

6. Peace negotiations in the Middle East

- The Middle East was the scene of seven processes of negotiation, dialogue and exploratory contacts, accounting for 14% of all such processes in the world in 2019.
- Difficulties in implementing the Stockholm Agreement persisted in Yemen, while Hadi's government and southern separatist forces signed another accord, the Riyadh Agreement, to de-escalate the conflict within the anti-Houthi side.
- Negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis remained stagnant in 2019, although international discussions on formulas for conflict resolution were maintained.
- Obstacles to the reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah continued in 2019, though some rapprochement was observed at the end of the year.
- The ceasefire agreements and negotiations on the conflict in Syria continued to be characterised by the prominence and influence of regional and international actors involved in the dispute.
- Women's organisations and feminist groups in the region continued to demand greater participation in formal negotiations and made specific proposals to deal with the conflicts they face.

This chapter studies the main peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East during 2019. 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 2019.

Table 6.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2019

Peace processes and negotiations	Negotiating actors	Third parties
Iran (northwest)**	Government, Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties (umbrella organisation for Kurdish groups that includes the Komala and KDP factions)	Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF)
Iran (nuclear programme)	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China, plus Germany), EU	UN, France, Japan, Oman
Iraq**	Various types of political actors	UNAMI
Israel-Palestine	Israeli government, Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas, Islamic Jihad	Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), France, Egypt, Russia, Oman
Palestine	Hamas, Fatah	Egypt, Qatar
Syria	Government, political and armed opposition groups	UN, EU, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran
Yemen	Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansar Allah South Transitional Council (STC), Saudi Arabia	UN, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia

* The peace negotiations in bold type are described in the second section of the chapter.

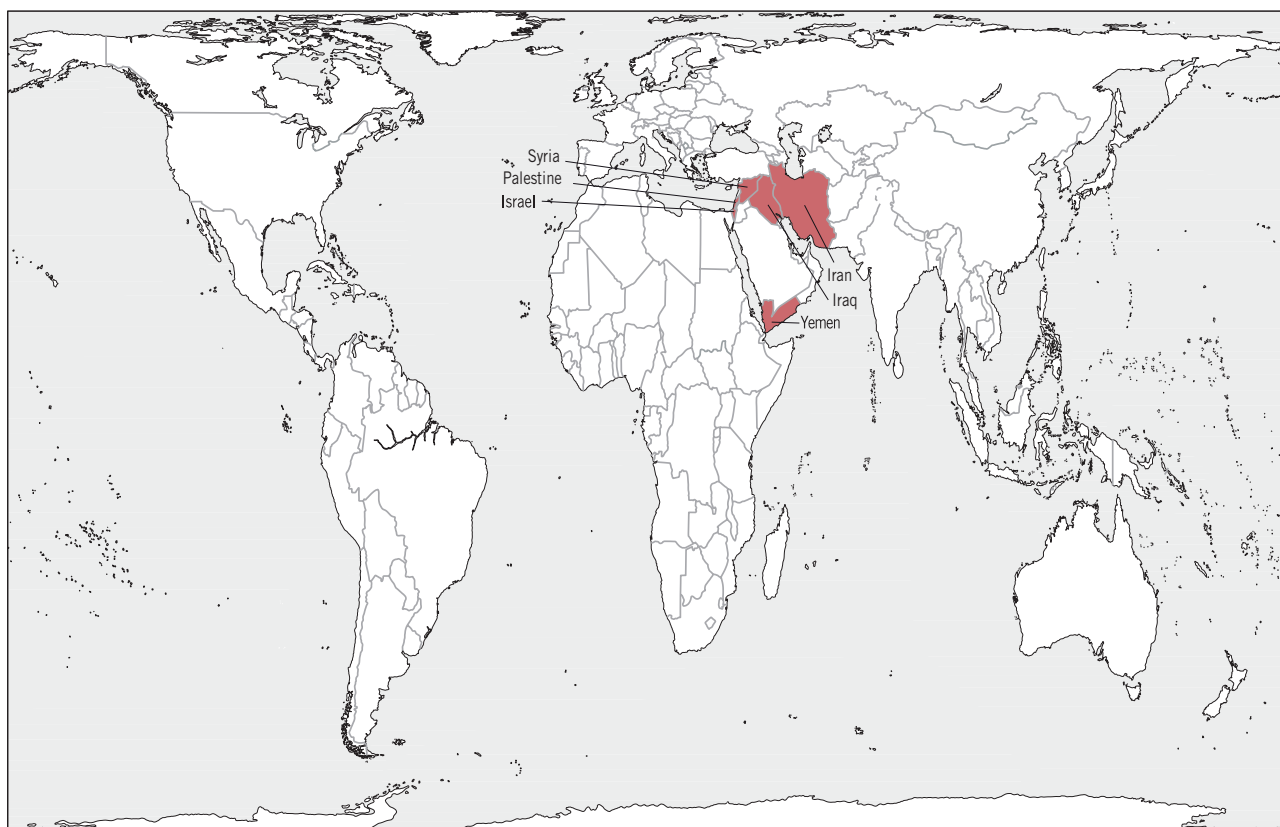
** Exploratory contacts

6.1. Peace negotiations in 2019: Regional trends

This chapter analyses seven processes of negotiation, dialogue and exploratory contacts that took place in the Middle East in 2019, two more than the previous year and accounting for 14% of all peace processes identified worldwide. Three of these negotiations were linked to armed conflicts: Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The other four processes were related to crisis situations. One was connected to the struggle between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah and another to

tensions around the Iranian nuclear programme, while two other exploratory and relatively shaky processes were linked to the crisis in Iraq, involving anti-government protests and tension in northwestern Iran linked to political and armed opposition by Kurdish actors. With the exception of the intra-Palestinian dispute, which is internal, the rest of the processes were linked to internationalised internal contexts (armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen and tensions in

Map 6.1. Peace negotiations in the Middle East in 2019



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2019

Iraq and northwestern Iran) or international contexts (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and tension over the Iranian nuclear programme). Four of the analysed processes were located in the Mashreq (Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Palestine and Syria) and three were in the Gulf subregion (Yemen and the two involving Iran).

All the various negotiating processes in the region enjoyed the roughly active participation of the respective governments, though according to the case sometimes indirectly. The

governments negotiated with various kinds of actors, including armed groups, political opposition organisations and the governments of other countries. Thus, for example, the Iranian government maintained contacts with the countries that remained faithful to the agreement on the nuclear programme signed in 2015 (France, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and Germany, known as the “P4+1” group) and stepped up pressure on those states to help to soften the blow of US sanctions imposed on Iran after Washington abandoned the deal in 2018. In Yemen, the internationally recognised government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, which controls part of the country, participated in negotiations that involved armed groups and political actors. During the year, negotiations continued for the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement signed in late 2018 by

the Hadi government and the group known as the Houthis, also called Ansar Allah. At the same time, in September 2019, the Hadi government was involved in another negotiating channel with southern separatist groups gathered under the umbrella of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) as part of a process that sought to avoid a confrontation within the anti-Houthi side.

The interests of the parties to the Israel-Palestine conflict were still represented by the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA), although the process remained deadlocked during 2019, as in recent years. The meetings with the most tangible results in the dynamics of the conflict were informal and non-direct. Held between the Israeli government and the Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, they focused on ceasefire agreements in the face of escalating direct violence during the year. The PA and Hamas participated in the internal

process in Palestine, as in recent years they have tried unsuccessfully to overcome the intra-Palestinian crisis that has been going on since 2006 and has prevented the formation of a unity government. The Syrian government also maintained its participation in both the UN-led Geneva process and the Russian-led Astana/Nur-Sultan process. However, it should be noted that the Syrian president expressly voiced his preference

The peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2019 accounted for 14% of all cases around the world and were linked to three armed conflicts and four crisis scenarios

for the Moscow-led process and made statements that questioned Damascus' commitment to the Geneva process. All the while, the regime remained committed to a military solution. As for the other actors involved in the negotiations, the high-level processes related to Syria continued to be characterised by the weakness of the opposition delegations due to their lack of influence over the actors on the ground, among other factors, as well as the exclusion of some key actors, such as the Kurdish group YPG, which is banned by Turkey for its relationship with the PKK.

There was a regional and international dimension to most of the armed conflicts and crises that were subject to negotiations in the Middle East, which resulted in a **significant role for external actors in the development and dynamics of the processes analysed**. One of the most emblematic examples continued to be Syria, where the Turkish ban on Syrian Kurdish actors was observed, as was the direct involvement of actors such as the United States, Russia and Turkey in the negotiations to establish "safe zones" or "de-escalation zones" in their areas of influence on Syrian soil. The establishment of the Astana/Nur-Sultan process has been perceived as an attempt to produce a negotiating scheme more favourable to the interests of some of the foreign actors supporting different sides in the conflict in Syria (Russia and Iran, who support the Syrian regime, and Turkey, which provides key support for some opposition groups), which also provides them with a space to manage their own strategic differences. In this context, some analysts called attention to attempts to replicate the "Astana model" outside the Middle East, particularly in Libya, where Moscow and Ankara also support opposing factions.¹

Syria was an example of a negotiating process directly influenced by the projection of regional and international interests in the conflict

Another illustrative case of regional and international influence was posed by Yemen, taking into account Saudi Arabia's prominent role as leader of the international military coalition that intervened in 2015 in support of the Hadi government and the projection of both the regional dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the growing tension between the United States and Iran into the Yemeni conflict. Thus, Saudi Arabia engaged in indirect contacts with the Houthis in 2019 to favour de-escalation in the border area during a war that included several attacks in Saudi territory, for which Riyadh and Washington held Iran responsible. Riyadh also promoted negotiations between the Hadi government and southern separatist groups that resulted in the signing of an agreement aimed at preventing an internal war on the anti-Houthi side. In this sense, Saudi Arabia is an example of an actor that acts as a negotiator and as a party in complex negotiating processes with several overlapping

channels and in which regional and/or international actors operate as supporters of some of the warring parties. This same reflection applies to the role of Russia and Iran with respect to Syria, since both countries act as promoters of the Astana/Nur-Sultan process and are also decisive actors in supporting the Assad regime. Another emblematic example is the US role in the Palestinian-Israeli process. Throughout 2019, the Trump administration continued to announce a "definitive" plan to resolve the conflict, which remained undisclosed by the end of 2019, while simultaneously taking steps openly aligned with the interests of the Israeli government, such as ceasing to consider the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories as illegal and recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Syria's Golan Heights, occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Third parties were present in all the negotiating processes analysed in the Middle East. **The UN remained involved in most cases in the region through various formats, including through the figure of "special envoys" active in Yemen, Israel-Palestine and Syria.** The UN also participated in formats such as the Quartet for the Middle East, constituted to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and in efforts to monitor the commitments made by the parties after the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme was signed in 2015. Additionally, some countries in the region officiated as third parties, such as Egypt, due to their sway over Palestinian actors, and Kuwait, which was available to host negotiations linked to the Yemeni conflict. Meanwhile, **Oman emerged as a regional actor that could serve as a possible bridge between the US and Iran to promote de-escalation in the face of increased tension between both countries**, linked in part to the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme. Enjoying good relations with both the US and Iran, Oman made some efforts during moments of high tension between the parties in 2019. Oman, which acts primarily as a facilitator and not as a mediator in the negotiations, was also a third party in the contexts of Israel-Palestine and Yemen. From the second half of the year, it facilitated communication channels between the Houthis and Saudi representatives aimed at reducing hostilities between the parties in Yemen.

The negotiations in the Middle East addressed a wide variety of topics, though one of the recurring themes was the search for ceasefire agreements, as in previous years. This was true of the conflict in Israel-Palestine, where indirect agreements were reported between the Israeli government and the Palestinian groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad; in Yemen, where two of the central themes of the year included the difficulties in

1. See the summary on Libya in chapter 2 (Peace negotiations in Africa).

implementing the ceasefire in the port of Al Hudaydah established in the Stockholm Agreement (2018) and the attempts to guarantee a cessation of hostilities between the Hadi government and secessionist groups in the south in the second half of the year; and in Syria, where various actors were involved in attempts to establish a ceasefire or “safe zones”, though the dynamics of violence continued to prevail. Other significant issues on the negotiating agenda in the region were attempts to produce unity governments or integrate disputing factions, which happened in the negotiations in Yemen and Palestine; discussions about holding elections, as the case of Palestine illustrates; debates over preparing new constitutional texts, in Syria; and more specific issues, such as nuclear proliferation or the sanctions system, in the countries involved in the agreement on the Iranian atomic programme.

As for the development of the negotiations and peace processes in 2019, the situation in the region was not particularly encouraging, as in previous years. In general terms, the situation was characterised by dynamics of deadlock in the talks (like in Israel-Palestine), successive rounds of contacts or meetings between the parties without results or with very limited results in terms of agreements or the implementation of deals (like in Syria and in the negotiations between the Hadi government and the Houthis in Yemen to implement the Stockholm Agreement) and the parties’ direct and gradual drift from agreements made previously (as illustrated by the Iranian nuclear programme, with continuous violations of the deal by Iran in 2019, following Washington’s decision to distance itself from the agreement the previous year). **In this context, some dynamics aroused some positive expectations in at least three scenarios about the possibilities of fleshing out the political approach to these disputes, though they were limited and shrouded in scepticism.** The first such scenario was Palestine. Although the persistent disagreements between Hamas and Fatah in making headway in the reconciliation process continued to be evident, in late 2019 there were some signs of rapprochement in the parties’ positions regarding the need to hold elections. The rapprochement came in a Palestinian political context marked by the presentation of an initiative presented by eight Palestinian groups aimed at overcoming the deep divisions between Hamas and Fatah since 2007.

In the second scenario, Syria, the launch of a Constitutional Committee as part of the Geneva process, designed and supported by the powers promoting the Astana process, was presented as a milestone by bringing together representatives of the disputing parties in a direct dialogue for the first time in five years, as well as by including civil society representatives. However,

One of the recurring themes on the negotiating agenda in the Middle East continued to be the search for ceasefire agreements between actors involved in hostilities

The processes and negotiations in the Middle East continued to illustrate the efforts of women and feminist organisations in dealing with female exclusion from formal negotiating spaces

the initiative was developed amidst a sceptical climate due to various factors, including doubts about the Syrian regime’s level of commitment, divisions in the civil society delegation, weaknesses in the opposition delegation and the persistent commitment of various actors involved in the military dispute. Some key actors were also excluded, such as the YPG/YPJ, banned by Turkey. Yemen is the third scenario, since during the second half of the year and under the auspices of Saudi Arabia, the Hadi government and southern secessionist groups signed the Riyadh Agreement in order to curb the particularly bloody hostilities that the parties had engaged in since August 2019 and thereby avoid a new war, this time within the anti-Houthi side. The pact was hailed as an opportunity to generate a more inclusive peace process in tune with the complexity of the actors

in Yemen, given that the key points of the agreement include the formation of a unity government with an equal number of representatives from the north and the south and the inclusion of delegates from the southern zone in future rounds of negotiations promoted by the UN to address the conflict in the country. Nevertheless, the difficulties in implementing this agreement and the obstacles to making progress in achieving the provisions established in the Stockholm Agreement between the Hadi government and the Houthis led analysts to predict a complex path towards 2020.

With regard to the gender dimension of the peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East, the cases analysed continued to illustrate efforts to address the exclusion of women from formal negotiation spaces, a persistent phenomenon despite international frameworks that seek to promote their participation in these areas and initiatives promoted by women’s organisations that criticise women’s marginalisation and demand greater female participation. **Both in Yemen and in Syria, they continued to demand a 30% minimum threshold of participation for women in the negotiating processes.**

In this regard, it should be noted that the Constitutional Committee created as part of the Geneva process in order to discuss a new Constitution for Syria enjoyed nearly 30% female participation. In Syria and Yemen, the mechanisms created at the behest of the UN special envoys also continued to operate in order to ensure female participation in the processes beyond their involvement in the negotiating tables. Thus, Yemeni technical advisors participating in the Technical Advisory Group carried out various activities during the year and the Syrian Women’s Advisory Group also remained active.

In addition, various initiatives promoted by civil society and supported by international NGOs and United Nations agencies facilitated meetings between

women and gave visibility to the proposals of women's organisations and feminist groups on the future of their countries and ways to transform conflicts that affected them. Thus, for example, Yemeni women held meetings in which they discussed their role in peacebuilding, the necessary political and security agreements for Yemen and the priorities on the agenda for a potential transition. In Syria and Palestine, women put forward concrete proposals on reconstruction needs from a feminist perspective. In Syria, some women's organisations also made gender-specific recommendations for the creation of a new Constitution and for the safe, voluntary and sustainable return for people forcibly displaced by the conflict. In most of these contexts, women's and feminist organisations also continue to work to make gender dynamics visible in the conflicts and crises they face.

Beyond the contexts analysed in detail in the next section of this chapter, **there were two other cases in the region in which contacts of an exploratory nature and uncertain development occurred at the end of the year. The first such case was in Iraq, where some efforts were made to try to address internal tensions that encouraged massive anti-government protests in the last quarter of 2019.** The protests were internal, but they also had an anti-Tehran component and were severely repressed by pro-Iranian authorities and militias operating in Iraq, resulting in violence that killed at least 400 people. The UN mission in Iraq (UNAMI) intervened to try to mediate the conflict. Under the leadership of the diplomat Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, it proposed a road map that described the end of the violence as an immediate priority. The plan also included other measures such as the immediate release of detained protesters, an investigation into the excessive use of force in protests and the disappearance of protesters, electoral reforms and anti-corruption measures. At a later stage, other issues related to constitutional reforms and infrastructure legislation would be addressed. Although Hennis-Plasschaert got the plan supported by key actors such as the top Shia spiritual leader in the country, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, as well as by Washington, and met with Iraqi lawmakers to discuss the plan, the prospects for the initiative remained in doubt at the end of the year. All this happened amidst the political crisis that resulted in the resignation of the Iraqi prime minister and the impact of the escalation of tension between Washington and Tehran that resulted in serious acts of violence in Iraq at the end of the year.

The second case involved **the exploratory contacts established during 2019 between the Iranian government and Kurdish organisations.** The scope and continuity of these contacts is difficult to specify, since it was a series of secret meetings held in Oslo. According to media reports, the meetings were facilitated by the

Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) and were held at least twice in the Norwegian capital in May and June. The Kurdish delegation reportedly involved four representatives of an umbrella organisation called the Cooperation Centre of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties, created in 2018 in an attempt to circumvent divisions between Kurdish groups. Among them, there were delegates belonging to two of the three Komala factions (the Society of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan and the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan) and two other factions of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI) and Central Committee of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan). Meanwhile, the Iranian government delegation was reportedly headed by a veteran diplomat, Mohammad Kazem Sajjadpour, with experience as a representative of Iran before the UN delegation in Geneva, and by members of the Iranian security apparatus. According to media reports, Kurdish actors demanded that the Iranian delegation be led by a senior diplomat, taking into account the experience of former KDPI Secretary-General Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, who was assassinated in Vienna in 1989 after negotiating with Iranian representatives.

Meanwhile, the Iranian delegation reportedly demanded that the meetings be kept secret. Before news of the meetings was leaked by Kurdish actors, media outlets asked about the continuity of the contacts, such as whether a third round scheduled for August would be held. In a brief public statement in July, the Kurdish group platform involved in the meetings confirmed that they had met with international centres to find a peaceful solution to the Kurdish issue. The news about the meetings provoked critical and sceptical reactions from other Kurdish groups. This included questions about the representativeness of the participating Kurdish actors, since groups such as the Komala Communist faction and the PJAK, a branch of the PKK in Iran, were not involved in the initiative, according to media reports, as well as the limited information on what was discussed in the meetings. The Iranian government's alleged intention to divide Kurdish groups and to warn of possible partnerships with the US or other actors amidst growing tensions between Washington and Tehran and between regional powers was also noted. Others said that the mere fact that meetings took place was an admission of Kurdish actors as dialogue partners and implicitly recognised that the Iranian regime's repressive strategy against the country's Kurdish minority had failed. Kurdish sources participating in the meetings asserted that the process was a first step that could not be categorised as negotiations, although it emerged that the parties to the talks exchanged views on the guarantees of minority rights in the Iranian Constitution. The meetings may have taken place alongside periodic episodes of violence between Iranian security forces and Kurdish armed actors in the northwestern part of the country.²

2. See the summary on Iran (northwest) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2020! Report on conflicts, human rights and peace building*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2020.

6.2 Case study analysis

Mashreq

Israel-Palestine	
Negotiating actors	Israeli Government, Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas, Islamic Jihad
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 about 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.

As in recent years, the negotiations between Palestine and Israel remained at a deadlock in 2019, though international discussions continued on formulas for conflict resolution, mainly in view of the expectations of a (repeatedly postponed) peace deal for the region to be proposed by the government of Donald Trump and other initiatives from Washington. However, **the prospects for resuming meetings and reestablishing negotiations were thwarted by the positions and policies of the Israeli government, which aimed to further entrench the occupation and annex Palestinian territories, by the US decision to push a Middle Eastern agenda that was clearly favourable to Israeli interests, by the weakness of the Palestinian negotiating position and other international actors' lack of initiative in engaging more actively to find a solution to the conflict** and other factors. Thus, the most concrete mediation efforts in 2019 focused on restoring the ceasefire between Israel

and Palestinian actors in Gaza in the face of successive acts of violence reported during the year.³

Several times during 2019, Washington announced the publication of its anticipated peace plan for the Middle East, described by the US government as “the deal of the century”, promoted as the final plan to end the conflict, though its public presentation was repeatedly postponed. Led by Trump advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner (Director of Innovations at the White House), who is known for his pro-Israeli positions, the deal was first reported to be made public after the Israeli elections in April. It was later said that it would be revealed after Ramadan, and subsequently that it would be announced after the Israeli elections in September. By the end of the year, the plan had still not yet been released. After the two Israeli elections in 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to form a government, which forced a new election in 2020. To pave the way for the plan, **in 2019 Washington promoted an international conference called “Prosperity for peace” to publicise what is supposedly the economic component of the plan. In summary, it proposes promoting economic prosperity as a precursor to a definitive solution to the conflict.** Held in Bahrain in June, Kushner used the conference to suggest sending 50 billion dollars to the region, both to countries hosting the Palestinian refugee population, as an incentive for them to integrate Palestinian communities there, and to the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which would receive around 27.8 billion dollars in investments within 10 years. Although the conference was supposed to be an event to obtain support from Arab countries for the plan, his proposal aroused little interest and was criticised by some as an attempt at bribery. Likewise, its usefulness was questioned in the absence of a political approach to address the conflict. In his speech, Kushner hinted that the Arab Peace Initiative, promoted in 2002 by former Jordanian King Abdullah, was no longer viable. The day after the conference, Oman announced that it would open an embassy in Ramallah, which analysts interpreted as an attempt to strengthen its position as a diplomatic channel to facilitate contact between conflicting actors in the Middle East, considering Netanyahu’s unprecedented visit to Oman in 2018.

In 2019, the Trump administration continued to postpone the presentation of its proposal to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and took new steps favourable to Israel

In the months that followed, however, the prospects for a negotiating process were affected by Israeli policies, and particularly by Netanyahu’s controversial election campaign promises, including his declared intention to annex almost one third of the land occupied by Israel if reelected. Specifically, the Israeli leader presented a map that proposed expanding Israeli sovereignty to most of the Jordan Valley and the area north of the Dead Sea, which would leave the West Bank completely surrounded

3. See the summary on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2020! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2020.

and cut Palestinian territory off from Jordan. Netanyahu also proposed annexing the Israeli settlements located in the Palestinian city of Hebron. He claimed that the country had not had an opportunity of this kind since the 1967 war and stressed that he would promote the proposal in maximum coordination with Trump. The proposal was openly rejected by the Palestinian Authority, the Arab League and other international actors, such as Russia, Turkey, the EU and the United Nations. Veteran Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said that it would eliminate any possibility of achieving peace between Palestinians and Israelis, while Saudi Arabia, which has exhibited greater understanding with Israel in recent years due to their common animosity towards Iran, said that the proposal was a dangerous form of escalation against the Palestinian people. Days after the announcement, Netanyahu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi for the third time in 2019. Putin reportedly warned Netanyahu about his proposal's impact on increasing regional tensions and on the possibilities of achieving peace between Arabs and Israelis.

The most concrete mediation efforts in 2019 focused on restoring the ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian actors in Gaza

In this context, **the decision made by the Trump administration in November to stop considering Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territory illegal helped to strain the atmosphere and hamper the possibilities of dialogue.** The US announcement encouraged protests in various Palestinian cities and, like Netanyahu's promises, was criticised by various international actors. This decision by Washington, clearly aligned with Israeli interests, was joined by other measures promoted by the Trump administration in favour of Israel in previous years, such as the decision to recognise the capital of Jerusalem and move the US embassy there from Tel Aviv, the suspension of aid to the UN agency for the Palestinian refugee population (UNRWA) and, in March 2019, the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights, occupied since the 1967 war. In this context, the Palestinian authorities refused to recognise the US as a mediator in the conflict. The new PA government established in 2019 expressed its willingness to negotiate with Israel, but as part of a process under the auspices of Moscow and the international community. Palestinian authorities also participated in initiatives to resume the old negotiating terms of the peace process during the year, including a meeting between Arab countries and the EU held in Ireland and a meeting between the Arab League and the EU in Egypt, both in February.

Thus, throughout 2019, the mediation efforts with the most tangible impact on the ground were deployed by Egypt and by the UN envoy for the Middle East, Nikolai Madlenov, to try to restore the ceasefire between Israel, on the one hand, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad, on the other. These indirect and informal contacts mainly

resulted in the suspension of hostilities, the reopening of border crossings and the restoration of the fishing area in waters around Gaza, although the agreements were continuously violated. Some economic agreements were also reached between Israelis and Palestinians, which also showed the Palestinian side's fragility and limited room to apply pressure. In February, the PA decided to reject the funds collected through Israeli taxation due to Israel's decision to withhold part of the resources earmarked for "families of Palestinian prisoners and martyrs".

However, amidst a severe Palestinian economic crisis, the PA and Israel decided to reactivate the joint committees established under the Paris Protocol, a mechanism that defines economic relations between Palestinians and Israelis. Days later, Israel began transferring funds to the PA, but withheld the line item that had prompted the blockade in February.

Gender, peace and security

Palestinian women's and feminist organisations and human rights NGOs continued their work in 2019, investigating and reporting the impacts of the Israeli conflict and occupation from a gender perspective. Despite the deadlock in the negotiations, local organisations also continued to promote greater female participation in decision-making areas and worked on developing some specific proposals, including ideas for rebuilding Gaza from the perspective of Palestinian women in a context of occupation and also of division between Hamas and Fatah. This project was promoted by the Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH), an NGO that also developed a guide during the year to promote women's participation in peace and security. During 2019, it also emerged that a second National Action Plan for the implementation of United Nations Resolution 1325 is expected to be drafted, with objectives similar to those of the first plan, valid for the 2017-2019 period. One such aim is the improvement of the participation of Palestinian women in local and international decision-making processes.⁴

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

4. For further information on this subject, see Pamela Urrutia Arestizábal, *Ocupación, conflicto y patriarcado: impactos en las mujeres palestinas y Mujeres, paz y Seguridad: aplicación, retos y límites en Palestina*, Escola de Cultura de Pau – Associació Hèlia, September-October 2019.

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.

As in previous years, **the difficulties in promoting a reconciliation process between Hamas and Fatah were again evident in 2019, despite the attempts of various stakeholders to mediate, and it was not until the end of the year that some rapprochement was observed** in the Palestinian factions' positions. The year got off to a bumpy start after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decided to ratify the Constitutional Supreme Court's ruling ordering the dissolution of the Palestinian Legislative Council (Parliament) in late December 2018, in which Hamas had a majority. In this context, in late January Abbas accepted the resignation of the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and moved to form a new government. This move was rejected by Hamas, but also by other Palestinian political groups who believed that Abbas's party, Fatah, was trying to centralise power at the expense of deeper intra-Palestinian division. Representatives of several Palestinian groups then met in Moscow in February to address a possible national reconciliation, but with no result. Shortly thereafter, in early March, the appointment of Mohammed Shtayyeh (Fatah) as the new Palestinian prime minister was announced, but Hamas questioned the legitimacy of the new government, arguing that it had not been ratified by the Palestinian Legislative Council. The Shtayyeh government assumed power in mid-April with a cabinet composed mostly of Fatah members. Shortly thereafter, Abbas announced the formation of a new Fatah delegation for talks with Hamas sponsored by Egypt. Egyptian representatives who traveled to Gaza to establish a truce and prevent a new escalation of violence between Israel and the Palestinian groups in Gaza took the opportunity to probe formulas aimed at intra-Palestinian reconciliation. Meanwhile, there was a series of incidents in the first half of the year that heightened the tension between the parties, including attacks on PA offices in Gaza, the withdrawal of PA officials from the Rafah border post between Gaza and Egypt, Hamas' seizure of the passage

between Gaza and Israel after expelling PA personnel and the PA's halt on the payment of salaries to around 5,000 employees, prisoners and relatives of Palestinians killed in Gaza due to their alleged links with Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

During the second half of the year, and especially in the final months, a relative rapprochement was observed between the Palestinian factions in a context marked by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's campaign promises to annex new Palestinian territories to Israel (September) and US positions that once again reinforced Israeli stances in the conflict, especially Washington's decision to no longer consider Israeli settlements built in the occupied Palestinian territories to be "illegal" (November). Thus, **in September eight Palestinian groups launched an initiative aimed at overcoming the deep division between Hamas and Fatah since 2007**. At a press conference in Gaza, the eight factions (Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestinian People's Party, the Palestinian National Initiative, the Palestinian Democratic Union, the General Popular Front and As-Sa'iqa) announced that they had sent copies of their proposal to the Palestinian president, the political head of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, the Egyptian authorities and the Arab League. The plan

An initiative promoted by eight Palestinian groups aimed at overcoming the deep divisions between Hamas and Fatah since 2007 was announced in September and the parties had found common ground to hold elections by the end of the year

suggests activating a PLO development committee in which representatives of all Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, would also participate as part of its temporary leadership. According to the plan, this committee would provide a consensual vision to form a transitional national government at the end of 2019 that would operate until new elections are held. Thus, the period to work effectively on reconciliation would extend from October 2019 to July 2020. At this stage, measures such as the release of political prisoners would be taken and the parties would be urged to avoid incendiary speeches and not take steps such as those that the PA has taken against Gaza

in the past, like salary cuts for officials. According to the plan, legislative, presidential, and Palestinian National Council elections will be held in mid-2020, following a review of the electoral laws. **The plan was framed and presented as a continuation of Egyptian efforts to mediate the dispute and, as reported, would start from the basis of some benchmarks present in previous reconciliation agreements** (in 2005, 2011 and 2017) that have not yet been implemented. The initiative also assumes recommendations to reconfigure the Palestinian National Council prepared in 2017 by the Beirut preparatory committee, in which all the PLO factions participated as observers, in addition to Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Hamas gave public support to the initiative promoted by these eight factions. Meanwhile, Fatah leaders said that no new plans were needed to end the division and that Palestinian organisations should focus on pressuring Hamas to comply with the 2017 agreement and particularly to promptly restore control of the Gaza Strip to the PA. Some Palestinian analysts said that this proposal was late in coming and believed that it had little chance of being implemented, but at the same time they thought that Fatah and Hamas could not ignore it. Regardless of how it was evaluated by the eight Palestinian factions, at the end of the year there was rapprochement about holding Palestinian elections (the last ones took place in 2006). In November, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh approved of the new elections called by the Palestinian president for 2020, with the understanding that the elections were not an end in themselves, but a way to navigate the current Palestinian crisis. Along these lines, he stressed the need for Abbas to call for a national dialogue to finish discussing the terms of the elections. Regardless of Hamas' approval, the media and analysts warned of other obstacles to the elections, since Abbas explained that the vote should take place in the West Bank and Gaza, but also in East Jerusalem, which in practice requires consent from Israel. In this regard, Haniyeh said that neither Fatah nor Hamas would accept East Jerusalem's exclusion from the elections.

Gender, peace and security

Palestinian women continued to mobilise to try to promote reconciliation between the Palestinian factions and to ensure that their skills and priorities in peace and security are taken into account.⁵ Thus, for example, during 2019 the Palestinian organisation MIFTAH presented an investigation on the reconstruction of Gaza from the perspective of women that underlines the importance of taking related resolutions such as Resolution 1325 into account and published a guide to promote female participation in peace efforts, with special emphasis on the search for intra-Palestinian reconciliation. This resource was intended to support the work of the WFAQ women's shadow committee. Created in 2016 to develop a movement to promote reconciliation and the end of the intra-Palestinian political division, the WFAQ committee is made up of women from Gaza and the West Bank that aims to influence both conflicting parties to foster rapprochement and expose the sufferings of those hit hardest by the division, especially women. The launch of a new Action Plan for Resolution 1325 was also planned. In line with the previous plan, it covers the period from 2017 to 2019 and aims to improve female participation in decision-making processes.

Syria	
Negotiating actors	Government, sectors of the political and armed opposition
Third parties	UN, EU, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran, International Syria Support Group (ISSG)
Relevant agreements	GGeneva 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)) ⁶

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 (2012), Lakhdar Brahimi (2012-2014), Staffan de Mistura (2014-2018) and Geir Pedersen (since 2018). Other initiatives have come from the EU, United States, Russia and leaders of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG). In 2015, the ISSG peace talks in Vienna -led by Washington and Moscow and in which twenty countries and international organizations participated- resulted in a peace plan for Syria that was endorsed by Security Council resolution 2254 the ONU. As of 2017, in parallel to the UN-led Geneva process - which has included intra-Syrian talks promoted by De Mistura- a new channel began: the Russian-backed Astana process, 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.

In line with what has been observed in recent years, ceasefire agreements and negotiations related to the conflict in Syria were characterised by the prominent role and influence of the regional and international actors involved, thereby reflecting its internationalisation and complexity. This dynamic was evident both in mostly unsuccessful attempts at a truce aimed at halting the hostilities and creating "safe zones", as well as in the high-level diplomatic processes promoted by the UN (the Geneva process) and by Russia (the Astana/Nur-Sultan process),⁷ which offered some progress towards the end of the year. In general terms, however, **as has happened since the beginning of the conflict, the armed actors involved remained committed to a military solution during the year and at the end of 2019, scepticism reigned regarding the prospects of a negotiated peace.**

In the first months of the year, the clashes and the regime's intense, Moscow-backed offensive against opposition groups led by the armed organisation Hayat Tahir al-Sham

5. Ibid.

6. 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.

7. The capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, was renamed Nur-Sultan in March 2019 in honor of the country's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

(HTS) on the northwestern front, particularly in Idlib, raised questions about the designation of the area as a “de-escalation area” in the agreement reached between Turkey and Russia in Sochi in September 2018. Ankara accused the Syrian government of boycotting the agreement. Although Turkey and Russia tried to discuss measures to reverse the escalation of violence and Moscow issued ceasefires, Russian forces continued with the attacks. The fragility of the “memorandum on stabilisation” reached in 2018 to curb the violence in this area was also evident in the many attacks on hospitals, even though they were identified as such as part of the mechanisms of de-escalation. Faced with the regime's offensive in northwestern Syria, Turkey became more actively involved in support of related armed groups halfway through the year. Thus, in September Ankara reported an attack on a Turkish convoy in Hama governorate as a violation of the 2018 Sochi agreement and threatened to defend itself. In September, Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that sought a ceasefire in Idlib. Moscow justified the decision by arguing that the resolution did not provide an exception for military operations against armed groups designated as terrorists by the UN.

On the northeastern front, meanwhile, negotiations between the US and Turkey began in January to establish what was termed a “safe zone” in the border area between Turkey and Syria, aimed at forcing the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces supported by Washington, the YPG, who lead the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Ankara argued that the creation of this “safe zone” was Turkey's right under the Adana Agreement signed with the Syrian government in 1998. This agreement would allow Syria to fight the PKK on Syrian soil and entitle Turkey to intervene militarily in Syria. Russia supported the proposal, while Bashar Assad's regime warned that renewing this agreement between Turkey and Syria depended on Ankara ceasing to support Syrian opposition groups and withdrawing its forces from northwestern Syria.

Contacts between Turkey and the US resulted in an agreement in June providing for the withdrawal of Kurdish forces to a future “safe zone” and the launch of joint patrols in September. However, the situation in the area changed dramatically in October, when the Trump administration decided to withdraw from Syria, leaving its Kurdish allies at Turkey's mercy. In early October, Ankara launched an intense armed offensive in the area. Ankara issued an ultimatum to the YPG to retreat to a strip 30 kilometres from the Turko-Syrian border. Meanwhile, Washington announced that it would keep forces in Syria to protect the oil fields under control of the SDF. Before their abandonment by the US, Kurdish forces approached the Syrian regime again with the intention of curbing the Turkish attack and engaged in negotiations with Russia, which led to the deployment of Russian and Syrian government forces in northeastern Syria for the first time in years. As part of an agreement between Putin and

Erdogan, Russia and Turkey began joint patrols in the area at the end of October. In mid-2018 the political arm of the SDF, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), had meetings with the Damascus regime, including a meeting between a delegation led by the leader Ilham Ehmed and a high representative of the regime, Ali Mamlouk, but these talks did not continue in part because of US objections to direct negotiations between Kurds and Damascus. The US may have influenced the Kurdish forces to attempt an agreement with Turkish-backed opposition groups, despite their involvement in the Afrin campaign, but they refused and subsequently supported Ankara's offensive. Following the US withdrawal, the SDC reportedly tried to negotiate with the government using its control of oil fields as a bargaining chip on the condition that Shia militias leave the country, which according to some analysts are regarded with increasing annoyance by Moscow.

The most significant activities of the high-level diplomatic processes established to seek a political solution to the Syrian conflict, at least formally, took place towards the end of the year. The process promoted by Russia, Turkey and Iran held some meetings during the year, involving the Syrian regime and some opposition groups. One such meeting took place at the Sochi resort in February, after which Moscow defended the inevitability of the military offensive against HTS in Idlib,

while another was held in Nur-Sultan in April, where the “guarantor countries of Astana” condemned the Trump administration's decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights in March, occupied since the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, in line with the criticism from the Syrian regime and the Arab League. These meetings in Sochi and Nur-Sultan did not yield concrete results regarding the negotiations over Syria and it was not until September that some developments occurred. Meeting in Ankara, the governments of **Turkey, Iran and Russia ratified their commitment to the Sochi agreement of September 2018 and signed a joint communiqué announcing the establishment of a Constitutional Committee as part of the Geneva process** for the purpose of drafting a new Constitution for Syria. The 14th meeting under this format, held in December, addressed the situation in Idlib (the target of an intense military offensive by Damascus and Moscow at the end of the year) and Israeli strikes in Syria, among other issues. At the same time, it emerged that Turkey and Russia were considering a model similar to that of Astana/Nur-Sultan for the conflict in Libya.

The Geneva process was led by the UN special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, following the resignation of Staffan de Mistura in late 2018, who had held the position since 2014. The Norwegian diplomat made his first visit to Syria in January and one month later announced the five objectives to which he wanted the Syrian, regional and international actors involved in the dispute to commit. These included: 1) to initiate and deepen a sustained dialogue with the Syrian government and opposition to build trust in order to establish a calm, safe and neutral

During 2019, various mostly unsuccessful initiatives were deployed to halt hostilities and reduce violence in Syria

environment; 2) to take more concrete action on people detained, disappeared and kidnapped through the commitment of the guarantors of the Astana/Nur-Sultan process, Syrian actors and others; 3) to involve a large number of Syrian people and to emphasise their role in the process; 4) to convene a credible, balanced and inclusive Constitutional Committee as soon as possible; and 5) to help different international actors to delve further in their own dialogue with a view to reaching a sustainable and internationally legitimate political agreement for the Syrian conflict. In the months that followed, Pedersen met with communities of refugees and internally displaced persons, with representatives of civil society and with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board, created during De Mistura's term of office. The UN special envoy also attended the meetings of the guarantors of Astana in April and May and met with Small Group on Syria, consisting of Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United States. In March, the UN and the EU also held the third international conference on the future of Syria and the region in Brussels.

In this context, the special envoy reported few results regarding prisoners (in July, 21 people arrested by the government and armed opposition groups were released simultaneously) and efforts in September that resulted in an agreement on forming the Constitutional Committee, considered the first political agreement between the disputing parties that should theoretically begin implementation of the road map adopted in 2012, which was also supported by UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in 2015. The idea of the Constitutional Committee was floated by Moscow during a meeting in Sochi in January 2018. **The Constitutional Committee consists of 150 people: 50 loyal to the Syrian regime, 50 members of the opposition, mostly from groups supported by Turkey and Saudi Arabia and 50 civil society representatives selected by the UN.** Nearly 30% of the commission's representatives are women. The civil society representatives caused much of the delay in forming the committee due to disagreements between regional powers about who should be a representative and objections to the people proposed by the UN, mainly by the Syrian regime. Each delegation included Kurdish representatives (there are seven in total in the commission), but there were no representatives from the SDF or YPG, as in previous rounds of the Geneva process, due to Turkey's veto over its links with the PKK. The opposition delegation brought together five dissident platforms and was led by Hadi al-Bahra. The pro-government group was headed by Ahmad Kuzbari. Pedersen acted as the supervisor of the process, while al-Bahra and Kuzbari served as co-chairs.

The Committee held its first round in Geneva in late October. A code of conduct was adopted, along with rules of procedure for the co-chairs, and each of the

delegations appointed 15 people to form a subcommittee responsible for preparing a draft of the Constitution that will be submitted to the committee for approval, ideally by consensus or by a majority of at least 75%. The Committee's first task was to define a common agenda that would allow the subcommittee to develop constitutional principles. However, the second round of contacts concluded in late November without agreement. The opposition accused the government delegation of rejecting its proposed agenda on at least five occasions and of attempting to address issues unrelated to constitutional reform.

In Syria, the creation of a Constitutional Committee was presented in 2019 as a milestone by representing the first direct dialogue between the parties in five years and by including civil society and 30% female participation, but various factors boosted scepticism about the outcome

The Constitutional Committee was presented as a milestone for committing the representatives of the warring parties to direct talks for the first time in five years, and for involving civil society in the negotiations for the first time. However, several factors boosted scepticism about its possible outcomes among analysts, diplomats and observers. One was the Syrian regime's increasing distance from the Geneva process as the formation of the committee drew near. In statements to the media, Bashar Assad said that Damascus

was not part of the negotiations, that the pro-government delegation represented its interests, but had no power to compel the government, and that its participation in the committee did not imply recognition of the other parties. Assad also expressed a clear preference for the Astana/Nur-Sultan process led by Russia. Another factor was the disagreement between civil society representatives and the weak opposition delegation, which has little influence on the ground and does not include key actors, such as the YPG. Media reports stressed that the opposition is under intense pressure to lower their demands. A third factor is the high threshold established for agreements in the committee, which makes it difficult to reach a consensus. Beyond these assessments of the committee's prospects, various analysts agreed that the Assad regime has little incentive to compromise and make concessions in a political process to address the conflict, taking its military strength into account. Thus, it has been suggested that the Syrian regime did not participate in any of the previous rounds of the Geneva process with a real intention to negotiate, but merely to show a formal commitment to a potential political agreement while intensifying its brutal military offensive.

However, some analysts stress that Russia is not in a position to take on the reconstruction of Syria after the conflict and that a potential Western commitment to provide financial support or lift sanctions depends on whether the Assad regime makes certain promises and progress with regard to the Geneva process. Thus, Pedersen acknowledged that the committee would not resolve the conflict alone, but was hopeful that it could open the door to a broader political process and that it be accompanied by some confidence-building measures, such as the release of women and children detained by

the parties. Other analysts pointed out that despite its flaws, the Geneva process is the only forum that currently brings together all the actors involved in the conflict.

Gender, peace and security

As mentioned above, the special envoy for Syria held several meetings with the Syrian Women's Advisory Board in 2019. At these meetings, the Syrian Women's Advisory Board echoed civil society organisations' demand that women should account for at least 30% of the participants in political decision-making on the future of Syria, including the Constitutional Committee. It also said that the constitutional process should guarantee and advance women's rights and noted the Syrian people's lack of confidence in the political process, mentioning the Geneva process in recent years. In this context, the Constitutional Committee was set up in late October with almost 30% female representatives. Pedersen said the UN had pressed to guarantee this minimum threshold of representation. Sabah al Hallak, of the Syrian Women's League, hailed it as a step forward to increase women's participation in formal political spaces. One of the members of the civil society delegation, the academic Samira Moubayed, said that any future democracy in Syria needed to recognise and respect the human rights of men and women and asserted that Syrian women would eventually press for 50% representation in all areas of political decision-making. Moubayed also warned that there is still a lack of awareness about the importance of having women in these spaces. Other prominent Syrian activists have stressed the issue, including Fadwa Mahmoud, of the Families for Freedom association. During an event held in 2019, the activist talked about her experience after being invited to participate in the advisory committee for negotiations attached to the High Negotiations Committee opposition platform in 2016 and her disappointment at the limited or non-existent role and influence of the 12 women participating, herself included, who had no chance to discuss her cause on prisoners and detainees in Syria.

Aside from formal high-level spaces, Syrian women continued to work for peace in a wide spectrum of fields. Their various initiatives included one created by the Syrian Women's Political Movement, established in 2017, to demand significant female participation in political processes. The organisation conducted a series of meetings between December 2018 and March 2019 in eight locations in Syria and with the diaspora, with the support of the international organisation WILPF. As a result of the meetings, the movement produced three documents with recommendations for sustainable peace in Syria in three main spheres: the Constitution, return and reconstruction.

The movement demands a democratic Constitution with a gender perspective and based on the values of freedom, dignity, participation and equality. It insists

that the voices of women must be considered both in the process and the content of the new Constitution and states that during the consultation process, a "feminist human rights manifesto" was created based on the principles to be promoted in the new Constitution, which focus on gender discrimination. The second document is a feminist road map to ensure a safe, voluntary and sustainable return for both refugees and internally displaced persons. The organisation denounces that the regime and its allies are using the issue of the displaced population's return as a negotiating instrument for narrow political and geostrategic interests and underlines that any return will only be possible as part of a political transition process with active transitional justice mechanisms and a neutral body that guarantees the returning people's safety. The third document is aimed at the challenge of rebuilding the country after nearly a decade of devastating armed conflict and asserts that the regime is using reconstruction to secure its material gains and to continue its war on the opposition by marginalising and excluding dissent. Therefore, reconstruction must prioritise public infrastructure and services, identify the needs and capabilities of men, women and young people, promote an active role for women and be subject to monitoring and accountability mechanisms, among other actions.

The Gulf

Iran (nuclear programme)	
Negotiating actors	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China plus Germany), EU
Third parties	UN, France, Japan, Oman
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 prospects for implementing the deal on the Iranian nuclear programme, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015, continued to deteriorate. While the process was affected by the US decision to withdraw from the agreement in 2018, **Tehran gradually distanced itself from some of the commitments it had made in the deal in 2019. As the US extended its policy of imposing unilateral sanctions against Iran, a series of incidents occurred in the Gulf area, in Yemen and in Iraq, among other places, that led to a volatile scenario dangerously supportive of military escalation between Washington and Tehran.** During the year, the Iranian regime tried to step up pressure on countries that remained committed to the deal after the United States' withdrawal, known as P4+1 (France, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and Germany)⁸ in order to alleviate the impact of the economic sanctions imposed by Washington. Thus, after the US withdrew exemptions that had until then allowed several countries to continue importing Iranian oil, Tehran issued a 60-day ultimatum in May and threatened to increase uranium enrichment. In July, it emerged that Iran had exceeded the enriched uranium reserves allowed by the JCPOA and a new ultimatum was issued, warning against fresh violations of the agreement. In the months that followed, these threats resulted in Iran lifting the limits on nuclear research and development and activating the centrifuges in the Fordow plant (south of Tehran). While early in the year the IAEA had confirmed Iran's compliance with what was agreed in the JCPOA (in line with previous evaluations since the agreement was signed) in November it warned that the country had accumulated more heavy water than the expected limit in the deal and complained that Tehran had prevented one of its inspectors from temporarily leaving the country.

The EU and the European countries involved in the agreement rejected Iran's successive ultimatums and at the end of the year warned of the possibility of activating the dispute resolution mechanism provided for in the JCPOA, which could lead to new sanctions on the Islamic Republic. Iran warned that if this mechanism were put in place, it would reconsider its commitments to the UN in nuclear matters. Steps were taken to implement a European instrument to facilitate trade with Iran to avoid US sanctions in 2019, called the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX). Promoted by France, the United Kingdom and Germany (E3), six other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) joined in November. However, in December Iran expressed frustration that no specific agreement had been produced under this mechanism. At the same time, throughout 2019 the US extended sanctions against the Islamic Republic, including against the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and in April Washington listed the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist organisation. In response, Tehran blacklisted the US Central Command for the Middle East and Central Asia (CENTCOM). **The Iranian government insisted that the US lift the sanctions as a precondition for future talks.**

During the year, mediation and facilitation efforts were attempted by various actors. Oman, which has good relations with both Washington and Tehran, tried to help to de-escalate the tension at critical times. For example, media outlets reported that the Omani foreign minister visited Iran shortly after the US secretary of state had a telephone conversation with the sultan of Oman in May. France also tried to promote a de-escalation agreement and encouraged rapprochement during the G-7 summit in Biarritz (August) and the UN General Assembly in New York (September). France suggested a schedule of steps to which Iran and the US should commit, but its prospects were slowed down by the outbreak of protests in Iran. In December, Japan, which had already tried to mediate in June, attempted to recover the French initiative and there was also an exchange of prisoners released by Iran and the US in Zurich.⁹ At the end of the year, however, the escalating tension between Tehran and Washington, which was mainly caused by the rise in Iranian attacks against US bases and interests in Iraq and by US attacks against pro-Iranian targets in Iraq, including an attack in Baghdad that claimed the life of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani in early January 2020, led analysts to warn of possible effects on the continuity of the JCPOA. These analysts also suggested ways to save the agreement, such as the intervention of a mutually acceptable third party, like Oman, to de-escalate the conflict, as well as more determined European involvement.¹⁰

Yemen	
Negotiating actors	Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansar Allah, Southern Transitional Council, Saudi Arabia
Third parties	UN, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia
Relevant agreements	Stockholm Agreement (2018), Riyadh Agreement (2019)

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

8. After the US withdrew from the pact in 2018, the group of countries that were previously known as "P5+1" (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany) became known as "P4+1".

9. International Crisis Group, *The Iran Nuclear Deal at Four: A Requiem?*, ICG, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 2010, 16 January 2020.

10. Ibid

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 and led to the signature of the Stockholm Agreement at the end of that year, 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.

The difficulties in implementing the Stockholm Agreement signed in December 2018 were evident throughout 2019. Although some events that encouraged some optimism about the prospects for a peace process in Yemen took place in the last quarter of the year, scepticism remained high at the end of the year due to the lack of progress in the promises made by the parties and to the uncertain impact of growing regional tensions on the country, and particularly the crisis between Iran and the US that sharpened significantly at the end of the year. **In the opening months of 2019, the problems in implementing the provisions of the Stockholm Agreement became clear.** Promoted by the UN, the agreement defined three issues: a ceasefire and demilitarisation of the port of Al Hudaydah and two other minor ports (Ras Issa and Saleef), a prisoner swap and the formation of a committee to de-escalate tension in the Ta'iz area. Inspired by the urgent need to avoid aggravating the humanitarian crisis in the country and to help to lift the blockade on Al Hudaydah, the agreement was conceived as a first step that could possibly lead to future negotiations to solve the Yemeni conflict. However, several analysts pointed out that the vague wording of the agreement influenced the parties to focus on its interpretation in the months that followed, especially with regard to Al Hudaydah.

The agreement gave rise to the formation and deployment of a truce monitoring force by the UN called the United Nations Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA). However, the internationally recognised government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the Houthis (Ansar Allah) continued to disagree about the security forces that would assume control of the area and the extent of the withdrawal. Amidst a climate of pressure on UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and efforts to publicly censor the Houthis, particularly from the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the diplomat asked the Houthis

to withdraw unilaterally from Al Hudaydah as a sign of goodwill. The Houthis agreed in May, which won them praise from both Griffiths and the head of the UNMHA, General Michael Anker Lollersgaard (Denmark). Anti-Houthi groups, however, said that they had only changed the name of some of their forces and still controlled the ports. This sparked a wave of accusations of bias against Griffiths from Hadi, who even temporarily refused to speak with the UN special envoy. According to some analysts, the Hadi government is suspicious of the agreement in general and fears that the UN approach legitimises the Houthis' territorial control.¹¹ Moreover, the Houthi withdrawal took place alongside an intensification of the group's attacks against Saudi Arabia, which reduced the potential positive impact of the withdrawal and further encouraged accusations that the Houthis are acting as pawns of Iran in the area. In fact, the US insisted during the year that it viewed all the Houthis' actions as backed by Iran.¹²

In this context, international pressure on Hadi prevented the derailment of the process and led to new talks between the UN special envoy and representatives of the Hadi government to discuss the implementation of the Stockholm Agreement. Meanwhile, the UAE, which provides key support for southern Yemeni forces and was about to launch a large-scale attack against the Houthis in Al Hudaydah in 2018, decided to withdraw the troops it maintained on Yemen's Red Sea coast and the heavy weapons it kept at Al Hudaydah in July. The scope of this withdrawal was considered key to reducing the immediate possibilities of a major battle in the port. In the following months, the negotiations on security in Al Hudaydah remained at a standstill due to the disagreements between Houthi representatives and the Hadi government in the Redeployment

Coordination Committee. The only progress reported involved the release of prisoners, for example, entailing the unconditional release of some 300 detainees by the Houthis in late September. At this time of the year, the dynamics in Yemen were determined by two main issues. Firstly, by the escalation of violence between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, particularly after an attack on Saudi oil facilities in September for which they claimed responsibility, but which Washington and Riyadh blamed on Iran. Secondly, by the intensification of disputes in the anti-Houthi side, which in August led to an open struggle over Aden between Hadi's forces and southern separatist groups united under the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The fighting went on for several months until the parties reached an agreement following mediation by Saudi Arabia.

11. International Crisis Group, *Saving the Stockholm Agreement and Averting a Regional Conflagration in Yemen*, ICG Middle East Report no.203, 18 July 2019.

12. See the summary on the armed conflict in Yemen in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2020! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2020.

After holding talks in Jeddah, **on 5 November the Hadi government and the STC signed the Riyadh Agreement in the Saudi capital, conceived as a formula to avoid a new war within the Yemeni armed conflict.** The key points of the agreement include the formation of a 24-member government based in Aden made up of representatives from the north and south in equal numbers, the inclusion of STC forces in Yemeni military and security structures and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from cities in the southern part of the country. The agreement also provides for the inclusion of STC delegates in government delegations in future rounds of talks promoted by the UN to define the country's political future. In November, Kuwait offered to host negotiations promoted by the United Nations. Some analysts said that this agreement would allow for a more inclusive peace process in greater tune with the complexity of the actors operating in Yemen, since the agreement fostered by the UN in December 2018 had only favoured a deal between two of the parties to the conflict.¹³ The UN special envoy hailed Saudi Arabia's initiative and the Riyadh Agreement as a fact that encouraged optimism and expectations about a Yemeni leadership more prone to concessions and peace. **Griffiths also highlighted the reduction in the levels of violence in the conflict following the Houthis' announcement on 20 September that they were suspending their attacks on Saudi Arabia and the reduction of Saudi attacks on Yemeni soil.** According to UN data, in the last two weeks of November there were 80% less air attacks in the country than in the previous two weeks and 48-hour periods without air strikes were identified for the first time since the escalation of violence in 2015.¹⁴ Oman, which has been trying to promote a communication channel between the Houthis and representatives of Riyadh since 2015, facilitated contacts between the parties in September in order to address specific issues, such as the end of Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia, the reopening of the Sana'a airport and the creation of a safe zone along the Yemeni-Saudi border area under Houthi control.

However, at the end of the year, the balance sheets and prospects were less optimistic. **In December, one year after its adoption, Griffiths said that the Stockholm Agreement had allowed for some humanitarian progress, but discussions about the demilitarisation of the port of Al Hudaydah persisted.** The diplomat also expressed his disappointment about the lack of progress in the exchange of prisoners, despite reports that 60 Houthis and 75 pro-government prisoners had been swapped in December. Even so, informal talks between Riyadh and the Houthis to de-escalate in the border area continued. Media outlets reported that implementation of the Riyadh Agreement was slow and that several deadlines had passed, including the one-month deadline set to form a government with the same number of northern and southern representatives, without the parties

reaching an agreement. Analysts stressed that the deadlines were ambitious and warned of the fragility of the security situation in southern Yemen. Thus, on 1 January 2020, spokesmen for the southern separatist movement announced their withdrawal from the joint committees responsible for implementing the agreement in protest against acts of violence reported in Shabwah governorate, which the STC and UAE blamed on the Islamist party Islah, a key player in the Hadi government. Tehran rejected the deal between the Hadi government and the STC, claiming that it promoted the Saudi occupation of Yemen. A few days after it was signed, Tehran recognised a senior Houthi representative as Yemen's ambassador to Iran. Some analysts said that this was intended to strengthen Tehran's relationship with the Houthis since, according to Iran's calculations, a unilateral Saudi withdrawal as a result of friction in the anti-Houthi camp would be preferable to a peace agreement led by Riyadh.

Gender, peace and security

Through various initiatives, Yemeni women claimed a role in resolving the conflict and defining the political future of their country. Thus, for example, early in the year, Yemeni activists took advantage of the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Yemen to demand to be heard. The occasion gave visibility to the recommendations made by six Yemeni human rights organisations gathered under the umbrella of the Yemeni Women's Solidarity Network, with the support of the international organisation WILPF, as revealed in December 2018. Their recommendations included the urgent need to improve humanitarian assistance and social services, end sexual and gender-based violence, halt arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, prevent the proliferation of weapons and explosives, stop the use of child soldiers and ensure significant participation in public and political life. In this regard, they insisted on a minimum threshold of 30% women, in line with the promises made after the National Dialogue Conference (2014). The UN-sponsored peace negotiations for Yemen that resulted in the Stockholm Agreement in December 2018 involved only one woman, Rana Ghanem, in the delegation of the Hadi government (representing 4% of all negotiators).

The group of Yemeni women who act as technical advisors to the UN special envoy for Yemen was also active in 2019, within the framework of the Technical Advisory Group, created in 2018. Meanwhile, meetings of Yemeni women were held with the intention of giving visibility to their views on the conflict and encourage their participation in the peace process. Thus, for example, in March, UN Women promoted a "Mediators for Peace" conference that brought together 100 Yemeni women

13. Peter Salisbury, *The Beginning of the End of Yemen's Civil War?*, Commentary, International Crisis Group, 5 November 2019.

14. OSESGY, *Briefing of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary General for Yemen to the Open Session of the UN Security Council*, 22 November 2019.

in Amman (Jordan) and was attended by Griffiths. During the two-day meeting, the participants discussed women's role in peacebuilding in Yemen, while the UN envoy stressed the need to ensure greater female representation in future formal talks. In late October, women from the Technical Advisory Group and another 20 women from Yemen and the diaspora met again in Amman as part of a negotiating process organised by the office of the UN special envoy to collect women's perspectives on the necessary political and security agreements in Yemen, as well as their priorities for the agenda of a potential transition.

Additionally, Yemeni women gathered in spaces facilitated by civil society organisations. Thus, for example, in July

several Yemeni leaders met in Amman in a five-day meeting to reflect on a feminist peace process in the country, in an event promoted by the Yemeni Peace Track Initiative and WILPF in collaboration with the Clingendael Institute, the Dutch Institute of International Relations, the NGO MADRE and the office of the UN special envoy. A total of 36 women from the north and south of the country and from the diaspora shared information, identified training needs, received tools to improve negotiating skills, shared concerns with diplomats and representatives of international agencies working in Yemen and reflected on issues such as opportunities for and obstacles to formal negotiations, lessons on local peace experiences and challenges on issues such as the release of prisoners and the issue of southern Yemen.