

6. Peace negotiations in the Middle East

- The Middle East was the scene of five negotiating processes that accounted for 10% of the total cases studied in 2018.
- The regional and international dimension of the conflicts and socio-political crises that were subject to negotiation and the influence of external actors in several of the disputes were key factors shaping the progress of the processes.
- The United Nations played a prominent role as a third party in most of the negotiations in the region, especially through its special envoys for the various contexts.
- The process to implement the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme was affected by the US decision to withdraw from the deal reached in 2015.
- After months of deadlock in meetings, the disputing parties in Yemen held a round of talks in December and reached an agreement on several key issues.
- Negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians remained at an impasse and contact between the parties was limited to trying to establish a ceasefire amidst the escalation of violence reported during the year.
- The intra-Palestinian reconciliation process remained blocked, in a context of intensified tensions between Hamas and Fatah.
- Several negotiating plans for Syria involved various local, regional and international actors, though they had limited impact on the dynamics of violence.

This chapter studies the main peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East during 2018. Firstly, the main characteristics and general trends on the negotiation processes in the region are presented. Secondly, the evolution of each different context during the year is analysed, including in relation to the gender, peace and security agenda. At the start of the chapter there is a map identifying the countries in the Middle East that were the scenario of negotiations during 2018.

Table 6.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2018

Peace processes and negotiations	Negotiating actors	Third parties
Iran (nuclear programme)	Iran, G5+1 (USA, France, United Kingdom, Russia and China plus Germany), EU	UN
Israel-Palestine	Israeli Government, Palestinian Authority (AP)	Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), France, Egypt, Russia, Oman
Palestine	Hamas, Fatah	Egypt, Qatar
Syria	Government, sectors of the political and armed opposition	UN, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran, International Syria Support Group (ISSG)
Yemen	Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansarallah	UN, Kuwait, Oman

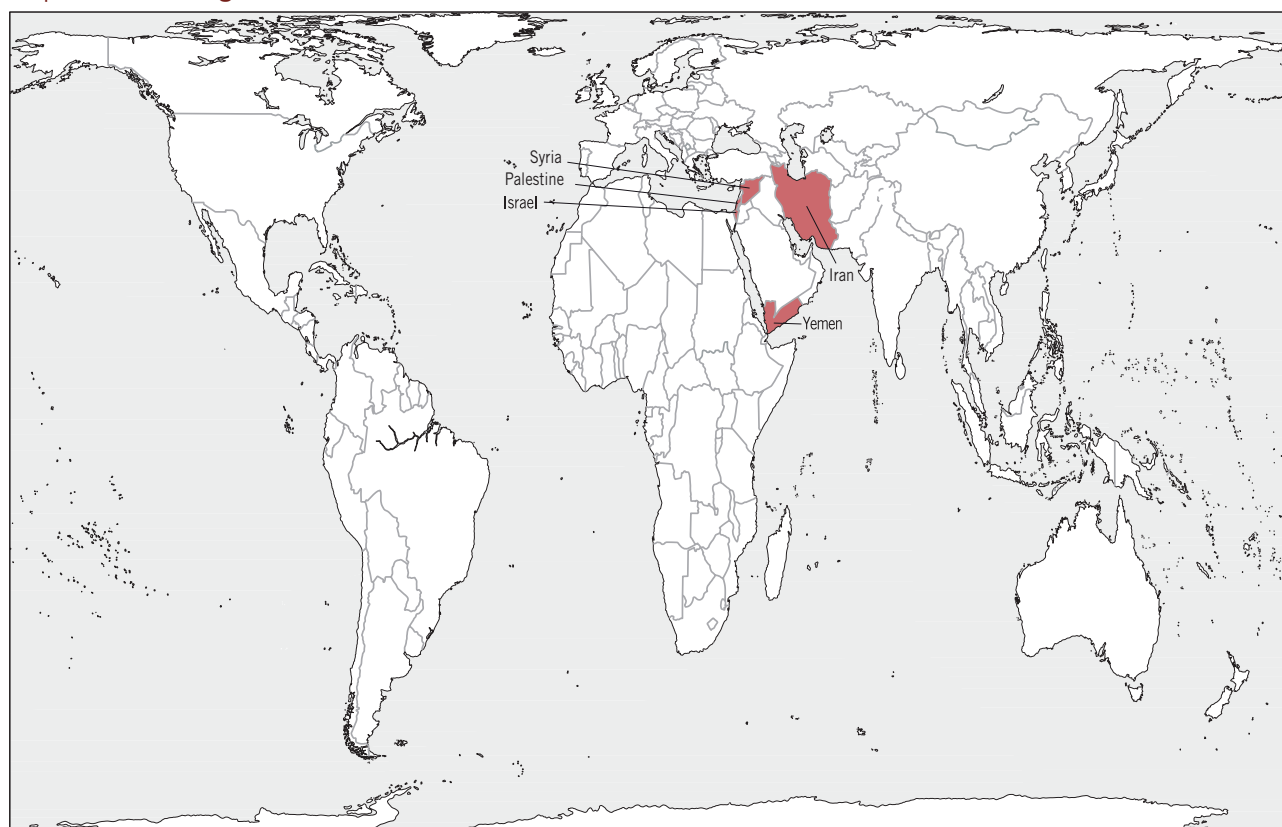
6.1. Peace negotiations in 2018: Regional trends

This section analyses five negotiating processes that took place in the Middle East during 2018, the same number as the previous year and accounting for 10% of the total peace processes studied worldwide. Three of these negotiations were linked to armed conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The other two processes were related to crisis situations, namely the conflict between the Palestinian groups Hamas and

Fatah and the tension surrounding the Iranian nuclear programme, which led to the signing of an internationally validated agreement in 2015. Except for the intra-Palestinian dispute, which is internal, the rest of the cases were international (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tension over the Iranian nuclear programme) or internationalised internal (the armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen). ¹ Two of the cases took place in the Gulf

1. For further information about the armed conflicts and socio-political crises around the world, see Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2019! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2019.

Map 6.1. Peace negotiations in the Middle East 2018



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2018

subregion (Yemen and the one involving Iran) and three in the Mashreq (Israel-Palestine, Palestine and Syria).

In all cases in the Middle East region, the governments of the countries where conflict and/or socio-political tension took place were one of the negotiating parties, talking (in some cases indirectly) with actors of various kinds. In Yemen, for example, the process involved the government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi with the armed group known as the Houthis or Ansarallah. In Syria, members of the government of Bashar Assad and representatives of some parts of the political opposition and of the armed groups operating in the country participated in both in the Geneva process promoted by the UN and in the Astana process sponsored by Russia. During 2018, the Damascus government was also involved in direct negotiations with some actors in the Syrian conflict, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Kurdish forces backed by the US. In Israel-Palestine, the interests of the parties continued to be represented by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority, led by Mahmoud Abbas, although, in keeping with the trend in recent years, no direct meetings were held and key issues of the dispute were not addressed. In fact, the (indirect) contacts with the greatest impact on the dynamics of the conflict in 2018 were between the Israeli government and Hamas and centred on a ceasefire agreement amidst

Peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East accounted for 10% of all cases worldwide and were linked to three armed conflicts and two crisis scenarios

intensifying violence. Furthermore, as in recent years, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas participated in a separate negotiating process to overcome the intra-Palestinian crisis that has dragged on since 2006. This process has thus far been unsuccessful and the parties have failed to form a unity government. The negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme involved the Tehran government and another set of countries that signed the 2015 agreement (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—China, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom and France—plus Germany). Together with the EU and the UN, these countries have continued to be involved in the implementation process. Several of them took steps to prevent the US from withdrawing from the agreement in 2018. Later, after Washington's announcement that it was backing out of the agreement, they worked to guarantee its continuity.

The regional and international dimension of the conflicts and socio-political crises subject to negotiations and the influence of external actors on several of the disputes were key elements that continued to shape how the processes evolved in the Middle East. A good example of this was the impact of US policies on various contexts in the region. This was the case with Iran, as the Trump administration decided to withdraw from the 2015 agreement, which had been achieved after a decade of negotiations, and reimpose sanctions on

Iran, raising tension between it and the United States. Washington's policies also influenced the prospects for negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. Several decisions made by the US administration during the year were rejected by the Palestinian population and its leaders, including the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem and a halt to funding for the UNRWA. These events strengthened perceptions of the Trump administration's partiality in favour of Israel, in addition to its announced intention to present an "ultimate plan" to resolve the dispute. At the end of the year, the US announcement that it would withdraw its troops from Syria also appeared as something that could have possible repercussions on the dynamics of the conflict and on the future of the negotiations.

The situation in Syria also illustrated the impact of other external actors in the course of the negotiations. Russia and Iran, allies of Damascus, and Turkey, which has supported opposition groups, continued to promote the Astana process, a parallel path to the UN-led Geneva process, and project their interests into the conflict. The influence of these countries in the conflict was evident in the direct agreement between Russia and Turkey to create a demilitarised zone to prevent clashes between armed groups and the forces of the Assad regime in Idlib governorate. The influence of regional powers also became apparent in Yemen. Representatives of the Hadi government and the Houthis participated in the end-of-year talks in Stockholm, but the UN said that meetings also had been held with Iran and Saudi Arabia. According to experts' analysis, any political solution to the conflict will require the consent of the governments of these countries, especially Riyadh, which has led the military campaign against the Houthis.

Third parties participated in all the negotiating processes in the Middle East.

As mentioned earlier, the region offers examples of negotiating processes in which third countries are aligned with one of the contending parties and try to play a role as a third-party mediator or facilitator of a negotiated solution to the conflict at the same time. Some countries in the Middle East also officiated as third parties in processes in the region, such as Egypt (in the Israel-Palestine and intra-Palestinian disputes), Oman (in Yemen and Israel-Palestine) and Kuwait (in Yemen). Other countries of the region officiated as mediators or facilitators in negotiations outside the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar in the Horn of Africa and in Afghanistan.² The role played by the United Nations in the different negotiating processes in the Middle East should also be stressed. **The UN was involved as a third party in four of the five**

The United Nations was involved in four of the five cases in the region, especially through the activity of its special envoys

The negotiations in the Middle East reported many problems and/or persistent deadlock and only the process in Yemen justified some positive expectations after an agreement was signed in Stockholm in December

cases analysed through various formats, although during 2018 the activity of the special envoys appointed to facilitate an end to the different conflicts was especially prominent. In Israel-Palestine, the UN special envoy for the Middle East peace process, Nickolay Mladenov, played a leading role along with Egypt in efforts to establish a truce between Israel and Hamas. In Yemen, new UN special envoy Martin Griffiths' many efforts led to a round of meetings and an agreement in Stockholm, thereby breaking the impasse in the negotiations since 2016. The UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, who resigned at the end of the year after more than four years in office, continued

his attempts to pave the way for political negotiations on the country's future in 2018, although the Geneva process was eclipsed for the Astana talks sponsored by Moscow. The UN's involvement in regional negotiating processes also included its participation in other formats, such as the Quartet on the Middle East for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations) and by monitoring implementation of the commitments made as part of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme.

Regarding the **negotiating agenda in the different processes**, we must bear in mind that the issues under discussion do not always enter the realm of public opinion. Based on this consideration, none of the cases analysed in the Middle East in 2018 addressed the substantive issues of the conflicts. **The most recurrent theme in the negotiating processes in the region during the year was the search for agreements related to ceasefires, truces and cessations of hostilities.** There

were attempts to curb the dynamics of violence through these types of agreements in Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen throughout 2018. The rest of the items on the agenda were more varied, depending on the unique characteristics of each context. Regarding Iran, in addition to the central issue of nuclear non-proliferation, a share of the attention fell on some Iranian activities that were cause for concern, and not only for the United States, such as arms transfers to armed actors in several countries in the region. In the intra-Palestinian dispute, the focus of the talks was reportedly on issues such as control of the Gaza Strip and the lifting of sanctions

against it. In Syria, the different negotiating processes addressed different issues. One of the lines of discussion in the Astana process was the establishment of the constitutional committee, though no significant progress was made during the year. Some parties to the conflict addressed general aspects related to security, such as Assad's government and the SDF, or led to specific

2. See the chapters on Africa and Asia in this publication.

agreements for exchanging bodies, releasing prisoners and evacuating combatants and civilians. Prisoner exchanges, the withdrawal of combatants and access to humanitarian aid were items on the negotiating agendas in both Syria and Yemen.

The outlook was not encouraging for the general trend of negotiations in the region during 2018 and the peace process in Yemen was the only one that justified certain positive expectations at the end of the year. The first direct meetings between the parties since 2016 not only led to an agreement in December on relevant issues to curb violence and facilitate access to humanitarian aid to Yemen, but also in the parties' promise to avoid actions that could lead to escalation and to continue the meetings. Nevertheless, the parties and the UN stressed that the agreement cannot yet be considered part of political negotiations to resolve the conflict and experts warned of different aspects that may affect its fragility, including the action of actors that have not played a leading role in the dialogue. **The other cases in the region reported several difficulties and/or persistent deadlock.** In the dispute between Hamas and Fatah, for example, despite the expectations created in late 2017 by the signing of a new reconciliation agreement, during 2018 the previous dynamics of distrust re-emerged, along with problems in implementing what was agreed. The chronic impasse in the negotiations between Israel and Palestine was maintained and prospects for 2019 were not very encouraging, considering the US position and the pre-electoral climate in Israel. In Syria, the few agreements made between some actors were not enough to produce a significant impact on the dynamics of the conflict and failed to address key issues, while the Damascus regime seems increasingly certain of imposing its positions with military force. Regarding the Iranian nuclear programme, while Tehran reaffirmed its commitment to the deal, the impact of the United States' withdrawal and the re-imposition of sanctions gave rise to questions about the future of the agreement at the end of the year.

Finally, regarding the gender dimension of peace processes in the Middle East, **the cases analysed illustrated the problems and obstacles that women face in participating in formal negotiations, but they also showed initiatives to denounce marginalisation and try to achieve a greater presence in negotiations.** For example, a group of Yemeni women sent a letter to the new UN special envoy to highlight the gender impacts of the conflict, demand effective female participation at all levels of the peace process and raise issues that from their point of view should be prioritised to address the situation in the country. At forums such as the UN Security Council, Palestinian women also gave visibility to the impacts of the conflict, the Israeli occupation and the exclusion of women in key political processes, including intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Throughout the year, Syrian women also participated in spaces to

present their views of the conflict. The Syrian Women Advisory Board remained active in 2018. Additionally, the office of the new UN special envoy for Yemen promoted the creation of the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group in 2018. This technical group did not participate in the Stockholm meetings, but was in Sweden during the talks and maintained contact with the delegations of the parties to the conflict.

6.2 Case study analysis

Mashreq

Israel-Palestine	
Negotiating actors	Israeli Government, Palestinian Authority (AP)
Third parties	Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), France, Egypt, Russia, Oman
Relevant agreements	Israel – PLO Mutual Recognition (1993), Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (Oslo I Accords), Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area (Cairo Agreement) (1994), Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (Oslo II) (1995), Wye River Memorandum (1998), Sharm el Sheikh Memorandum (1999), Road Map to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (2003), Annapolis Conference Joint Understanding on Negotiations (2007)

Summary:

The Palestinian-Israeli peace process launched in the 1990s has not resulted in an agreement between the parties on the most complex issues borders, Jerusalem, settlements, Palestinian refugees and security or the creation of a Palestinian state. Since the timetable established by the Oslo Accords broke down a series of rounds of negotiation have been conducted and various proposals have been made, but they have all been unsuccessful. The peace process has developed amidst periodic outbursts of violence and alongside the fait accompli policies of Israel, including with regard to its persisting occupation. These dynamics have created growing doubts about the viability of a two-state solution. Meanwhile, after periods of escalating violence, truce and cessation of hostilities agreements have been reached between the Israeli government and Palestinian armed actors.

Following the trend in recent years, **negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli government remained deadlocked and the general atmosphere between the parties deteriorated as a result of various factors. These included the largest escalation of violence since 2014, which killed 170 Palestinians and injured more than 6,000 in 2018, some steps taken during the year by the US government and by Israel and persistent intra-Palestinian division.**³ Thus, over the course of the year, debates over the real prospects for a peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overlapped with the Trump administration's

3. For further information about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the crisis between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine, see Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2019! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2019.

proposal of more concrete steps aimed at getting Israeli and Palestinian actors to agree to a ceasefire.

Regarding the prospects for a peace plan for the conflict, the Palestinian government of Mahmoud Abbas continued to reject any possible US proposal and insisted that it would not participate in initiatives mediated by Washington, given its partiality to and open support for Israeli interests. After recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017, the Trump administration made another set of decisions in 2018 that were rejected by the Palestinian population and its leaders, as well as various actors of the international community. The US transferred its embassy to Jerusalem in May amidst the harsh Israeli campaign against Palestinian protests over the Nakba, which had already killed 55 Palestinians and wounded over 1,200. Months later, in September, it formally suspended its funding to the UN agency for the Palestinian refugee population, UNRWA, which provides assistance to more than five million refugees in the Palestinian territories, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. The United States had been the main donor to UNRWA, providing 300 million USD, and had previously cut another 200 million USD in bilateral aid to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Palestinian representatives and analysts considered the decision hostile and intended to undermine one of the key Palestinian demands in the peace negotiations: the return of the refugees. Other controversial moves made by the Trump administration during the year were its decision to withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council, alleging that it was prejudiced against Israel; the closure of the PLO mission and the expulsion of its ambassador in Washington; and the shuttering of its diplomatic mission to serve the Palestinian population in Jerusalem, demoting the consulate to a unit inside the US embassy to Israel. Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat described this move as proof that the United States had fully adopted the Israeli narrative regarding Jerusalem, the settlements and the refugees, making it its own.

In this context, expectations remained afloat throughout 2018 regarding the US proposal to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which Trump has announced as the “ultimate deal” and “the deal of the century” and which will be drafted by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Palestinian leaders repeated during the year that the US peace proposal was not intended to offer a fair and sustainable solution, but to legitimise the Israeli occupation and complained that the team drafting the proposal was clearly pro-Israeli. In addition to Kushner, this team includes Ambassador David Friedman, who is also openly supportive of Israeli settlements, and Jason Greenblatt, Trump’s special envoy for the Middle East. In fact, the Kushner team paid a visit to the region in June to prepare the ground for their plan and met with Israeli, Egyptian and Jordanian representatives, but

not Palestinians. Given this situation, the Palestinian authorities took steps intended to internationalise the dispute, such as their proposal to hold an international peace conference, which was rejected by the US, and their request for an investigation into Israel’s war crimes, crimes against humanity and apartheid in the International Criminal Court.

It should be noted that the Israeli side also had retractors to the US plan. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said he saw no urgency in presenting the plan and, according to reports, he would not be interested in any process that could mean that his government might have to make some kind of concession in 2019, an election year. Some members of his cabinet agreed, with Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked publicly declaring that she considered the US peace plan a “waste of time” because the differences between Palestinians and Israelis were too great. Given this context, during 2018 the Israeli government took steps that widened the gulf between both sides, such as enacting a law that declared Israel a Jewish state in the middle of the year and that led to mass protests by Israeli Arabs, who account for 17.5% of the population of the country. In

September, Trump announced that the plan would be revealed in two or four months, but media outlets later reported that it could be delayed until February or even until March or April 2019. According to reports, one event that may have influenced the delay in the planned timetable was the assassination of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, since Kushner wanted Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman to be one of the backers of his initiative.

Negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians remained deadlocked in 2018 and the Trump administration continued to delay presenting its plan to address the conflict

Faced with this impasse in the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis, other international actors decided to get involved or showed their willingness to intervene as facilitators. Thus, towards the end of the year it emerged that Oman had shared some ideas with Israelis and Palestinians to resume the negotiations, though without acting as a mediator. Mahmoud Abbas travelled to Oman in late October and met with the Omani leader, Sultan Qaboos. Days later, Sultan Qaboos received Netanyahu in the first visit to the country by an Israeli prime minister since 1996. French President Emmanuel Macron also expressed his intention to make a plan of his own for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if the US continued to delay before revealing its plan. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also expressed his willingness to mediate the dispute, arguing that regional stability will not be possible until the conflict is resolved. Egypt also said it was ready to mediate between Israel and Palestinian actors, though in 2018 its efforts were mainly focused on reducing violence given the significant rise in hostilities.

Regarding ceasefire agreements, it should be noted that Egypt and the UN special coordinator for the Middle

East peace process, Nickolay Mladenov, were involved in efforts to stop clashes between Israel and Hamas. In a context of persistent intra-Palestinian rivalry, the Abbas government was opposed to any agreement between Israel and Hamas before the Palestinian Authority regained control over the Gaza Strip. The Abbas government even threatened to intensify pressure on Gaza.⁴ After a meeting in early November with the Egyptian president, Abbas agreed to the initial implementation of a ceasefire. Hamas contained protests at the separation barrier with Israel in Gaza, while Israel lifted its naval blockade on the Gaza Strip and allowed the delivery of fuel and money to pay Palestinian officials financed by Qatar. After new incidents of violence, this truce was resumed in the middle of the month and led to the resignation of Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman in protest of what he considered a surrender. Other intermittent ceasefires were reported throughout the year, such as in May or October, between Israel and Islamic Jihad. In December, media outlets reported that Netanyahu had sent messages to Abbas and Hamas warning that Israel would not observe any ceasefire in Gaza if attacks against Israeli interests in the West Bank were orchestrated in parallel.

Gender, peace and security

During the annual debate on the UN's gender, peace and security agenda, Randa Siniora, the director of the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), became the first Palestinian activist to address the UN Security Council, where she criticised the impacts of the conflict and the exclusion of Palestinian women from the peace talks. Siniora highlighted the consequences of the Israeli occupation and its discriminatory policies and the resulting humanitarian crisis from a gender perspective and warned that escalating violence in the conflict also had an impact on violence against women in the home. She also warned that despite Palestinian women's key grassroots work on human rights and peacebuilding, their representation in political decision-making positions remained very limited. She also denounced the exclusion of the concerns of Palestinian women in key political processes, including the construction of the Palestinian state and intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

Palestine	
Negotiating actors	Hamas, Fatah
Third parties	Egypt, Qatar
Relevant agreements	Mecca Agreement (2007), Cairo agreement (2011), Doha agreement (2012), Beach Refugee Camp agreement (2014)

Summary:

Since the start of the confrontation between Hamas and Fatah, which materialized as of 2007 with a de facto

separation between Gaza and the West Bank, several mediation initiatives have been launched in an attempt to reduce tensions and promote an approximation between these two Palestinian formations. It was not until May 2011 that the confluence of several factors –including the deadlock in negotiations between the PA and Israel, changes in the region as a result of the Arab revolts and the pressure exerted by the Palestinian public opinion– facilitated the signing of a reconciliation agreement between the parties. The diverging opinions between Hamas and Fatah on key issues have hampered the implementation of this agreement, which aims at establishing a unity government, the celebration of legislative and presidential elections, and reforming the security forces. Successive agreements have been announced between both parties since, but they have not been implemented.

The disagreements between Hamas and Fatah and the serious difficulties in making headway in the process of intra-Palestinian reconciliation became clear once again throughout 2018. **Tensions between both groups intensified significantly and by the end of the year a new agreement had not been reached, despite the many rounds of meetings that Egypt had held with the parties** in its role as mediator of the dispute. The intra-Palestinian conflict has also significantly shaped the initiatives aimed at establishing a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas amidst the greatest escalation of violence in the region since 2014.⁶

The last agreement between Hamas and Fatah, signed in October 2017, was supposed to be implemented in 2018. Among other issues, it stipulated that the Abbas government would assume full control of the Gaza Strip at the beginning of February. However, 2017 ended with both sides trading accusations of violating the provisions of the agreement. The Abbas government upheld its sanctions against the Gaza Strip even though Hamas had dismantled the committee it had created to administer the territory in September 2017. Hamas reported that the Palestinian Authority (PA) was subjecting the population of Gaza to collective punishment by reducing electricity subsidies, reducing the salaries of public employees and limiting the entry of medicine into the Gaza Strip, which is affected by a serious humanitarian crisis. Tension between the parties escalated in March following a bomb attack against Prime Minister Rami al-Hamdallah during a visit to Gaza. The Abbas government accused Hamas of being behind the assassination attempt and the Islamist group blamed its counterpart for the attack, describing it as an attempt to avoid implementing the October agreement. Direct contact between both sides was blocked and the PA intensified the sanctions against Gaza. Some analysts suggested that Abbas' strategy was aimed at pushing Gaza to an extreme situation that could spark a rebellion against Hamas.

As on previous occasions, Egypt tried to mediate between the parties and held several meetings with delegations of both factions, separately, in July. Egypt submitted a plan that included a timetable for implementing the

6. See the summary on Israel-Palestine in this chapter.

intra-Palestinian reconciliation process, forming a unity government and immediately lifting all the Palestinian Authority's sanctions on Gaza. According to media reports, Washington consented to the Egyptian plan. Hamas approved the plan in mid-July, but Fatah did not. The Abbas government imposed tougher conditions for an agreement, including regaining total control of Gaza in political and security terms. The negotiations continued this way in the following months. Media outlets reported that relations between Egypt and the PA government were strained by Abbas' misgivings about Cairo's role in the peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the US was devising and for not sufficiently considering Fatah's interests in Gaza. In this context, as Egypt and Nickolay Mladenov, the UN special envoy for the Middle East peace process, were trying to promote a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian president condemned any possible truce, insisting that any agreement of this kind should be made with the PA government. Thus, in mid-August, Abbas refused to meet with Egyptian delegates, although a Fatah delegation travelled to Cairo days later.

By September, it became clear that Egypt had aligned itself with the position of the Abbas government by delivering a speech that stressed the need to prioritise intra-Palestinian reconciliation and the PA's effective control of Gaza before a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. According to media reports, the change in the Egyptian approach could be due to threats by Abbas to degrade his relations with Israel by suspending cooperation in security and halting financial transfers to the Gaza Strip. Hamas then claimed that Fatah was imposing conditions that made reconciliation impossible, but meetings mediated by Egypt continued. In early November, the Palestinian president travelled to the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh to meet with Egyptian leader Abdel Fatah al-Sisi in the first meeting between the two in 10 months. Following the meeting, Abbas agreed to the initial implementation of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, but remained publicly critical of the Islamist group, which he accused of blocking the establishment of a Palestinian state. In late November, Hamas and Fatah delegations held meetings again in Cairo with Egyptian representatives (consecutively, with no direct meetings involving both groups) and assessed a new proposal from the al-Sisi government. Hamas approved of the proposal again, while the Fatah delegation left Egypt after giving preliminary approval, subject to Abbas' confirmation. According to reports, the new plan would be based on the Cairo Agreement of 2011 and would still have to define several issues pending consultations and agreements between both Palestinian factions. Media outlets reported that the proposal includes three phases:

Intra-Palestinian divisions persisted during 2018 and affected both the prospects for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah and a ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel

first, a three-month transitional period in which Hamas would hand over administrative control of Gaza to the PA in exchange for lifting all the sanctions imposed on the public employees of the Gaza Strip; second, elections for the presidency and for the Palestinian Legislative Council; and third, the formation of a national unity government including all Palestinian factions. It also emerged that Egypt had sent a letter to the Fatah leadership warning that if there was no progress in the reconciliation process, it would abandon its role as mediator. In December, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh said he was willing to meet with Abbas anywhere to discuss how to end the intra-Palestinian division.

Gender, peace and security

During the year, **Palestinian women gave visibility to their marginalisation in the process of intra-Palestinian reconciliation.**

In October 2018, the director of the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), Randa Siniora, became the first Palestinian activist to speak before the UN Security Council, where she addressed the impacts of the Israeli occupation on women, but also the exclusion of women from key political processes, such as national reconciliation. Siniora explained that only 5% of the key positions are held by women, including in the PA, and that the 30-member internal reconciliation team only includes four women. In this context, Siniora demanded that the PA implement the national action plan provided for in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and called for significant female representation in intra-Palestinian reconciliation efforts.

Syria	
Negotiating actors	Government, sectors of the political and armed opposition
Third parties	UN, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran, International Syria Support Group (ISSG)
Relevant agreements	Geneva Communiqué from the Action Group for Syria (2012); UNSC Resolution 2254 in support of the International Syria Support Group Roadmap for a Peace Process (Vienna Statements (2015)) ⁷

Summary:

Given the serious consequences of the armed conflict in Syria and amidst concern about the regional repercussions of the crisis, various regional and international actors have tried to facilitate a negotiated solution and commit the parties to a cessation of hostilities. However, regional actors' and international powers' different approaches to the conflict, together with an inability to reach consensus in the UN Security Council, have hindered the possibilities of opening the way to a political solution. After a brief and failed attempt by the Arab League, the UN took the lead in the mediation efforts, led by special envoys Kofi Annan

7. Both the Geneva Communiqué of 2012 and United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 are reference documents for the negotiations, but neither has been signed by the parties to the conflict.

(2012), Lakhdar Brahimi (2012-2014) and Staffan de Mistura (2014-2018). Other initiatives have come from the United States, Russia and leaders of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). Alongside the intra-Syrian conversations hosted by De Mistura in Geneva, the Russian-backed Astana process began in 2017, which also involve Turkey and Iran. The various rounds of negotiations held since the beginning of the armed conflict have shown the deep differences between the parties and have not been able to halt the high levels of violence in the country.

The complexity of the Syrian conflict and the many actors involved were reflected in the scope of negotiations to address it. **UN-backed efforts continued in 2018 as part of the Geneva process and alongside the Astana process, a parallel initiative promoted mainly by Russia (an ally of the Syrian government),** but that also involves Iran and Turkey. Additionally, some direct communication channels were activated between other actors involved in the armed conflict in Syria, with some agreements being sought. In addition to this variety of channels, which evolved in different ways, some of the most significant agreements of the year, such as the one regarding the Ghouta area in September, were managed and negotiated mainly by foreign countries (Russia and Turkey), rather than by Syrian actors, reflecting the significant regional and international dimension of the conflict.

At the beginning of the year, meetings were held as part of the Geneva process and the Astana process. On 25 and 26 January, delegations from the Assad government and the Syrian opposition met in Vienna (Austria) with the team of the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura. In the ninth round of meetings of the Geneva process (which, however, were not held directly between the parties), formulas for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015), which conceived a political transition for Syria, were unsuccessfully discussed again. Days later, starting on 30 January, the tenth round of the Astana process took place in Sochi (Russia), which also included the participation of opposition delegations and the Syrian government, as well as Russia, Turkey and Iran. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Jordan and Staffan de Mistura, who throughout the year insisted on the role that the UN should be playing to promote a political solution for Syria. At the time, but also over the course of 2018, analysts noted the greater relevance of the Astana process, partly because it is a better reflection of the balance of forces in the field, and partly because of the Assad regime's resistance to any kind of concessions given his expectations of imposing himself by military means.

The joint statement following the Sochi meeting supported 12 principles developed as part of the Geneva process and also reflected an agreement to create a committee to submit a proposal for constitutional reform to contribute to a political agreement, under the auspices of the UN, and in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. This constitutional committee would be composed of representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, as well as experts, members of civil society, independent figures,

tribal leaders and women, and it would also properly represent the ethnic and tribal groups of Syria. It was decided that the terms of reference, powers, rules of procedure and criteria for the selection of its members would be carried out as part of the Geneva process. The creation of a committee of this nature had been one of Staffan de Mistura's working issues as part of the Geneva process, so during 2018 the diplomat held several meetings to try to make progress in its formation. However, no headway had been made by the year's end.

Another key milestone in the first half of 2018 was the unanimous approval of a new United Nations Security Council resolution that demanded that all parties cease hostilities and immediately halt the fighting for at least 30 days to allow access to humanitarian aid, among other issues. UN Security Council Resolution 2401 was passed on 24 February amidst intensified violence in various parts of Syria and especially in the area of East Ghouta (a rebel stronghold). Despite the UN's appeal, the violence did not stop and instead intensified. In less than 10 days, between 18 and 27 February, the Assad regime's air campaign killed more than 580 civilians. In this context, Russia proposed the implementation of five-hour local truces in East Ghouta starting on 27 February to allow civilians to leave. Three large armed groups operating in the region (Jaysh al-Islam, Rahman Corps and Ahrar al-Sham) pledged to respect Resolution 2401 and to expel members of other groups linked to al-Nusra Front and al-Qaeda. The regime suspended its attacks for one day, but in practice its offensive in the area was resumed by air and land in the days that followed. Since Resolution 2401 was passed, Staffan de Mistura has exerted diplomatic efforts to promote its implementation together with the Geneva-based International Syria Support Group's Humanitarian Access Task Force, led by its co-chair, Jan Egeland, and co-directed by Russia and the USA. Although there was a drop in violence in some areas, there was no cessation of hostilities and violence persisted in the following months. In fact, some of the so-called "de-escalation zones", according to the agreements in the Astana process in 2017, became scenes of heavy fighting.

Based on specific agreements between the disputing parties, a total of 130,000 internally displaced persons left the besieged area of East Ghouta in March, with bodies exchanged and prisoners released by armed groups. However, hostilities intensified again in April during the regime's final campaign on East Ghouta, which again included the use of chemical weapons on Douma. The armed group Jaysh al-Islam then agreed to a deal to release captives and evacuate fighters and civilians to areas under Turkish control in the north of the country. In the following months diplomatic activity was maintained in different formats, including the Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in Brussels (April) and Staffan de Mistura's meetings with significant actors, including the members of the Small Group of the Global Coalition (France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States) and with the members of the Astana

process. Meanwhile, Russia, Turkey and Iran also met again in Astana in May, and in Sochi in July, where they addressed issues such as the conditions for launching the constitutional committee, the release of prisoners, the return of displaced people and refugees and other topics

However, the agreement with the greatest impact on the dynamics of the conflict did not occur until the second half of the year as a result of a deal between Russia and Turkey. In the face of growing violence in Idlib governorate, one of the “de-escalation zones” that Iran, Russia and Turkey created—in theory—as guarantors, **on 17 September Ankara and Moscow announced the establishment of a demilitarised area to prevent clashes between armed opposition groups and the Assad regime.** The agreement provided for the withdrawal of heavy weapons and “radical terrorist groups” from a 20-kilometre strip and a halt to air strikes in the area. The agreement was announced by the Russian and Turkish presidents after a bilateral meeting in Sochi. Two weeks earlier, a trilateral meeting with Iran in Tehran had led to a public confrontation over the possibilities of a ceasefire in Idlib. Following the agreement on the demilitarised zone, there was a drop in hostilities in the region, although some armed actors, such as Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham, rejected the possibility of disarming. The demilitarised zone agreement was upheld at the end of the year, though incidents between the parties began to multiply in October. At a meeting in Istanbul at the end of that month, the leaders of France, Germany, Russia and Turkey issued a joint statement stressing the importance of implementing confidence-building measures to support the viability of the political process and a long-lasting ceasefire.

In this context, in October Staffan de Mistura announced his decision to leave office after more than four years. After the announcement, he paid a new visit to Syria to discuss the regime’s disagreements with the constitutional committee and other issues. The UN special envoy specifically asked Russia, Turkey and European countries to pressure the Syrian regime to stop blocking the formation of the committee. The UN Secretary-General appointed Norwegian diplomat Geir Pedersen to be his successor

There were other meetings, approaches and agreements between various actors involved in the Syrian conflict throughout the year. For example, some channels of direct dialogue were activated between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—led by Kurdish groups, and supported by the US— and the Assad government. A high-level delegation met in Damascus with representatives of the regime in July and in August there were meetings in which issues related to security and the provision of services were reportedly discussed. However, the dialogue was stalled by differences between the parties

regarding decentralisation and local autonomy issues. Additionally, discussions were reported between Turkey and the United States to form a working group to resolve differences, particularly in relation to the area around Manbij, following Turkish threats to take the town after seizing control of the Kurdish Afrin area in March. Meanwhile, there were also attempts to arrange truces via mediation between armed opposition actors, such as those between Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham (JTS), which were unsuccessful. Damascus, Israel and the United Nations also reached an agreement to reopen the Quneitra crossing, in the Golan Heights, and to facilitate the peacekeeping operations of the UN mission (UNDOF) that has overseen the area since a demilitarised zone was established in 1974. UNDOF’s activities have been directly affected by how the conflict has evolved in recent years, leading to its withdrawal in 2014, when al-Qaeda-like groups penetrated the area. UNDOF finally returned in July 2018, after Syrian troops regained control of the Quneitra crossing following a Russian-backed agreement with armed groups. Finally, at the end of the year, the United States’ announcement that it would withdraw its troops from Syria looked like it could have repercussions on the dynamics of the conflict and on the future of the negotiations.

Throughout 2018, the Astana and Geneva processes continued to try to address the Syrian conflict, in addition to other direct meetings and negotiations between various actors involved in the conflict

Gender, peace and security

Syrian women participated in various initiatives throughout the year to give visibility to the importance of their participation in peace negotiations and other arenas of political decision-making.

In April, during the Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region, which was held in Brussels, organised by the UN and the EU and attended by representatives of more than 85 countries and organisations, a parallel event took place in which 10 Syrian women presented their different perspectives on the conflict. This event was supported by UN Women, the EU and various NGOs (Kvinna till Kvinna, WILPF, CARE, OXFAM and others) and one of its main messages for political decision-makers was that there can be no peace without the participation of women. In June, about 200 Syrian women of different political leanings currently residing in Syria and abroad as a result of the conflict gathered in Beirut (Lebanon) to discuss ways to promote women’s rights in the country. The event was part of an initiative supported by UN Women to develop a common framework for the women’s movement in Syria and also served as a space to identify priorities in the political, legislative, economic, social and security spheres. Created by around 30 Syrian women in Paris in October 2017, the Syrian Women’s Political Movement continued its work to act as a new opposition political movement. Its vision embraces the establishment of a democratic and pluralist state based on equality between men and women that has a

Constitution with a gender perspective, eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. The movement says that these changes cannot be carried out as long as Assad and other high officials of the regime remain in power. The movement, whose base is currently expanding inside and outside Syria, intends to bring a feminist vision to the peace process and to a future transition. This new platform demands 30% female representation in all areas of political decision-making and, specifically, in the delegations and negotiations that aim to define the future of Syria. At the end of 2017, Syrian women accounted for 15% of the members of the government and opposition delegations in negotiations in Geneva.

In his diplomatic efforts with different actors important to the development of the Syrian conflict, Staffan de Mistura said that the constitutional committee had to be inclusive, credible and balanced with at least 30% female representation. After he announced his resignation, some praised his efforts to promote a more inclusive peace process, with greater participation of women and young people.

The Gulf

Iran (nuclear programme)	
Negotiating actors	Iran, G5+1 (USA, France, United Kingdom, Russia and China plus Germany) ³ , EU
Third parties	UN
Relevant agreements	Joint Plan of Action (provisional agreement, 2013), Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015)

Summary:

Under scrutiny by the international community since 2002, the Iranian nuclear programme has become one of the main sources of tension between Iran and the West, particularly affecting Iran's relationship with the United States and Israel. After more than a decade of negotiations, and despite the fact that various proposals were made to resolve the conflict, the parties failed to reach an agreement and remained almost unchanged in their positions. The US, Israel and several European countries remained distrustful of Tehran and convinced of the military objectives of its atomic programme, whilst Iran continued to insist that its nuclear activities were strictly for civilian purposes and in conformance with international regulations. In this context, the Iranian atomic programme continued to develop whilst the UN Security Council, US and EU imposed sanctions on Iran and threats of military action were made, mainly by Israel. Iran's change of government in 2013 favoured substantive talks on nuclear issues, facilitated new rounds of negotiations and led to the signing of agreements aimed at halting the Iranian atomic programme in exchange for lifting the sanctions. Negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme have been met with resistance by Israel, certain countries such as Saudi Arabia and groups in the United States in a context marked by historical distrust, questions of sovereignty and national pride, disparate geopolitical and strategic interests, regional struggles and more.

The implementation of the agreement on the nuclear programme signed in 2015, after over a decade of negotiations, was questioned during the year after the US government decided to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Trump administration made the decision in May and reimposed the sanctions on Iran, stoking bilateral tension and prompting other countries involved in the agreement to guarantee its continuity. Washington's decision came despite the fact that all the quarterly reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued since the agreement was signed, including those published in 2018, confirmed that Iran was complying with the commitments made as part of the agreement.

In the early months of the year, the US tried to convince other countries that had signed the nuclear agreement, especially in Europe (the United Kingdom, Germany and France), of the need to make amendments to the agreement to guarantee inspections of Iran's military sites and penalise its ballistic missile programme, among other issues. However, the leaders of these countries tried to persuade the Trump administration of the importance of keeping the agreement. Indeed, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel approached the issue directly with the US president during their visits to the White House in April. Iran was also active in the diplomatic field. In January, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with his British, French and German counterparts and with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, who confirmed Europe's firm commitment to the agreement.

In April, the US and the three European countries that signed the agreement held a new round of talks to try to respond to Trump's apprehensions about it without breaking it. By then, US pressure had already intensified through an ultimatum and mutual threats between Tehran and Washington increased. Finally, the US decided to formally withdraw from the agreement on 8 May. UN Secretary-General António Guterres regretted the decision, saying that the JCPOA had been a great achievement for nuclear non-proliferation and regional and international peace and security. After Washington's announcement, the Iranian government sent a letter to Guterres confirming that it would continue to respect the agreement. The UN Secretary-General welcomed the decision, but also said that the Iranian authorities would need to consider several countries' concerns about activities that may contravene the restrictive measures established by UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which unanimously endorsed and appropriated the JCPOA in 2015. In his reports to the UN Security Council in June and December, Guterres detailed some of the concerning matters, including allegations of weapon deliveries to the Houthis in the conflict in Yemen, armed groups in Bahrain and armed groups in the Gaza Strip. Although in some of these cases the

3. After the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018, this group of countries was renamed the P4+1 by the media.

UN investigation found that the weapons were Iranian, it was unable to determine that the transfers had been made after January 2016, which would contravene the provisions of Resolution 2231. Israel also blasted Iran at the UN for its use of certain weapons in Syria and for missile tests that may violate Resolution 2231

After the Trump administration decided to back out of the deal, several analysts warned of the greater possibilities of a confrontation between Washington and Tehran. In the months that followed, the US and Iran raised the tone of their threats and made displays of force that only aggravated the hostile atmosphere. The US government reinstated the pre-agreement sanctions and also announced new penalties for over 700 Iranian individuals throughout the year. Iran warned in June that it was taking preparatory steps to increase its uranium enrichment capacity should the agreement collapse. It also warned that its forces could close the strategic Strait of Hormuz if oil exports were blocked and conducted massive military exercises in the Persian Gulf in August, including ballistic missile tests. Tehran also decided to take the case to the International Court of Justice, which ruled in its favour regarding humanitarian sanctions in October. According to specialised agencies, US sanctions could have a very severe impact on the Iranian economy. **Alongside this dynamic of growing tension, other countries that had signed the agreement promoted several initiatives to try to guarantee its continuity.** The E3 (United Kingdom, France and Germany) and Mogherini regretted Trump's announcement of US withdrawal from the deal when he made it in May. Experts of the so-called P4 + 1 (previously the P5 + 1, and now composed of the United Kingdom, France, Russia and China plus Germany) held a technical meeting in Tehran in June and a ministerial meeting in Vienna in July and expressed support for its implementation. Notably, the EU was particularly concerned about the possible consequences of Washington's decision on European investments in Iran.

Yemen	
Negotiating actors	Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansarallah
Third parties	UN, Kuwait, Oman
Relevant agreements	Stockholm Agreement (2018)

Summary:

The source of several conflicts in recent decades, Yemen began a difficult transition in 2011 after the revolts that forced Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down as president after more than 30 years in office. The eventful aftermath led to a rebellion by Houthi forces and former President Saleh against the transitional government presided over by Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was forced to flee in early 2015. In March 2015, an international coalition led by Saudi Arabia decided to intervene militarily in the country in support of the deposed government. Since then, levels of

violence in the conflict have escalated. Given this turn of events, the United Nations, which has been involved in the country since the beginning of the transition, has tried to promote a political solution to the conflict, joined by some regional and international actors. Despite these initiatives, the meetings were unsuccessful and the talks have been at an impasse since mid-2016. It was not until late 2018 that meetings between the parties resumed, arousing cautious expectations about the possibilities of a political solution to the conflict. The hostilities have significantly worsened the security and humanitarian situation in the country.

In late 2018, some expectations were raised about the possibilities of a negotiated solution to the armed conflict in Yemen, after months of frustrated attempts to hold a round of talks between the government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the Houthis/Ansarallah at the request of the UN. **These meetings between the parties, the first since the breakdown of negotiating efforts in 2016, took place in December in Sweden, led to agreements on several key issues** and were considered a sign of commitment to a political solution to the conflict, which would continue to be the subject of debate between both sides. The meetings took place in an international context increasingly concerned about how the conflict in Yemen was developing, considering the intensification of violence during the year, the aggravation of the humanitarian crisis, the risk of famine for 14 million people in the country and greater misgivings regarding the policies of Saudi Arabia, the leader of the armed coalition supporting the Hadi government, in addition to other factors.

Efforts to resume the negotiations began after a new UN special envoy was appointed in early 2018. Martin Griffiths, a British diplomat and former executive director of the European Institute of Peace, took office in March and began holding a series of meetings with local and regional actors

in order to present a new framework for resuming the negotiations. He exerted these efforts amidst intense hostilities on different fronts and growing tension and alarm over predictions of increased fighting over the strategic port of Al Hudaydah, which was held by the Houthis and is the entry point for 80% of the goods to the country. **Griffiths said his priority was to avoid an open battle in Al Hudaydah due to the severe political and humanitarian consequences that could have and quickly resume the talks.** In July, the UN special envoy for Yemen presented the Hadi government, the Houthis and the international coalition led by Saudi Arabia with a plan that included UN supervision of Al Hudaydah and two other ports north of the city; a phased drawdown of the Houthi forces and the withdrawal of the forces supported by the United Arab Emirates from Al Hudaydah; and the reopening of the airport in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, among other measures. Both sides proposed changes and, after a series of meetings, Griffiths announced the holding of "consultations" in early September in Geneva. Given the impasse in the negotiations since 2016, the special envoy opted

for this approach instead of convening “peace talks” directly. His idea was that these consultations would provide an opportunity for the parties to discuss a framework for the negotiations and agree on some appropriate confidence-building measures. Notably, some specific humanitarian agreements had been reached in the previous months, such as the deal to allow the UN to conduct vaccinations against cholera with the cooperation of the Houthis and the United Arab Emirates in Al Hudaydah.

However, amidst mutual recriminations, these consultations in Geneva never took place. The meeting was cancelled after the Houthis announced that they would not travel to the Swiss city because of problems in agreeing on the conditions of the trip. The Houthi delegation intended to fly from Sana’a on a plane from Oman to the capital of that country, Muscat, transporting a group of wounded Houthis, but there was no agreement on the details of the procedure with the Saudi-led coalition, which controls the airspace. There was also no agreement on guarantees that the Houthi leaders participating in the consultations would be able to return to Yemen. This impasse led to a new intensification of hostilities around Al Hudaydah, but did not shut down the diplomatic channels. In the weeks that followed, Griffiths stepped up efforts to bring the parties to the table to talk and explicitly asked senior US officials to support the peace process in meetings with them in October by pressuring the Saudi-led coalition. At the time, Riyadh was already under fire for the impact of its war tactics on the Yemeni civilian population and for the news of the brutal murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

In late October, senior US officials proposed establishing a ceasefire, with some conditions and nuances. This message was not completely in tune with Griffiths’ approach, which did not connect the start of the consultations with a ceasefire to prevent the process from getting derailed. Some significant measures were announced in the weeks that followed, however. The Saudi-led coalition claimed that it had begun a “pause” in its offensive. Days later, the Houthis reported that the missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE had ceased and said they were ready for a wider truce. At the same time, the United States discouraged the submission of a resolution to the UN Security Council on the humanitarian situation in Yemen. The text demanded an end to the fighting around the port of Al Hudaydah and the establishment of a two-week deadline for the Houthis and the Saudi-led military coalition to remove all barriers hindering the entry of humanitarian aid. The United States and other countries such as China, Kazakhstan and Ethiopia argued that it was prudent to hold off on submitting the resolution while awaiting the results of the consultations promoted by the UN. It emerged that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had conducted a vigorous lobbying campaign at the time, threatening to boycott

the talks in Stockholm because they did not want a UN resolution limiting their opportunities for military action. The consultations were still preceded by other significant events, including an agreement with Saudi Arabia to evacuate injured Houthi combatants from Sana’a to Muscat as a confidence-building measure. Given the problems that had prevented the consultations from being held in September, the UN special envoy decided to accompany the Houthi delegation on its trip to Sweden in a plane chartered by Kuwait, one of the mediating countries. A day earlier, a group of 50 wounded Houthis was transferred to Oman

Finally, the consultations in Sweden took place between 6 and 13 December at Johannesburg Castle in the town of Rimbo, outside Stockholm. The parties’ delegations sat face-to-face in the opening session, but did not have direct contact on the other days. Griffiths’ team was in charge of contrasting the positions on the different topics with both groups. During the event’s closing ceremony, the leaders of both delegations, the Hadi government’s foreign minister, Khaled al-Yamani, and Mohamed Abdelsalam, on behalf of the Houthis, publicly joined hands in the company of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, which was considered a sign of the progress made during the consultations.

The process concluded with the Stockholm Agreement, which addressed three key issues. First, it established an immediate ceasefire in the strategic port city of Al Hudaydah and in the ports of Salif and Ras Issa. The combatants had to withdraw outside the city and port limits within two weeks, a ceasefire would be observed throughout the province, a coordination committee headed by the UN would be created to supervise the withdrawal and demining of the area and the UN would strengthen its presence in the area. Secondly, a mechanism was created for a massive prisoner exchange involving some 15,000 captives that was supposed to take place on 20 January 2019. Finally, a memorandum of understanding was signed on the city of Ta’iz, which considered the establishment of a joint committee involving both sides, the United Nations and a civil society representative. The parties also pledged to avoid any action, escalation or decisions that could affect the prospects of implementing the agreement. Although no agreements were announced, it emerged that during the meetings proposals were also made to reopen the Sana’a airport. Both sides also came closer to agreement on the creation of “humanitarian corridors” and local ceasefires to enable the delivery of aid. **The UN Secretary-General also confirmed that there had been meetings with Iran and Saudi Arabia and other regional actors, which did not participate directly in the consultations,** and described their role as “constructive” in creating conditions for the agreement. According to the Stockholm Agreement, the consultations will continue in January 2019 at a site to be agreed upon by the parties. By late 2018 the agreement had begun to be implemented, although problems of access for humanitarian aid persisted and both sides accused each other of violating the ceasefire.

Several analysts cited the challenges to any potential political solution to the Yemeni conflict. Some experts called attention to Griffiths' approach, which in addition to favouring "consultations", chose to focus the agenda first on confidence-building measures with a smaller format of actors involved in the meetings. This approach also carries the notable risk of simplifying a very complex conflict and the exclusion of other relevant actors in the short term (such as the Southern secessionist groups) may be a destabilising factor. It was also suggested that any political solution will require the consent of foreign actors, including the United Arab Emirates, Iran and especially Saudi Arabia. Other voices stressed the importance and need to involve other actors, including Yemeni women, in the negotiating process. Griffiths argued that the armed conflict between Houthis, the Hadi government and the Saudi-led coalition must first be halted and that it will be possible to start a peace process with the participation of other groups afterwards. The UN special envoy also defended the extra Track II diplomacy efforts alongside the official negotiations as a key factor for peacebuilding in Yemen and has held meetings with various Yemeni actors since the beginning of his time in office.

Gender, peace and security

During 2018, a group of Yemeni women promoted a series of initiatives to articulate their proposals for transforming the conflict and making their voices heard in formal spaces. Created in 2015 with the help of UN Women, the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security, which represents a diverse group of Yemeni women committed to ending violence in their country and convinced of the need to play a greater role in the negotiations, held meetings in Amman (Jordan) in February to plan response strategies in the different scenarios planned for Yemen. Another dozen Yemeni women participated in a working group led by UN Women, together with women from Syria and Iraq, to discuss how to promote peace in their respective countries. In March, **a total of 145 women, including more than 100 female Yemeni leaders, Nobel peace laureates and representatives of international organisations, sent a letter to the newly appointed UN special envoy asking him to take advantage of the opportunity to support the effective participation of Yemeni women in peacebuilding.**

The letter presented an overview of the current situation of women in Yemen, denouncing the significant rise in

gender violence after the conflict broke out in March 2015 and warning that there were 2,447 documented cases of women killed or injured between then until July 2017. It also stated that 76% of the more than two million internally displaced persons were women or minors and that child marriage had increased by 66% as a resource for many families facing poverty, given the severe economic deterioration in the country and other issues. The letter then asserted that despite the situation, Yemeni women had been unflagging in their efforts to achieve peace, especially at the community level, on issues such as local truces, the reintegration of child combatants and humanitarian aid management. The group of Yemeni women complained about the exclusion of women from initiatives promoted to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict in recent years and recommended prioritising roughly a dozen issues, including an immediate cessation of hostilities; the end of the siege of Ta'iz; the resumption of the peace negotiations and mechanisms to put an end

The year 2018 ended with certain expectations in Yemen, following the agreement reached in Stockholm that established a ceasefire in the strategic port of Al Hudaydah

to child recruitment, find a fair solution to the question of southern Yemen, pay public officials, release detainees, ensure the functioning of health and education services and support transitional justice with a gender approach. They also demanded support for effective female participation by adding gender experts to the delegations, holding regular consultations with leaders of women's organisations across the country and ensuring at least 30% female representation at all levels of the peace process, among other measures.

In this context, **the UN special envoy's office promoted the formation of the Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group**, in line with the international gender, peace and security agenda and with the results of the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen (2015), which demanded a minimum of 30% female participation in public positions and in negotiating delegations. Composed of eight women, the group reportedly aims to represent a variety of voices under the principles of neutrality, independence and professionalism. It is not intended to be a delegation for the negotiating process, but a group collaborating directly with the Gender, Peace and Security Unit of the special envoy's office to assist in the development of Griffiths' strategy to address the conflict. The Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group worked with Griffiths' office during the consultations in Sweden, an opportunity that its members took to meet with both delegations.

