

6. Peace negotiations in the Middle East

- The Middle East was the scene of five cases of negotiation that accounted for 12.5% of all processes in the world in 2020.
- Problems in keeping the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme afloat persisted throughout the year amidst high tension between Washington and Tehran.
- In Yemen, there were mediation and facilitation initiatives to try to achieve a cessation of hostilities and attempts to implement prior agreements between the parties alongside constant escalations of violence.
- The chronic impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations persisted, with no prospects for dialogue after Netanyahu's plan to formalise the annexation of occupied territories and Trump's initiative for the region.
- The rejection of plans proposed by Israel and the US in 2020 led to rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas and an agreement to hold presidential and legislative elections, although the differences between the parties were once again evident by the end of the year.
- The complexity of the armed conflict in Syria had its correlation in the ceasefire and diplomatic initiatives, with a high role for regional and international actors in the negotiation schemes put in place.
- Women's groups in the region continued to demand greater participation in formal negotiations. In Syria and Yemen, they demanded ceasefires to reduce violence and face the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter studies the main peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East during 2020. 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 2020.

Table 6.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2020

Peace processes and negotiations	Negotiating actors	Third parties
Iran (nuclear programme)	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China, plus Germany), EU	UN
Israel-Palestine	Israeli government, Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas, Islamic Jihad	Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), Egypt, France
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

6.1. Peace negotiations in 2020: Regional trends

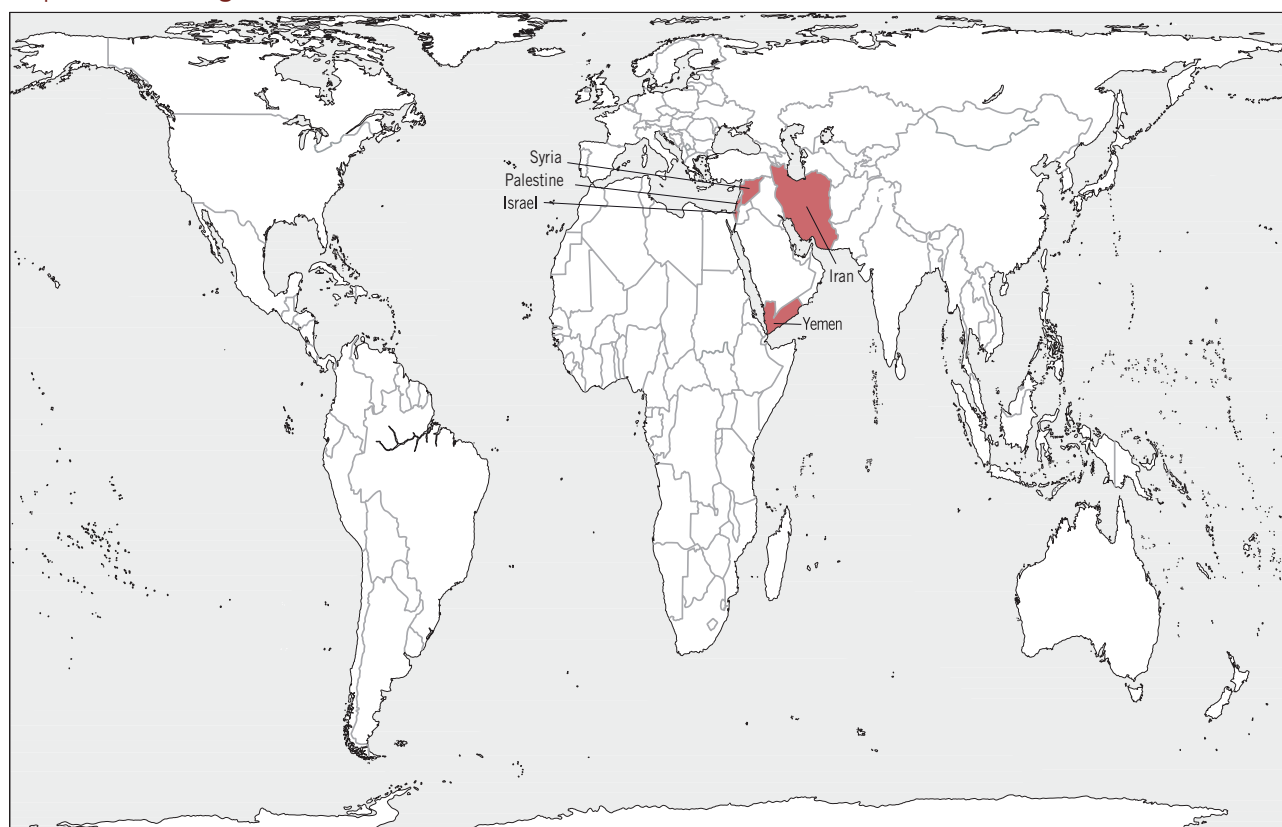
This chapter analyses five cases of negotiation that took place during 2020 in the Middle East (two cases less than the previous year), accounting for 12.5% of the total peace processes identified around the world. Three of these negotiations were linked to armed conflicts: Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The other three processes were related to socio-political crises. One refers to the conflict between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah and the second deals with the tension linked to the Iranian nuclear programme. Except for the intra-Palestinian dispute, which is internal in nature, the

rest of the cases were linked to internationalised internal contexts (the armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen) or international contexts (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the tension over the Iranian nuclear programme).¹ Three of the processes analysed referred to cases located in the Mashreq (Israel-Palestine, Palestine and Syria) and another two took place in the Gulf subregion (Yemen and Iran).

Regarding the nature of the actors involved in the various negotiation processes, **all cases in the region**

1. See the summaries of these cases in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2021! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

Map 6.1. Peace negotiations in the Middle East in 2020



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2020

involved the respective governments, more or less actively, depending on the case, and through various direct and indirect formats. The governments' dialogue took place with various types of actors, including armed groups, political opposition organisations and governments of other states. Thus, for example, the internationally recognised government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi in Yemen continued to be involved in the process sponsored by the UN to try to resolve the dispute with the Houthis (also known as Ansar Allah), an armed group that controls an important part of Yemeni territory. At the same time, during 2020 the Hadi government remained in contact with pro-independence sectors of the south grouped together under the Southern Transitional Council (STC) as part of a process facilitated by Saudi Arabia to resolve the divisions within the anti-Houthi camp. These last meetings led to the establishment of a new unity government at the end of the year that in practice should involve representatives of the STC in the process with the Houthis led by the UN.

In line with what happened the previous year, Iran maintained contact with the countries that continued to adhere to the agreement on the nuclear programme signed in 2015 (France, the United Kingdom, China,

Russia and Germany, known such as the "P4+1" group), after the Trump administration abandoned the deal in 2018. Although the negotiations in Israel-Palestine remained chronically stagnated, the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) maintained coordination in certain areas, such as security, as part of implementation of the Oslo accords. There was also occasional indirect contact between Israel and Palestinian actors to establish ceasefires after periods of escalation of violence. As for the intra-Palestinian dispute, the meetings involved the PA and Hamas, which controls and governs the Gaza Strip. Finally, in Syria, the government of Bashar Assad continued to favour a militarised approach, but remained linked to the Astana process, led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, and the UN-backed Geneva process, while maintaining some contact with Kurdish actors at the behest of Moscow.

For yet another year, Syria illustrated the prominent role that regional and international actors play in the evaluation and dynamics of some negotiating processes due to their influence over some of the parties to the conflict and the interests involved in supporting one side or the other. This was seen in the armed conflict in Syria, but also in other internationalised internal contexts, such as in Libya,² with the participation of a

Peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2020 accounted for 12.5% of the cases worldwide and were linked to three armed conflicts and two scenarios of socio-political crisis

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

great number of local, regional and international actors. In 2020, for example, Russia and Turkey once again played a key role in negotiating ceasefires in Syria. Regional and international influences on the dynamics of peace processes and negotiations were also seen in Yemen. In this case, the tensions between Iran, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the United States, on the other, weighed on Washington's decision to consider declaring the Houthis a terrorist group. Both, Riyadh and Washington, view the Houthis as proxies of Tehran. Another significant example was that of Israel-Palestine, and in particular the role of the United States, which during the Trump administration was openly and explicitly aligned with the interests and positions of the Israeli right. The presentation of Trump's plan for the region in January in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was another signal of this alignment. Described by the US administration as the "definitive peace plan" for the region, the Trump's plan served as a precedent and cover for Netanyahu and his controversial initiative to formally annex a third of the occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank, denounced by the PA and by multiple international actors. Although Netanyahu's plan was put on hold, in the second half of the year Washington's action was decisive for announcing the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and four Arab countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco).

The influence of regional and international actors in the dynamics and evolution of negotiating processes was especially evident in Syria, Yemen, and Israel-Palestine.

Third parties were present in all the cases analysed in the Middle East. The United Nations maintained its involvement in all cases in the region, except for the internal Palestinian dispute, through different mechanisms and formats. These included the role of the "special envoys" in Syria, Yemen and Israel-Palestine. In addition to its UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), the United Nations is also part of the so-called Quartet for the Middle East (also consisting of the EU, Russia and the US), a mechanism established in 2003 to coordinate international support for the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. The UN is also involved in following up on the commitments made following the adoption of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in 2015. At the same time, some countries in the region served as third parties. This was the case of Egypt, for example, both in the intra-Palestinian dispute, in which Cairo facilitated talks between Hamas and Fatah during 2020, and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which Egyptian authorities promoted truces at times of escalating violence and backed an international conference in 2021 to revive the negotiations. It was also the case of Oman, which has been playing a third-party role in Yemen. In 2020, Oman facilitated an agreement between the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, and the United States for a prisoner exchange.

The **agendas of the negotiations** in the Middle East varied in different contexts and addressed a wide variety of topics. However, and following the trend of recent years, **one of the main (and recurring) themes in several of the cases analysed was the search for ceasefire agreements.**

This took on special importance and notoriety in 2020 after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the call for a global ceasefire by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. He interpellated the different actors in armed conflicts to curb the violence and focus efforts on responding to the pandemic. The response to Guterres' appeal, made public on 26 March, was very limited in the region. Although some actors expressed their willingness to cease hostilities, acts of violence and violations of previously committed truces continued to be reported in practice. In Yemen, for example, Saudi

Arabia, the leader of the international military coalition supporting Hadi's government, announced a unilateral truce in April. However, the move was criticised by the Houthis, who demanded that the cessation of hostilities be part of a broader agreement including other measures such as an end to the land, sea and air blockade in the Yemeni territory controlled by the armed group. From this perspective, the group presented an alternative proposal to the UN special envoy. Throughout the year, he tried unsuccessfully to get the parties to commit to a joint declaration that included a commitment to a ceasefire throughout the country, in addition to other confidence-building measures and the launch of political talks.

In Syria, the ceasefire agreement reached in early March between Russia and Turkey for the Idlib region was mainly determined by their interests in the conflict, as it came before the UN Secretary-General's pandemic-related appeal. Although it was formally maintained during 2020, there were increasing periodic violations of the agreement as of mid-year. Only the SDF led by the Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces openly heeded the Secretary-General's call and decreed a suspension of military activities. Even so, sporadic clashes between the SDF and Turkish-backed groups continued, as well as incidents with ISIS. Egypt's mediation in Israel-Palestine favoured an informal truce between Israel and Palestinian groups in Gaza in February and the spread of the pandemic aided some cooperation between Israel and the PA, but the following months were characterised by an escalation of tension and new sporadic acts of violence in the face of plans to formalise the annexation of occupied Palestinian territories by Netanyahu's government. Other relevant issues on the negotiating agenda in the region were attempts to generate unity governments (an issue in the negotiations in Yemen), the discussions around the holding of elections (as illustrated by the case of Palestine), debates about preparation of new constitutional texts (in Syria) and more specific issues, such as nuclear proliferation

and the sanctions system, in countries involved in the agreement on Iran's atomic programme.

Regarding the **development of the peace negotiations, the general balance for 2020 continued in line with previous periods and was not encouraging regarding the dynamics of dialogue and the possibilities of a substantive peace.** As in previous years, dynamics of chronic deadlock in the negotiations prevailed (such as in Israel-Palestine), distancing the parties with respect to commitments they had made in previous agreements in contexts of increased tension (as illustrated by the problems with implementation in the Iranian nuclear programme). There were also successive rounds of contacts or meetings between parties without results or with very limited results and with logistical difficulties aggravated by COVID-19 (as in the case of the intra-Syrian negotiations sponsored by the UN), and announcements or ceasefire agreements that led to limited pauses in hostilities that were frequently violated. Even in some contexts in which some dynamics that could be described as progress were identified they demonstrated their fragility. Thus, for example, although Fatah and Hamas announced an agreement to hold presidential and legislative elections in 2021, which would be the first in 15 years, by late 2020 the problems and mistrust between the parties were once again evident due to the lack of agreement on the election schedule and the PA's decision to resume its security cooperation with Israel, which Hamas criticised. In Yemen, the agreement between Hadi's forces and southern separatists united under the STC to form a unity government announced at the end of 2020, after a year of mutual accusations and periodic clashes between both sides, was marred by criticism of its lack of inclusiveness (the new cabinet is made up only of men) and by a bomb attack at the Aden airport just as the new ministers landed in the city, revealing the persistent and serious security challenges in the country. In a parallel development, and **even though the hostilities remained active in Yemen, the Houthis and the Hadi government made headway in implementing one of the points of the Stockholm Agreement (2018) on prisoner exchanges:** in October, more than a thousand people were released in an event that was celebrated as the largest exchange of detainees since the violence escalated in the country in 2015.

Regarding the gender dimension, some of the peace processes and negotiations analysed in the Middle East continued to illustrate efforts to address the exclusion of women from formal negotiations. This phenomenon persists despite international frameworks that promote their participation in these areas and the initiatives promoted by women's organisations that denounce the marginalisation of women and demand a greater female presence in these spaces. In Yemen, women's groups praised the formation of a consensus government as

One of the key issues in the Middle East negotiating agenda was the search for ceasefire agreements, although there was a very limited response to the call for a global truce by the UN Secretary-General

part of negotiations sponsored by Saudi Arabia but denounced the marginalisation and discrimination of women despite their legitimate right to political participation. Yemeni women's groups stressed the precedent of the National Dialogue Conference of 2014, whose recommendations included the need to guarantee a 30% minimum level of female participation in all political decision-making spaces. They also recalled that the National Action Plan for Resolution 1325 approved in 2020 by the Hadi government guarantees a 30% minimum level of female representation in the peace negotiations. In Syria, the constitutional committee established in 2019 as part of the UN-backed Geneva process was considered progress because it had a larger share of women (28% of the delegates), but this body demonstrated a limited capacity for action throughout 2020 amidst a blockade aggravated by the pandemic and the difficulties in reaching a consensus on positions. As reported by the UN, contacts between the special envoy for Syria and the Syrian Women's Advisory Council continued throughout the year, which among other issues would have emphasised the need to address economic and humanitarian emergencies.

Along these lines, a common thread in the demands made by women from Syria and Yemen (both contexts affected by high-intensity armed conflicts, with thousands of deaths per year) was the insistence on an urgent ceasefire. This call, which they have been making recurrently in recent years, was linked in 2020 to the need to prioritise the humanitarian response and face the serious challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in both cases, characterised by the serious deterioration of health infrastructure and very serious civilian suffering as a result of years of violence. The Syrian and Yemeni women's demands also focused on the release of detainees and an end to the supply of weapons to the parties in conflict that fuels the cycle of violence. Syrian, Yemeni and also Palestinian women stressed the need to take the gender impacts of COVID-19 into account and to include women in making decisions and responding to the pandemic.

Finally, the development of national action plans to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 continued to be a mechanism to attempt to apply the commitments to the international agenda on women, peace and security and, specifically, those related to conflict prevention, transformation and resolution, at the local level. As such, the National Action Plan approved in Yemen, the first plan of its kind in the country, should be highlighted. Yemeni women's organisations welcomed its adoption, but criticised some aspects of its origin and content, stressing that although consultations did take place with civil society organisations during the drafting process, some of their main recommendations were not taken into account. There were also concerns about the lack of a budget and of mechanisms to guarantee implementation, the non-inclusion of some

key issues such as child marriage, the situation of female human rights activists and the elimination of discriminatory laws and practices. In Palestine, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the approval of UN Resolution 1325, the second National Action Plan was presented, which covers the period 2020-2023 and aims to promote the participation of Palestinian women in decision-making and peacebuilding processes, including intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

Netanyahu's plan to formalise the annexation of one third of the occupied territories, validated by Trump's proposal for the region, increased tension, sparked protests in Palestine and prompted international criticism

after continuous announcements and postponements during his term, Trump finally unveiled his plan to address the conflict, proclaimed as the “definitive peace plan” for the region, thereby formalising his support for the positions of the Israeli extreme right. Staging that support, the 180-page document was presented by the US president and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House. Trump's plan envisaged the recognition of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, rejected the right of return for the Palestinian refugee population and offered a form of Palestinian statehood with

a capital on the outskirts of Jerusalem in addition to economic investment and other measures. The plan was rejected by the Palestinian leadership and population and sparked protests.

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), Egypt, France
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.

In line with what has been observed in recent years, **the chronic impasse in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations persisted throughout 2020. The prospects for resumption were directly conditioned by the positioning of the Trump administration** in the United States, which was openly favourable to the interests of the Israeli government, while Israel continued with its policies of settlement expansion and de facto annexation of the occupied territories throughout the year. In January,

In the meantime, efforts continued to try to implement an informal truce around the Gaza Strip during the first quarter. As on other occasions, Egypt's mediation favoured an informal ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian groups from the Gaza Strip in February. In this context, the expansion of the COVID-19 pandemic in March promoted some cooperation between the PA and the Israeli government. Various people warned of the potential impact of the virus in the Gaza Strip, due to the fragility of its health infrastructure due to the attacks and the blockade imposed by Israel in recent years. Representatives of Hamas and the PA raised the need to release Palestinian prisoners to avoid their exposure to the virus and warned of Israel's responsibilities for the impact of the disease on the Palestinian population.

The informal truce in force since before the outbreak of the pandemic and the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire was called into question by a new escalation of tension encouraged by the plans of the new Israeli government led again by Netanyahu and formed in May following a coalition agreement between Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White party. **Netanyahu was determined to fulfil his electoral promise to formally annex one third of the occupied territories of the West Bank, including 235 settlements and most of the strategic and fertile Jordan Valley, bordering Jordan.** The prospect that the plan could begin to be implemented as of 1 July, as announced by Netanyahu, prompted new protests and acts of violence and received criticism from the Palestinian authorities. After denouncing the Israeli plan, validated by Trump's proposal for the region, the PA suspended cooperation agreements with Israel in May, while Hamas warned that it considered it a “declaration of war”.

At the international level, various people stressed that the move implied violating the basic principles of international law and undermined the prospects for a two-state solution (considered moribund or already completely impractical by many actors), warning that

it could aggravate the sufferings of the Palestinian population and further destabilise the region. The UN Secretary-General, the special envoy for peace in the Middle East and 50 UN human rights experts also spoke along these lines.³ Amid rumours about the schedule and about a possible gradual implementation of the plan, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, warned that any annexation of the occupied territories would be illegal. More than 1,000 European MPs from 25 countries signed a declaration demanding an EU response to the plan and several European countries that are members of the UN Security Council (France, Belgium, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Norway) jointly warned that they would not recognise the annexation. Several analysts argued for the need to put the policy announced by Netanyahu in context and consider it one that only makes a de facto apartheid situation more explicit.⁴ Jordan suggested that it could withdraw or downgrade the peace accord it signed with Israel in 1994 and some diplomats warned that this could affect Israel's rapprochement with Arab countries in recent years, the result of their common front against Iran as a regional adversary. As for the reactions in Palestinian territory, given the increase in acts of violence, fresh intervention by Egypt and the UN special envoy for the Middle East re-established the informal truce between Hamas and Israel in August.

In this context marked by international criticism, added to the internal divisions within the Israeli government over implementation of the plan, **Netanyahu's initiative was temporarily suspended and gave way to Washington-backed agreements to normalise Israel's relations with four Arab-majority countries during the second quarter.** A deal with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was announced in late August, followed by one in September with Bahrain and another in October with Sudan. In December, Morocco joined the list. In return, Washington proclaimed that it recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.⁵ The US and Israel insisted on presenting these agreements as a step towards peace in the region, even though in practice, they formalised existing relations between Israel and these states, which were not involved in direct hostilities with Israel in the past, with the exception of Sudan. Although the agreements were defended by these countries as a way to stop Netanyahu's annexation plan, the Israeli prime minister asserted that his proposal was still on the table. Palestinian protests against these agreements did not achieve strong political support in the Arab League, which in September failed to pass a condemnatory resolution. Amid rumours of a similar move by Saudi Arabia, Riyadh defended the Arab Peace Initiative as the basis for a solution.

In this context, during the last quarter the PA resumed security cooperation with Israel that had been suspended since May, which once again strained its relations with Hamas. The PA also underlined its willingness to resume peace talks after the inauguration of a new government in the United States and insisted on the importance of promoting an international peace conference. **The Palestinian president appealed to the UN Secretary-General to convene an international meeting during the first few months of 2021 for the purpose of launching a "genuine" peace process between Israelis and Palestinians.** Mahmoud Abbas asked António Guterres to work with the Quartet on the Middle East (the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN) and the UN Security Council to convene all concerned parties to the meeting. He also argued that peace and stability in the region would not be possible if the key issues of the conflict remained unresolved and in a context of persistent occupation. Abbas underlined the commitment to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which offered to normalise relations with Israel in exchange for an agreement for a Palestinian state and total withdrawal from the territories occupied since 1967. At the end of the year, the PA redoubled its diplomatic efforts. In December, Abbas travelled to Qatar and obtained explicit support for the Palestinian cause and also met with Vladimir Putin, who discussed Russia's willingness to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians as part of the Quartet. Likewise, the configuration of a joint committee to promote the international conference in 2021 was announced, made up of the PA, Jordan and Egypt. At the same time, the Israeli government continued its policies of building settlements, demolishing, and confiscating Palestinian homes, practices denounced by human rights groups and United Nations organisations. Meanwhile, the internal crisis in the Israeli government led to its dissolution in December and a new call for elections (the fourth in less than two years) scheduled for March 2021. Finally, the UN Special Coordinator for In the Middle East Peace Process, the Bulgarian national Nickolay Mladenov, ended his term of office in December, which he had held since 2015, and was succeeded by the Norwegian diplomat Tor Wennesland.

Gender, peace and security

At the urging of Palestinian and Israeli women, **a group of 40 international female leaders issued a statement condemning the Israeli government's intentions to formally annex one third of the Palestinian territories.** Referring to UN Resolution 1325 and the international Women, Peace and Security agenda, these leaders warned of the impact of Netanyahu's plan and Trump's

3. Associated Press, "UN chief urges Israel to back away from West Bank annexation", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2020; UN News, "UN Middle East peace envoy warns against unilateral action on all sides, as Israel threatens West Bank annexation", UN News, 20 May 2020; UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Israeli annexation of parts of the Palestinian West Bank would break international law – UN experts call on the international community to ensure accountability*, 16 June 2020.

4. For further information, see "A decisive moment? The importance of curbing the arms trade with Israel", Escola de Cultura de Pau, Centre Delàs, IDHC, July 2020.

5. See the summary on Morocco-Western Sahara in chapter 1 (Peace negotiations in Africa).

proposals for the region. The declaration was signed by figures such as Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Shirin Ebadi, Mairead Maguire and Jody Williams, as well as political figures such as Helen Clark, Mary Robinson, Radhika Coomaraswamy, Graça Machel, Navi Pillay and Margot Wallström.⁶

Also during 2020, Palestine presented the second edition of the National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325. The Palestinian government unveiled the new plan, which covers the period 2020-2023 and was developed with support from Norway, to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the approval of the emblematic resolution which gave way to the Women, Peace and Security agenda. One of its purposes is to promote the participation of Palestinian women in decision-making and in peacebuilding roles. Palestinian representatives from various organisations stressed the need for substantive implementation of the plan, associated with a system of monitoring and annual evaluations. In the meantime, Palestinian human rights organisations led by women continued to report and denounce the specific and disproportionate impacts of the policies of the Israeli occupation on Palestinian women. They also warned of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on Palestinian women and demanded a greater role for women in the response to the crisis.

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.

Even though the rejection to Israeli and US announcements and policies prompted rapprochement between Palestinian groups during 2020, by the end of the year obstacles to reconciliation between the parties

prevailed again. The plan to formally annex one third of the occupied territories announced by Netanyahu's government as part of the Israeli electoral campaign and reaffirmed after the formation of a new government in April, validated in turn by the "definitive peace plan" presented by the US at the beginning of the year, favoured rapprochement between Hamas and Fatah, which took place especially from the second half of the year.

Netanyahu's plan, which according to the Israeli prime minister was to be launched on 1 July, led to a joint conference of representatives of various Palestinian groups in Gaza, including Hamas and Fatah in late June in which they reaffirmed their unity to challenge the formal annexation of territories announced by Israel and to reject the Trump administration's plan. Days later, in early July in Ramallah, the Secretary-General of Fatah, Jibril Rajoub, and the deputy head of Hamas' political office, Saleh al-Arouri, held a new joint press conference emphasising common action against the plans of Israel and the US. Between 22 and 24 September, the two main Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, held reconciliation talks in Turkey. **After the meeting in Istanbul, an agreement was announced to hold legislative elections for the Central Council of the PLO and for the presidency of the PA,** although the groups remained divided on whether to hold them simultaneously, as preferred by Hamas, or separately, as advocated by Fatah, which wants the legislative elections to take place first. The meeting in Turkey also considered a comprehensive national dialogue in collaboration with all Palestinian groups.

New meetings took place in Cairo, Egypt, between 16 and 18 November. However, the PA's decision to re-establish security cooperation with Israel, which had been suspended since May in retaliation for the annexation plan announced by Netanyahu and in protest of the US initiative, again exposed the differences between the Palestinian groups. Hamas condemned the move, announced on 17 December, while the talks in Egypt were taking place, and asserted that the PA was ignoring national principles and values, in addition to the results of the conference of leaders of the different Palestinian factions. It also blasted the decision as a heavy blow to efforts to formulate a joint response to the annexation plans and to Trump's so-called "deal of the century" and stressed that it served to validate and justify the agreements to normalise relations with Israel announced since late August. Finally, the Islamist group warned that the PA's decision called into question and undermined the legitimacy of institutions such as the Palestinian National Council and its decision to halt cooperation with Israel.

Meanwhile, Fatah representatives, blamed the difficulties and failure of the talks with Hamas in Egypt on the Islamist group's insistence on holding the PLO legislative, presidential and council elections

6. MIFTAH, *Global call by women leaders against annexation and for peace*, 2 July 2020.

simultaneously. At the end of November, the Secretary-General of the Fatah Central Committee, Jibril Rajoub, argued that the resumption of security cooperation with Israel was an emergency measure that should not affect reconciliation efforts and ruled out interference or external pressure in the intra-Palestinian process. In December, Abbas travelled to Qatar in what was interpreted as an attempt to get the Qatari authorities to use their influence and pressure Hamas to reach an agreement on the elections. Meanwhile, an Egyptian delegation was deployed to Gaza to discuss the reconciliation process with Hamas and the informal truce with Israel. Media reports indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis had increased contact between mediators, Hamas and Israel. Finally, the results of a study by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research showed that only 11% of the Palestinians who responded were confident that the two Palestinian groups would reconcile in the short term.

Gender, peace and security

During 2020, the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs presented the second National Action Plan for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which covers the period 2020-2023 and aims to achieve greater female participation of women in all decision-making roles, including reconciliation efforts, as well as other issues. At the same time, civil society organisations continued promoting initiatives to favour a more substantive and equitable presence of women and young people in decision-making and in negotiations for intra-Palestinian reconciliation. They also warned of the specific impacts on women of the political division since 2007 and complained that despite constituting half of the population, women have been absent from formal spaces for national dialogue.

Syria	
Negotiating actors	Government, sectors of the political and armed opposition
Third parties	UN, EU, USA, Russia, Turkey, Iran
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 (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.

As in recent years, **the complexity of the armed conflict in Syria correlated with the ceasefire and diplomatic initiatives, with a prominent role for regional and international actors in the negotiating schemes put in place.** In the first few months of the year, attention was focused on the hostilities in northwestern Syria, following the decision of Bashar Assad's regime and Russia to intensify the armed campaign against the opposition stronghold of Idlib starting in late 2019. The violence in the area had severe impacts on the civilian population, with many fatalities and massive forced displacements—between December and March, almost one million people left their homes due to the conflict in this area. Previous agreements as part of the so-called “Astana process” had defined this area as a “demilitarised zone”, which is why Turkey accused Moscow of non-compliance with its commitments. Some humanitarian pauses in the fighting were negotiated during this period and in mid-January Russia and Turkey announced a ceasefire that was not observed, since ground clashes and air strikes in Damascus resumed after a few days. A rise in incidents involving Syrian forces and Turkish troops, with casualties from both sides, raised fears of an even greater escalation of violence in February. **In early March, however, Moscow and Ankara reached a new agreement, which resulted in an additional protocol to the Memorandum on Stabilisation of the “demilitarised zone” in Idlib.** Signed by Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin after a meeting in Moscow, the deal stipulated an interruption of military activities along the line of contact in the demilitarised zone from 6 March and a start to the deployment of joint Russian-Turkish patrols. As of this date, the air strikes in Idlib ceased, though they continued sporadically in other parts of the country. Though periodically violated, the truce was generally upheld, allowing some of population to return in March and the launch of joint Russian-Turkish patrols. The air strikes resumed in June, however, and at the end of the year the ceasefire was formally maintained, albeit amid periodic and increasing violations.

7. Both the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UN Security Council Resolution 2254 are benchmark documents for the negotiations, but have not been signed by the parties to the conflict.

Some analysts argued that the ceasefire agreement confirmed that decisions on ceasefires in Syria are taken bilaterally in practice, between Ankara and Moscow, rather than under the Astana format, which also includes Iran (the agreements on Idlib made in Sochi in September 2018 and on northeastern Syria in October 2019 were also negotiated mainly between Turkey and Russia).⁸ In April 2020, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey and Iran held a virtual meeting but did not issue a joint statement and the reports they presented after the meeting showed differences in priorities and interests among the parties. Thus, for example, Moscow underlined the need to lift sanctions against the Syrian regime and, in an implicit allusion to Ankara, to intensify efforts to separate opposition groups from jihadist militants such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib. Turkey, meanwhile, insisted that UN Resolution 2254 on Syria should be the benchmark for the political process in Syria, while Russia referred to it to vindicate Syrian sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁹ In July, a virtual meeting on Syria took place between the presidents of Iran, Turkey and Russia. The first such meeting since September 2019, it did not produce any major developments. However, Moscow took the opportunity to denounce the sanctions imposed by the US against the Syrian regime, following the entry into force in mid-June of the Caesar Act, which punishes individuals, entities and countries that negotiate with the government of Bashar Assad.

Regarding UN-backed initiatives, the UN special envoy for Syria insisted in March on the need to implement the UN Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire in the country in response to the pandemic. In late March, Geir Pedersen demanded a complete and immediate ceasefire for all of Syria, a massive release of prisoners and abducted people and full, sustained and unimpeded humanitarian access throughout the country. None of these requests were met in practice and only the SDF, led by the Kurdish YPG/YPJ forces, answered the call and decreed a suspension of military activities in March. Still, sporadic clashes involving the SDF and Turkish-backed groups were reported throughout the year, in addition to incidents with ISIS.

Regarding the UN-backed negotiating process, in 2020 the difficulties of the so-called "intra-Syrian talks" continued to become evident. The constitutional committee created in September 2019, which held two consecutive rounds that same year, only managed to meet

The complexity of the armed conflict in Syria correlated with the ceasefire and diplomatic initiatives, with a prominent role for regional and international actors in the negotiating schemes put in place

twice in 2020. The meetings were postponed several times due to the pandemic, but also owing to problems in reaching a consensus on the agenda. It was not until late August that the third round took place, in Geneva, with a limited group consisting of the constitutional committee in charge of drafting the proposal (made up of 45 people, 15 government representatives, 15 members of the opposition and 15 civil society activists). However, no progress was made on substantive issues due to the differences between the parties, nor was it possible to agree on topics for a future meeting. After facilitating an agreement between the two co-chairs of the committee (Ahmad Kuzbari, appointed by the Syrian government and Hadi al-Bahra, designated by the Syrian opposition's negotiating committee), Pedersen convened a fourth session in Geneva on 30 November, at which national foundations and principles would be discussed, as well as constitutional principles. The debate on these issues was expected to continue in a new, fifth session in January 2021. By the end of the year, no further details had been revealed about the outcome of the meeting in the Swiss capital. In the weeks leading up to the fourth round in Geneva, Pedersen took a series of trips, including to Ankara, Tehran and Moscow, to try to secure international support for the process and a conducive climate during the negotiations.

Meetings between the political wing of the SDF and the Syrian government also continued in 2020. A delegation of the Syrian Democratic Council met in Damascus with representatives of the regime to discuss the establishment of autonomous local administrations in the Kurdish-majority areas in the northeastern part of the country as part of a process mediated by Russia. However, in an interview with the International Crisis Group at the end of the year, the head of the SDF, Mazloum Kobani, publicly acknowledged the pessimism surrounding the possibilities of an agreement with the Syrian government due to the difficulties of obtaining commitments and guarantees.¹⁰ According to some analysts, a key point of dissent between the parties focuses on which military forces would ensure physical control of the northeastern area of Syria. In this context, Kobani was in favour of negotiating the region's status as part of a broader agreement including the entire country, with international guarantors. Regarding Turkey, the SDF leader implicitly recognised the persistence of hostilities in areas controlled by Syrian groups supported by Ankara and expressed his readiness for a total and unilateral truce if the US or

8. Charles Thépaut, "The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia", *Policy Watch* 3308, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 28 April 2020.
9. Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, No. 89, 22 April 2020, *Press Release Regarding the Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Astana Process; Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's video conference with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif and Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu*, 22 April 2020.
10. International Crisis Group, *The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria*, Commentary/ Middle East and North Africa, 25 November 2020.

Russia could get Turkish to commit to address violations against the civilian population in Afrin and to allow the return of the displaced Kurdish population. Starting with recognition of the strategic relations between the US and Turkey, Kobani showed his willingness to reach agreements with Ankara in which Washington acts as mediator and guarantor. Analysts highlighted that the prospects here are conditioned by the perception of weakness of the SDF after the announcement of the US withdrawal and by the policies that the new US government decides to implement in the region.

At the same time, there were reports of talks between Kurdish groups during the year, and specifically between the YPG and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which brings together various Kurdish opposition groups, aimed at promoting more inclusive governance in areas controlled by the SDF, in a process reportedly supported by the US and France. In October, the SDF issued an amnesty that benefited more than 600 Syrian ISIS prisoners not involved in blood crimes who had shown regret for joining the group.

Gender, peace and security

Syrian women continued to have very limited participation in formal negotiation spaces, despite their extensive work and multiple initiatives in peacebuilding and the search for truth and justice. The **constitutional committee established in late 2019 represented an increase in the levels of representation, reaching 28% female, including in the smallest body in charge of writing the proposal. However, the capacity to influence was constrained by its blockage during 2020** due to the pandemic and the difficulties in reaching a consensus on positions. The UN reported that the special envoy for Syria continued his contacts with the Syrian's Women Advisory Board (WAB) in 2020. Pedersen held consultations outside the constitutional committee meeting in Geneva in August, at which time the council reportedly emphasised the need for the political process to develop alongside improvement in the living conditions of the Syrian population. Along these lines, they expressed their concern about the health and security situation and the economic and humanitarian emergencies. The UN Secretary-General has praised these types of consultations, but emphasised that they cannot replace direct participation.

As part of the Brussels conference on Syria, some stressed the need to put Syrian women and their needs and rights at the centre of the response to the conflict, especially with the added crisis stemming from the coronavirus pandemic than has increased the risks

Faced with the extreme vulnerability of the Syrian population to COVID-19 after nine years of war, Syrian women insisted on a permanent ceasefire, the release of prisoners and an end to the provision of weapons to all sides

for women in other latitudes. Since the beginning of the pandemic, organisations led by women inside and outside Syria have emphasised the **extreme vulnerability of the population to COVID-19 due to the extensive destruction of health infrastructure after nine years of conflict and the lack of equipment and medical staff**. They also expressed concern about the repercussions on women's sexual and reproductive health and about the difficulties in adopting the minimum measures to prevent the spread of the virus among the displaced population living in overcrowded conditions, with hygiene problems and access to drinking water. In this context, **their demands focused on a permanent and nationwide ceasefire; the release of prisoners and abducted persons or, at least, access to medical assistance to detention centres; the suspension of the provision of arms to all sides; a gender-sensitive health and humanitarian response; and the immediate reopening of closed border crossings to facilitate access of aid, especially to areas especially affected by the humanitarian crisis, such as Idlib.**¹¹

The Gulf

Iran (nuclear programme)	
Negotiating actors	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China plus Germany), 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.

11. WILPF, *Centering Women, Peace and Security in Ceasefires*, WILPF-Women, Peace and Security Programme, mayo de 2020.

In line with the trend observed the previous year, **problems persisted in keeping the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme**, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), afloat during 2020, in a context marked by various factors. These included the abandonment of the deal by the United States in 2018 and its preference for a strategy of coercion and maximum pressure on Iran, the gradual distancing of the Islamic Republic from the commitments made under the agreement since 2019, a series of incidents that affected high-level Iranian infrastructure and scientists in 2020 and various acts of violence involving Iranian, US and Israeli forces in different parts of the Middle East that raised alarms about the potential for escalation between the parties.

Regarding the latter, it is worth noting the destabilising impact of the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a US attack in Iraq in January that led to retaliatory actions by Iran. Other acts of violence and skirmishes took place throughout 2020, mainly in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, which exposed the tension between the parties. In addition, a series of attacks and acts of sabotage were reported in July against infrastructure linked to the Iranian atomic programme, including the Natanz and Isfahan plants. In November, the assassination of the person in charge of the Iranian nuclear programme caused a special stir, an action in which Israeli forces may have participated, according to Tehran. At the same time, the Trump administration strengthened its policy of sanctions against Iran and approved a series of related measures throughout the year against people, companies, scientists, banks, transport and metal companies, fuel and electricity suppliers and others. According to the International Crisis Group, in a period of two and a half years (until December 2020) Washington had approved almost 1,500 unilateral sanctions against Iran, which had dramatic consequences for its economy. These sanctions were not only maintained, but intensified during 2020, even though Tehran asked the UN to promote lifting these restrictive measures to facilitate its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely affected the country. In fact, an estimated one million people had contracted the virus in Iran, with nearly 50,000 fatalities reported by the end of November.

At the same time, Iran continued to violate the agreement.

At the beginning of the year the three European states involved in the agreement (France, Germany and the United Kingdom, known as the E3 group) activated the provided dispute resolution mechanism in the face of detected breaches. Nevertheless, during a visit by the EU foreign policy representative to Tehran in February, the Iranian president insisted that his country was in compliance with the agreement and would continue to cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In June, an IAEA report found that Iran had continued to enrich and accumulate uranium above the limits allowed by the JCPOA and warned of Tehran's

lack of cooperation to access two sites where suspicious activities had been identified. The E3 countries urged Iran to cooperate with the IAEA, and in July the timeline for the conflict resolution mechanism was extended. In November, new information from the IAEA confirmed that Iran continued to maintain uranium reserves above the agreed thresholds and that the country had to provide explanations regarding sites where traces of nuclear activity had been identified.

In August, Washington tried unsuccessfully to reactivate the United Nations sanctions against Iran that had been in force before the 2015 nuclear programme agreement, a right reserved for the signatories of the agreement that the United States abandoned. The action generated debate within the UN Security Council and evidenced the disparity of positions between the US and the countries that signed the agreement, a situation that Tehran celebrated as a victory. In view of this reality and coinciding with the expiration of the UN arms embargo against Iran, the Trump administration approved new unilateral sanctions against the Islamic republic. At the end of the year, press reports generated some alarm by pointing out that Trump had considered military actions against Iran's main atomic facility, warning that the president's initiatives against the country could not be ruled out in the final days of his term. In this sense, in February the US Senate approved a regulation to prevent the president from launching any military action against Iran without authorisation from Congress.

In this context, at the end of the year, expectations rested on the changes that could take place after the new US government came to power. In remarks prior to his election as president, Joe Biden was in favour of resigning the JCPOA. In December, at their first meeting in a year, the foreign ministers of the countries that signed the agreement (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, China, Russia and Iran) were in favour of not establishing preconditions and welcomed a possible US return to the agreement. At the same time, in response to the assassination of a prominent Iranian nuclear scientist in an attack attributed to Israel in November, Iran's Parliament passed a law in December urging the government to enrich uranium to 20% (according to the JCPOA it should be kept below 4%) and to block the IAEA's access to the country if the sanctions against Iran were not lifted during the first few months of 2021.

Yemen	
Negotiating actors	Government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansar Allah, Southern Transitional Council, Saudi Arabia
Third parties	UN, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman
Relevant agreements	Stockholm Agreement (2018), Ryadh 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 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 redirecting the Yemeni armed conflict and its multiple dynamics of violence towards a political and negotiated path became apparent again in 2020. **Throughout the year, mediation and facilitation initiatives to achieve a cessation of hostilities and attempts to implement previous agreements between the parties competed with persistent escalations of violence, which aggravated the already dramatic situation of the Yemeni population and exacerbated their vulnerabilities amidst the pandemic.**¹² An analysis of the evolution of the negotiations requires consideration of the two main (but not the only) lines of confrontation affecting the country. First is the struggle between the Houthi forces and the government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, backed by the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition, in which the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also prominently participates, and other Yemeni actors that make up the anti-Houthi camp. Second is the dispute within the anti-Houthi camp, designated as a war within a war, which pits Hadi's forces against southern separatist sectors united under the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and supported by the UAE.

Regarding the first and main line, difficulties in achieving a wide-ranging ceasefire and in launching political talks persisted in 2020. Although some expectations were raised at the end of 2019 due to the relative reduction in violence and informal contacts between the Houthi forces and Riyadh, hostilities intensified in the first few months of 2020. Nevertheless, meetings to explore the implementation of confidence-building measures continued, including a meeting in February between representatives of the Hadi government and the Houthis and another meeting with Riyadh, in Jordan, in which

the terms of the prisoner exchange were discussed. These talks were blocked by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and by the upsurge in violence. The UN special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, said that all parties urgently need to accept the global ceasefire achieved by the UN Secretary-General to respond to the pandemic and to resume contact to find a political solution to the conflict. Although the Houthis, the Hadi government and Saudi Arabia were all in favour of a truce, in practice the clashes did not stop. **In April, Riyadh declared a unilateral truce potentially across the entire country, but the Houthis declined, arguing that a ceasefire should be part of a broader agreement** that would also end the maritime, land and air blockade in the parts of the country controlled by the armed group. Along these lines, the Houthis presented an alternative proposal to that of the UN special envoy, without curbing their offensives, which reached into southern Saudi territory. In practice, therefore, the violence persisted and although Riyadh formally renewed the unilateral truce, it also engaged in further attacks in Yemen.

During the year, the UN special envoy presented several proposals that were not accepted by the parties. In fact, Griffiths was publicly questioned and accused of bias on both sides. Throughout 2020, tensions also reached the port of Al Hudaydah, a key part of the Stockholm Agreement signed in December 2018 at the behest of the UN. The city was the scene of incidents in the first quarter of the year and of armed clashes between the Houthis and UAE-backed forces in September. In this context, Griffiths resubmitted a joint declaration proposal to the parties that included a nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian and economic confidence-building measures and political talks. As the hostilities raged, the Houthis and Hadi agreed to an exchange of prisoners, another one of the issues laid out in the Stockholm Agreement, which resulted in the release of 1,081 people in October. The event was hailed as the largest exchange of prisoners since violence escalated in the country in 2015. Meanwhile, as part of an agreement between the Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the United States facilitated by Oman, 240 people were able to return to Sana'a from Muscat, the capital of Oman, in exchange for the release of two Americans captured by the Houthis. At the end of the year, the prospects for the UN-backed process were influenced by statements that the US government could declare the Houthis a terrorist organisation and by the evolution of the negotiations between the Hadi government and the STC to overcome their dispute and form a unity government.

Regarding this internal struggle, a reflection of the fragmentation of the anti-Houthi camp, at the

¹² See the summary on Yemen in the chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2021! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2021.

beginning of the year Saudi Arabia stepped up pressure on the Hadi government and the STC to implement the Riyadh Agreement, signed in November 2019 to curb the escalation of violence between the parties. As anticipated by the limited schedule of the agreement and the difficulties in reaching a consensus, the implementation of the agreement was not fulfilled in the initial 90 days stipulated, giving way to a new plan or “phase two”. Although there were some limited prisoner exchanges, differences persisted over withdrawal zones and appointments of senior security officials. At the same time, hostilities continued. In this context, the STC raised the need for greater UN involvement to implement the agreement. One of the most critical episodes took place in April, when amid speculation about a possible offensive by Hadi’s forces on Aden and after torrential rains that seriously affected the area, the STC decided to declare an autonomous administration in southern Yemen. Even though this called the Riyadh Agreement into question and new clashes broke out in Abyan and the island of Socotra in the Gulf of Aden, contact was maintained at Saudi Arabia’s request. **In July, Saudi Arabia presented a new proposal to implement the Riyadh Agreement that urged the STC to rescind its declaration of autonomy.**

Although the STC made new threats to withdraw from the deal, **in December the parties finally managed to reach a consensus on a unity government.** The Riyadh Agreement provided for the formation of a joint government and the consequent inclusion of STC delegates in the UN-mediated process. Along these lines, diplomatic sources anticipated that the UN special envoy intended to make the most of the announcement about the new government to pressure for direct talks with the Houthis and to close the terms of a joint declaration on a ceasefire, economic and humanitarian measures and the resumption of the peace process. The new Yemeni cabinet was formed with no women for the first time in two decades, prompting criticism from Yemeni women’s organisations. The formation of the new government and the news about some positive steps taken in withdrawing forces from Aden and from combat areas in Abyan governorate were overshadowed at the end of the year by the bomb and rocket attack on the Aden airport on 30 December, when the new cabinet was landing in the city. The attack revealed the extreme fragility of the situation in the country.

The attack on the Aden airport when the new Yemeni cabinet was landing revealed the extreme fragility of the situation in the country

Yemeni women welcomed the National Action Plan for UN Resolution 1325, but criticised their marginalization from decision-making roles, including the new unity government between Hadi’s forces and the STC, which did not include any women

Gender, peace and security

Yemeni women’s groups such as the Yemeni Women Movement welcomed the formation of a consensus government as part of the Riyadh Agreement, but **firmly denounced the marginalisation and discrimination of women in their legitimate right to political participation.**

The UN special envoy for Yemen also stressed that more efforts should be made to incorporate women into the cabinet and in decision-making positions, especially considering the precedent of the National Dialogue Conference, almost one third of whose participants were Yemeni women, which concluded its work in 2014 with a series of recommendations that included guaranteeing a 30% minimum level of female participation in political decision-making positions. In May 2020,

the Hadi government, which controls part of Yemeni territory, formally launched the first Yemen National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, whose objectives include boosting female participation in all decision-making areas. However, as mentioned previously, the new Yemeni cabinet was formed with no women. Regarding the National Action Plan, Yemeni women’s organisations such as the Peace Track Initiative presented critical analyses of its origin and content, underlining that although consultations were held with civil society organisations during the drafting process, some of their main recommendations

were not taken into account. In positive terms, the commitment to include a 30% minimum of women in peace negotiations is hopeful, but there is concern over the lack of a budget and mechanisms to guarantee implementation, as well as the non-inclusion of key issues such as child marriage, the situation of women human rights activists and the elimination of discriminatory laws and practices.¹³

Furthermore, **during 2020, Yemeni women’s groups continued to insist on the urgency of a ceasefire.** The so-called “Group of Nine” (organisations that make up the network for the implementation of Resolution 1325) demanded an end to

the war in the country, saying that efforts must focus on the response to the coronavirus pandemic.¹⁴ The group asked the warring sides to commit to a ceasefire, to ending the armed conflict and to a comprehensive peace agreement resulting from an inclusive peace process. Some organisations such as the Peace Track Initiative also provided a critical assessment of the ceasefire proposals based on a comparative analysis

13. For further information, see “National Action Plan and demands for inclusion in Yemen” in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Gender and Peace* January - June 2020.

14. The “Group of Nine” consists of the Yemeni Women’s Pact for Peace and Security/Tawafuq, Yemeni Women’s Summit, Women’s Peace Voices, Coalition of Peace Partners, Southern Women for Peace, Women’s Solidarity Network, Women for Yemen Network, Young Leadership Development Foundation, Ma’rib Girls Foundation - Southern Women for Peace.

of the initiative presented by the Houthis in April and the draft joint statement written by Griffiths. After the draft was leaked, there were complaints that the UN proposal defended the participation of women and young people in a generic way and that emphasis in practice was placed only on their inclusion in the institutions resulting from a framework agreement between the parties. In this sense, the need was raised for greater dialogue with civil society in preparing these types of documents.

Activists like Rasha Jarhum also asserted that the marginal participation of women in the Stockholm process prevented women from realising their potential, despite the creation of a women's technical advisory council that has continued to work with

the office of the UN special envoy. No women were appointed to the agreement's follow-up committees, ignoring the work of organisations such as Mothers of Abductees, which had achieved the release of 940 arbitrarily detained people by early 2020 and could have played a key role in the prisoner exchange agreements. Jarhum also revealed that some women had decided not to wait for any more invitations and to take the initiative, prompting a group of them to appear in Riyadh at the end of 2019 to convey their priorities and demands. Finally, the Women Solidarity Network, made up of more than 250 Yemeni women inside and outside the country of different political affiliations, was active in promoting the protection of women from violence and in defending rights and gender equality in Yemen.