southern groups.

A Role for the EU and its Member States

Ending the Yemen war is increasingly urgent given both its dramatic humanitarian costs and regional tensions. EU member states are already involved in direct mediation efforts with Iran, including through EU and E4 (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) consultations and individual initiatives, such as France's direct diplomacy with Tehran and Washington. The EU and member states should build on these efforts to strengthen the UN-led political process to end the Yemen war. In that context, the EU and its member states should advocate for a clear de-escalation plan between the Huthis and Saudi Arabia, which in turn would facilitate starting intra-Yemeni negotiations.

The EU and member states are well-placed to advocate a more inclusive (and therefore more credible) political dialogue. EU institutions and member states have sponsored Track II dialogues among Yemeni groups on a range of local and national issues since the beginning of the war. A core criticism of these initiatives is that they are not sufficiently linked to formal UN efforts. In cooperation with the UN special envoy's office, the EU and member states

could help ensure findings from Track II meetings on the south and women's participation in the political process, as well as on tribal and local perspectives, feed into UN-led negotiations, and that Track II exercises are informed by the UN envoy's approach.

The EU and member states, which have direct channels with Riyadh, are in a strong position to press the Hadi government and Saudi-led coalition to broaden participation in the official peace talks by diversifying the government negotiating team to make it more representative of the anti-Huthi bloc. The EU and member states should also use their channels with the Huthis to press for greater inclusivity on their part, including by women. The European External Action Service should also continue to meet with and channel perspectives from groups not involved in the UN-led process to the UN envoy, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The 2018 Stockholm Agreement, and particularly the agreement to demilitarise the port city of Hodeida, can be either a stepping-stone toward a more comprehensive peace process or, should it remain stalled, a stumbling block. EU member states have offered technical and staffing assistance to the UN Mission to Support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA), the UN body set up to oversee the agreement through technical assistance and personnel secondment. But they have delivered little to date. UNMHA remains severely understaffed, in part because of delays in personnel transfers. EU member states should promptly fulfil their commitments in this regard.