

6. Peace negotiations in the Middle East

- The Middle East witnessed five negotiating, dialogue and exploratory processes that accounted for 14% of the total in the world in 2021.
- The cases in the region once again illustrated the importance of regional and international actors and the influence of their interests and antagonism in developing some of the negotiating processes.
- Negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme resumed in 2021, but developed unevenly, in part due to Iran's breaches of the points of the 2015 agreement.
- Difficulties persisted in establishing a nationwide ceasefire in Yemen and a negotiated path to address the multidimensional conflict affecting the country.
- Palestinian-Israeli negotiations continued to stall, although some high-level contacts took place after the new Israeli government took office.
- Despite signs of rapprochement in the first quarter, the fracture between Hamas and Fatah persisted, especially after the president of the Palestinian Authority decided to postpone what would have been the first Palestinian elections in 15 years.
- The negotiating process for Syria promoted by the United Nations continued in 2021, but the rounds of meetings between representatives of the government, the opposition and civil society did not yield any significant results.
- Women's organisations and activists in the region continued to claim the need for more inclusive peace processes and women's substantive participation in decision-making.

This chapter studies the main peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East during 2021. 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 2021.

Table 6.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2021

Peace processes and negotiations	Negotiating actors	Third parties
Iran (nuclear programme)	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China, plus Germany), USA	UN, EU
Israel-Palestine	Israeli government, Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas	Egypt, Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), Munich Group (Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan)
Palestine	Hamas, Fatah	Egypt, Qatar, Algeria
Syria	Government, political and armed opposition groups	UN, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq (as observers in Astana process)
Yemen	Government, forces of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansar Allah South Transitional Council (STC), Saudi Arabia	UN, Oman, Saudi Arabia, USA

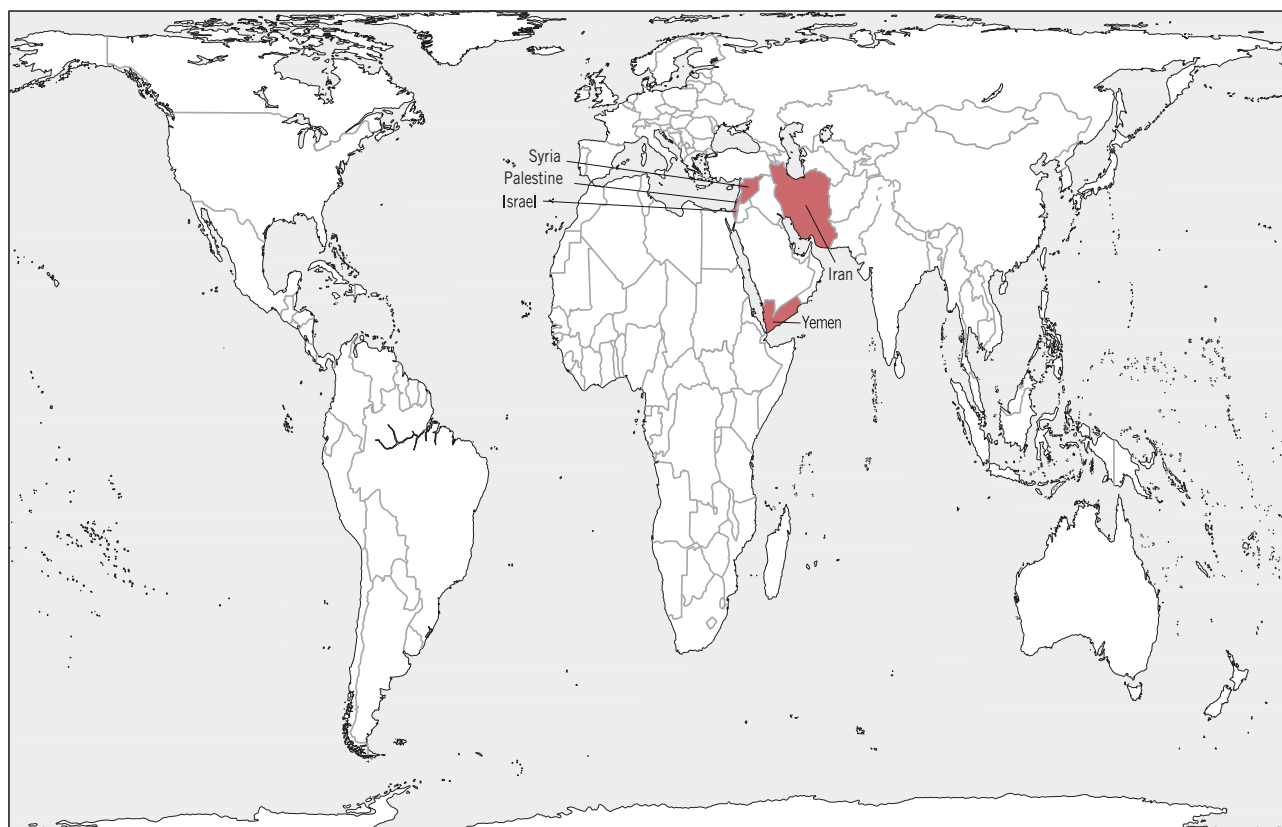
6.1. Peace negotiations in 2021: regional trends

This chapter analyses five negotiating, dialogue and exploratory processes that took place in the Middle East during 2021, the same number of cases as the previous year, accounting for 14% of the total peace processes worldwide. Three of these negotiations were linked to armed conflicts: Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The other two processes were related to socio-political crises: one between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah and the other linked to the

Iranian nuclear programme. Except for the intra-Palestinian dispute, which was internal in nature, the rest were internationalised (the armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen) or international (the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the tension over the Iranian nuclear programme).¹ Three of the processes analysed were located in the Mashreq (Israel-Palestine, Palestine and Syria) and the other two took place in the Gulf (Yemen and Iran).

1. See Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

Map 6.1. Peace negotiations in the Middle East in 2021



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2021

All negotiating processes in the Middle East included the participation of the respective governments through direct and indirect channels. Government actors were involved in negotiations, dialogue and/or contacts with a range of different actors, mainly other states and opposition organisations, armed and unarmed, as part of formal and informal negotiation schemes, depending on the context. Thus, for example, representatives of Iran and other countries that signed the 2015 nuclear agreement (France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia and China, known as the P4+1 group) continued their direct contacts as part of the formal negotiations. In 2021, the new Biden administration rejoined the Vienna process, though through indirect contacts, due to Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear pact in 2018 during the Trump administration. Throughout the year, the US government conditioned the return to the deal and formal talks on Tehran compliance with a series of demands. The government of Yemen, supported by the international coalition led by Saudi Arabia, continued to be involved in the United Nations-sponsored peace process focused on the dispute with the Houthis, an armed group also known as Ansar Allah that controls a large part of the country. There were no direct contacts between the parties, who continued to express their positions in meetings with mediators. Meanwhile, despite the signing of the Riyadh agreement in 2019 and the formation of a unity government in late 2020, the Saudi-mediated negotiations continued to try to

resolve the tensions between the forces of President Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi and separatists of the south active under the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in 2021.

The Syrian government of Bashar Assad formally remained in the UN-backed Geneva process and maintained direct contacts with representatives of the opposition and Syrian civil society. In this format, and due to pressure from Turkey, Kurdish actors representing the autonomous region of northeastern Syria were excluded. At the same time, Damascus continued to participate in the Astana process, sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran, which also involved representatives of the Syrian opposition. Through Moscow's facilitation, Damascus also took steps to reactivate ceasefire agreements with armed actors during the year, notably the Kurdish groups of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northwest and other opposition forces in the southeast. Although the negotiations between Israel and Palestine continued to be chronically deadlocked, in 2021, unlike previous years, there were some high-level contacts between the PA and representatives of the new Israeli government formed after the end of the Netanyahu administration. The unusual meetings between the president of the PA and the defence minister of the new Israeli government revealed the range of positions held by Palestinian and Israeli actors, as confirmed by the declarations of the Israeli

prime minister, who ruled out that these contacts could be considered the reopening of a diplomatic process with the Palestinians. Additionally, as in previous periods, there were indirect contacts between Israel and Hamas to agree on a ceasefire after the intense escalation of violence in 2021. As for the intra-Palestinian dispute, negotiations continued between the PA and Hamas, which controls and governs the Gaza Strip, in addition to other Palestinian groups.

The peace processes in the Middle East once again illustrated the importance of regional and international actors and the influence of their interests, the dynamics of their relationships and antagonism, which had a significant effect on some

of the processes in the area. This is due either to their direct participation in the armed conflicts whose resolution is being negotiated in support of one or the other side, their influence over one of the parties in conflict or the strategic calculations involved in the development of some of these conflicts. This situation was once again especially evident in Syria, where countries such as Turkey and Russia continued to play a crucial role in ceasefire agreements as part of their active involvement in the conflict, directly and through their ascendancy over some armed groups operating in the country. Ankara's influence in the negotiations was also felt as it blocked the participation of Kurdish representatives from the autonomous region of northeastern Syria, linked to its historic dispute with the PKK.² The country continued to be a scenario where tensions between the US and Israel with Iran were also clear, taking the form of various incidents and attacks against Tehran's interests in Syria, given the important Iranian presence in the country as part of its support for the regime of Bashar Assad. In this context, the UN special envoy for Syria stressed that the lack of progress in the negotiations was due in part to the lack of "constructive international diplomacy" because the divisions between international actors hampered the possibilities of reaching agreements on different topics.

Another emblematic case along these lines was that of Yemen. The country continued to be the scene of an armed conflict in which regional conflicts were projected, especially between Riyadh and Tehran, but also to a lesser extent between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During 2021, Saudi Arabia and Iran re-established contact after breaking their diplomatic ties in 2016 and representatives of both countries met under Iraqi mediation in an attempt to open a direct

The negotiating processes and exploratory meetings in the Middle East accounted for 14% of the cases worldwide in 2021 and were linked to three armed conflicts and two socio-political crises

One of the key issues on the negotiating agenda in the processes in the Middle East continued to be the establishment (or re-establishment) of ceasefire agreements

channel between the regional adversaries. According to reports, one of the main issues discussed was the Yemeni conflict, where they support opposing sides: Riyadh supports the Hadi government and Tehran supports the Houthis. Nevertheless, attempts to find

common ground between the Yemeni actors was not successful. According to various analysts, the progress of the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme and Iran's need to maintain a position of strength also influenced its strategic calculations in Yemen. Tensions also ran high between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, accused by Saudi sources of torpedoing implementation of the Riyadh agreement as part of its support for the STC during the year. The influence of the United States and the repercussions of its

change of government were also observed in Yemen. The incoming Biden administration reversed the Houthis' designation as a "terrorist organisation", one of the final actions taken by the Trump administration that threatened to block the group's participation in the UN-sponsored negotiating process. It also became more actively involved in diplomatic efforts to redirect the conflict.

The US was also a decisive actor in the Palestinian-Israeli case, as was especially evident in the years of unequivocal alliance between Trump and Netanyahu. After both men left power, however, no significant changes were observed in US policy towards Israel and the Biden administration did not roll back any of the controversial actions taken by his predecessor in 2021. The influence of regional disputes was also reflected in intra-Palestinian tension. Thus, after Morocco's decision in 2020 to re-establish relations with Israel in exchange for US support for its claims over Western Sahara, its main regional rival, Algeria, sought to position itself as a key supporter of the Palestinian cause in the face of the "normalisation" and as a mediating actor in the struggle between Fatah and Hamas. The importance of regional and international actors in the dynamics of the negotiations was also observed in other contexts in North Africa and the Middle East (the MENA region), particularly in the case of Libya.³

Third parties were involved in all the cases analysed in the Middle East. In various contexts, this role was played by states. One example was the role performed by Oman in addressing the Yemeni conflict. Despite its tradition of discreet mediation and facilitation in other theatres in the region, as well as in the Yemeni conflict in previous years,

2. See the summary on Turkey (southeast) in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

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

Oman took on an unusually explicit and public role in 2021. Its performance was made possible by the good relations it maintains with both Iran and the US and its recent strengthening of relations with Saudi Arabia. As in previous years, Egypt continued to play an important role in establishing ceasefires between Israel and Hamas and in mediating the intra-Palestinian dispute between Fatah and Hamas. Egypt also participated in the Munich Group, created in 2019 to reactivate the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, made up of France, Germany and Jordan. In several complex armed conflicts, there were states that officiated as an involved party while also facilitating and/or mediating as a third party, such as Russia in Syria and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Other countries in the region assumed the role of observers, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq as part of the Astana process for the Syrian conflict. In terms of international organisations, the United Nations continued to be involved in most cases in the region through various formats, including the special envoys for Syria and Yemen and the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO). The UN also participated in multilateral formats, such as the Quartet for the Middle East (made up of the EU, the US and Russia), and remained involved in monitoring the commitments made after the signing of the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme in 2015. In Syria, the UN led one of the negotiating formats (the Geneva process) and participated as an observer in the Astana process promoted by Russia, Turkey and Iran. Regional organisations did not play a prominent role in the negotiating processes in the region, except for the EU's role in coordinating the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear programme as part of the Vienna process.

The items on the agendas of the negotiations in the Middle East were varied, given the uniqueness and specificities of each context. **Even so, following the trend of previous years, one important and recurring issue that was observed in several cases in the area was an attempt to establish (or re-establish) ceasefire agreements.** Thus, for example, in Yemen, the attempts to establish a nationwide truce failed and the ceasefire agreement governing the port of Al Hodeidah, as part of the Stockholm Agreement signed in 2018, was called into question due to changes in the correlation of forces in the area and successive clashes during the second half of the year. Meanwhile, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, mediated by Egypt, was decreed again in May after the worst escalation of violence since 2014. At the

Women's groups and activists in the region continued to claim the need for more inclusive peace processes and substantive female participation in decision-making

In most cases in the region, negotiations and diplomatic contacts took place against a background of persistent and serious violence or incidents with a highly destabilising potential

end of the year, the truce was maintained, but in a fragile atmosphere. In Syria, difficulties continued to be observed in upholding the truce in Idlib, validated mainly by Russia and Turkey, throughout the year. At the same time, Moscow tried to re-establish ceasefire agreements previously signed by the Syrian government with Kurdish forces in the northwest and with opposition groups in the southeast, as part of what were called "reconciliation agreements". Other prominent issues on the region's negotiating agenda were nuclear non-proliferation (in the case of the Iranian nuclear programme), constitutional reforms (Syria) and elections (Palestine).

Regarding the gender, peace and security agenda in the region, women's organisations and activists continued to draw attention to what from their point of view should be priority issues in negotiations and diplomatic contacts. Thus, for example, they cited the need to address the impacts of the armed conflicts in Syria and Yemen on the population, incorporating a gender perspective; the urgency of dealing with the grave humanitarian situation; and the importance of responding to the problem of detained and disappeared persons. In Yemen, they also highlighted the urgency of a ceasefire and called for the eradication of military camps and weapons depots from the cities. In Syria, they requested that the discussions on a new constitutional framework incorporate international instruments that seek to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women and demanded that the international community become more actively involved in issues such as the forced return of refugees. In both countries, feminist organisations demanded truly inclusive peace processes that guarantee women's effective participation in discussions about the future. Thus, for example, Yemeni women denounced their exclusion from spaces of power and decision, as illustrated by the campaign that exposed the absence of women in the unity government established in late 2020 as part of implementation of the Riyadh agreement. Consultative mechanisms made up of women continued to function in Syria (Syrian Women's Advisory Board) and Yemen (Technical Advisory Group) as part of UN-sponsored processes and as a formula to implement the commitments of the international women, peace and security agenda. However, some critics claimed that these consultative schemes were not enough to guarantee substantive female participation.

The evolution of the negotiations and peace processes generally followed the trend set in previous years and illustrated the difficulties faced by the dialogue and negotiating processes to promote peace in the region.

In line with what was observed in previous periods, there was chronic impasse in the negotiations (as the Palestinian-Israeli case illustrated for yet another year, with formal negotiations suspended since 2014), with some parties stepping back from previous commitments (as evidenced in the discussions on the Iranian nuclear programme), rounds of contacts or meetings between parties without positive results (such as the UN-sponsored Geneva process to address the crisis in Syria), obstacles to re-establish political dialogue due to the profound differences between the parties (as in Yemen and Palestine) and serious difficulties in achieving sustainable, long-lasting and wide-ranging ceasefire agreements that do not lead to limited pauses in hostilities or recurrent violations. In most cases in the region, negotiations and diplomatic contacts took place against a background of persistent and serious violence (Yemen and Syria continued to be high-intensity armed conflicts in 2021), serious escalation (as in the Palestinian-Israeli case, which reported the worst body count in seven years and faced dynamics of direct and chronic structural violence) and security incidents with high destabilising potential (such as acts of violence that involved Iran, the US and Israel, among other actors, and escalated tension around the discussions over the nuclear programme and the sanctions against Tehran). In Yemen, United Nations representatives stressed the need to maintain open channels of dialogue and negotiation even without a cessation of hostilities, given the serious way that events were moving and the deep humanitarian crisis in the country.

In this context, various voices underlined the international responsibilities in the difficulties faced by the processes in the region, not only from the perspective of the events that occurred in 2021, as analysed in previous paragraphs, but also from a longer-term perspective. On the 30th anniversary of the Madrid-Oslo process, many analysts underlined how this scheme had helped to entrench the Israeli occupation and worsen Palestinian oppression, dispossession and fragmentation. Critics characterised this framework as a “fictional peace process” and underlined the need for a new approach that favours a fair approach and resolution of the conflict. The problems in the evolution and dynamics of the negotiating processes in the region also encouraged calls to take new approaches in other contexts. Thus, for example, in Yemen, the new UN special envoy and various analysts highlighted the importance of promoting a more inclusive political process, which effectively incorporates Yemeni actors not involved in the hostilities. In Syria, after verifying the failure of the two rounds held in 2021, the previous problems in advancing in a political dialogue and the indications of the government's lack of real will to negotiate, the UN special envoy explored the possibilities of launching a new format to deal with the conflict.

6.2 Case study analysis

Mashreq

Israel-Palestine	
Negotiating actors	Israeli Government, Palestinian Authority (PA), Hamas
Third parties	Egypt, Quartet for the Middle East (USA, Russia, UN, EU), Munich Group (Egypt, France, Germany, Jordan)
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.

Suspended since 2014, the negotiations between Palestine and Israel remained chronically blocked in 2021, although unlike in previous years, some high-level contacts did take place. Meanwhile, the commemoration in 2021 of the 30th anniversary of the Madrid-Oslo peace process provided a new opportunity to make a critical assessment of the dynamics that were imposed at the time and that in practice have helped to entrench the policies of the Israeli occupation, emphasising Palestinian fragmentation, oppression and dispossession. In this context, some said it was necessary and urgent for international actors to undergo a paradigm shift and take a new approach. The UN's report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 dealt extensively with this issue,⁴ arguing that one of the main problems with the Madrid-Oslo process launched in 1991 has been that Israel imposed its demand that the negotiations with the Palestinian representatives take place outside the framework of

4. United Nations, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967*, A/76/433, 22 October 2021.

applicable international law, including international humanitarian law and the UN resolutions. Along these lines, former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon also said that the Israeli policy of gradual de facto annexation of the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 has dimmed the possibilities of a two-state solution and emphasises that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is not a dispute between equals that can be resolved through bilateral negotiations.⁵

Critics of the Madrid-Oslo process said that the main international actors' systematic adherence to the two-state formula, ignoring the reality on the ground and without demonstrating any effective political desire to resolve the conflict, has resulted in a "diplomatic pantomime"⁶ and a "fictional peace process".⁷ Palestinian analysts argued that the peace process has become part of an Israeli strategy to evade accountability and entrench its domination over the Palestinian population.⁸ In this context, some called for recognition that the international community's approach to address the Palestinian-Israeli issue in recent decades had failed and claimed that a new approach was urgent, even more so considering the developments in 2021, including the worst escalation of violence in seven years, with incidents in Gaza and the West Bank, but also between Palestinians with Israelis and Jewish-Israelis in various cities in Israel.⁹ The events that rattled historic Palestine in 2021 confirmed that the status quo is not sustainable and that despite the fragmentation imposed by the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian people together continue to lay claim to their collective rights. The proposals for a new approach to address and fairly resolve the conflict included action such as active international intervention to address the asymmetry of power between the parties, a rights-based approach in accordance with international standards that guarantees respect for the rights of both peoples and urgent action to dismantle the Israeli occupation.

The events of 2021 included Israeli attacks as part of Operation Guardian of the Walls in the Gaza Strip, which caused the deaths of 260 Palestinians, half of them civilians, in just 11 days; while the missiles launched by Palestinian armed groups from Gaza killed 12 Israelis. **As on previous occasions, the hostilities in Gaza ended in a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, after which both parties proclaimed themselves**

victorious. At the end of the year, the truce was still standing, although in a very fragile atmosphere, with periodic episodes of violence in the Gaza Strip, but also in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. In this scenario, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East warned of the importance of concerted action to avoid any new escalation of violence. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid reportedly discussed the Gaza truce and ways to bolster it during his visit to Egypt in December, where he met with his counterpart Sameh Shoukry and President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

There was a change of government in Israel in June 2021, marking the end of Benjamin Netanyahu's administration. Still, the heterogeneous eight-party ruling coalition led by ultra-nationalist Neftali Bennet did not bring about any major changes regarding the Palestinian issue. However, some unusual high-ranking contacts were made following the inauguration of the new Israeli government. **In August, new Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz, a former general, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas held the first direct high-level meeting in a decade in Ramallah.** According to reports, Gantz and Abbas discussed issues related to security and the economy during the meeting. Based on the idea that strengthening the PA weakens Hamas, Gantz may have offered Abbas a loan of

132 million euros as an advance payment of taxes that Israel collects on behalf of the PA, in addition to a package of work permits and building licenses for Palestinian houses in area C. The meeting took place shortly after Neftali Bennet visited the US, where he met with President Joe Biden. The Israeli prime minister, who said in Washington that the negotiations would not resume, stressed that the contacts between Gantz and Abbas should not be interpreted as the start of a diplomatic process with the Palestinians. According to various analysts, the new Israeli government assumes that the conflict will not be resolved any time soon, that both sides are too politically divided to resume negotiations and that, therefore, their focus should be on "reducing" or "minimising conflict". To do this, they offer an "economic peace", meaning a rescue of the deteriorated Palestinian economy, but without resuming the peace process. Critics claim that it is only a new "mantra" that seeks to maintain the status quo and fait accompli policies, such as the continuous expansion of the settlements, which entrench the occupation and prioritise Israeli interests.¹⁰

Israeli-Palestinian negotiations remained chronically blocked in 2021, although some contacts did take place between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and new Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz

5. Ban Ki-moon, "US should back a new approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict", *The Financial Times*, 29 June 2021.

6. United Nations, Report of the Special Rapporteur... (2021), op. cit.

7. José Abu Tarbush (2021), op. cit.

8. Inés Abdel Razek, "Thirty Years On: The Ruse of the Middle East Peace Process", *al-Shabaka*, 31st October 2021 and Yara Hawari, "Thirty years of sham 'peace process'", *al-Jazeera*, 1 de noviembre de 2021.

9. See the summary on Israel-Palestine in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

10. Patrick Kingsley, "'Shrinking the Conflict': What Does Israel's New Mantra Really Mean?", *The New York Times*, 30 September 2021; Juan Carlos Sanz, "Israel se ofrece a rescatar la economía de la Autoridad Palestina sin reanudar el proceso de paz", *El País*, 30 August 2021.

In September, after returning from a visit to Egypt where he met with President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, the first meeting in 10 years by an Israeli prime minister to the Arab country, Bennett publicly reiterated his opposition to a Palestinian state. A well-known detractor of the two-state formula, he stated in several interviews that a Palestinian state would be a “very serious mistake”.¹¹ In this context, Abbas gave Israel an ultimatum during his speech before the UN General Assembly, warning that if it does not withdraw from the occupied Palestinian territories within one year, including East Jerusalem, it would stop recognising the state of Israel based on the pre-1967 borders. The Palestinian president also asked the UN Secretary-General to convene an international peace conference. Israeli officials dismissed Abbas’ ultimatum as “delusional”.¹² In December, Abbas met again with Gantz, this time in the home of the Israeli defence minister.

After the meeting, Gantz said that they had addressed how to promote economic and civic activity to build confidence. The meeting was criticised by far-right Israeli parties, such as Likud, and also within the new Israeli government. Gantz reportedly briefed the prime minister and foreign minister, but most cabinet members learned of the meeting from the media. Thus, Israeli ministers openly criticised Gantz. The meeting also produced disagreements and conflicting positions in Fatah, whose internal conflicts worsened in 2021, and was condemned by Hamas, which claimed that these types of initiatives further deepened intra-Palestinian divisions. Thus, after an apparent rapprochement in early 2021, the Islamist party and Abbas’ entourage once again stepped back from each other after the president’s decision to suspend what would have been the first Palestinian elections in 15 years.¹³

Regarding the mediating actors, after four years without meetings, the Quartet for the Middle East (US, Russia, EU and UN) issued a statement in March 2021 expressing its concern about the economic disparities between Palestinians and Israelis and the impact of COVID-19, calling on the parties to avoid unilateral actions. New statements in May and November voiced concern about the violence in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza and reiterated the Quartet’s commitment to a two-state solution. Additionally, in 2021 the activities of the Munich Group continued, formed during the Security Conference held there in February 2020. Made up of Egypt, France, Germany and Jordan with the declared purpose of reactivating the peace process, the group held some meetings during the year, though their efforts did not cause a change of scenery.

Palestine	
Negotiating actors	Hamas, Fatah
Third parties	Egypt, Qatar, Algeria
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.

As in previous years, some events in 2021 pointed to an agreement between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah. However, as the months went by, the division and impasse in the negotiations prevailed. As analysts have pointed out, in practice this situation favours the status quo and the distribution of power quotas between both groups and threatens the renewal of leadership and generational change in Palestine.¹⁴ After finding common ground in 2020 in reaction to the announcements by the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu to formalise annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories, Hamas and Fatah held relatively eventful talks **that in the first few days of 2021 led to an agreement to call the first Palestinian elections in 15 years.** Fatah’s preferred option of holding the legislative elections separately, on 22 May, from the presidential one, scheduled for 31 July, prevailed (Hamas preferred to hold both votes together). In addition, a third vote was scheduled for 31 August to renew the Palestinian National Council, the PLO parliament that brings together representatives of the occupied Palestinian territories and the diaspora. The agreement around the elections was then celebrated by UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, who described it as a key step towards Palestinian unity.

Other events during the first quarter pointed to rapprochement. Fourteen Palestinian groups meeting

11. Tovah Lazaroff, “Palestinian statehood would be a ‘terrible mistake’ – Bennett”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 15 September 2021.

12. Europa Press, “Israel rechaza el ‘delirante ultimátum’ de un año dado por Abbas para lograr un acuerdo de paz con Palestina”, *EP*, 25 September 2021.

13. See the summary on Palestine in this chapter.

14. Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal, “Praxis of Palestinian Democracy: The Elections that Never Were and the Events of May 2021”, *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, IEMED, November 2021.

in Cairo decided that a unity government would be formed after the elections, the electoral tribunal tasked with supervising the vote was set up and Hamas released 45 Fatah members. According to reports, in addition to the public agreements, Hamas and Fatah may also have agreed that the Islamist group would not aspire to occupy key positions that could veto any new Palestinian cabinet. The elections raised expectations: 93% of the eligible population registered to vote, 36 parties presented lists with candidates and 405 women ran as candidates (29% of the total 1,389 applicants). However, critics warned of a series of obstacles and action taken by the PA that hindered a plural competition, among them the minimum age of 28 years for the candidates (the average age is 21 years and that of the leaders is 70), the high cost of the fee for the applicants and the short time between the announcement of elections with a new proportional system that would benefit the established parties.¹⁵ At the same time, political tensions began to emerge. One fault line occurred within Fatah, where three lists were outlined for the elections: an “official” one dominated by Mahmoud Abbas and his entourage, another led by prominent Palestinian prisoner Marwan Barghouti and the nephew of Yasser Arafat, Nasser al-Qudwa (the “Freedom” list) and a third one (the “Future” list) consisting of candidates supported by former security chief Mohammed Dahlan, expelled from Fatah in 2011. Senior Fatah officials tried unsuccessfully to persuade Barghouti not to run for election. Abbas also expelled al-Qudwa from Fatah for promoting a separate list of candidates for the legislative elections.

In this context, on 29 April, Abbas announced that the elections were being scrapped indefinitely. Officially, the decision owed to the difficulties for Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem to participate because of the obstacles imposed by Israel, despite its obligation to guarantee the vote according to the terms established in the Oslo agreements. However, various analysts said that Abbas’ decision was also influenced by concern about the internal division of Fatah and a victory for Hamas (or, at least, substantial representation in the Legislative Council). This concern was shared by international actors and by Israel, which was not interested in a vote that could theoretically strengthen the Palestinian leadership and its ability to challenge the policies of the occupation.¹⁶ The cancellation of the elections was described as a disappointment and a usurpation of power by various groups and as a “coup” by Hamas. International actors limited themselves to regretting it and generically urging a new date for

the elections. According to reports, Egypt and Jordan have also intervened to cancel the elections due to the possible repercussions that a Hamas victory could have for their internal affairs.¹⁷

In this scenario, there was an escalation of hostilities in Gaza in May, which was preceded by a series of incidents in East Jerusalem that gave way to protests, acts of violence and a general strike throughout historical Palestine, in what was called the “Unity Intifada”.¹⁸ In the midst of the clashes, which caused more than 260 deaths in 11 days, **Abbas called for the formation of a unity government “committed to international legitimacy”**. Abbas’ approach drew criticism and was described as an empty and provocative gesture at an inopportune moment, amid the intense Israeli bombing of Gaza and the popular uprising in the West Bank and Israeli cities with large Palestinian populations.¹⁹ According to reports, the Palestinian president had sent one of his main advisors to Qatar so the kingdom could use its good offices and convince Hamas to accept the conditions put forth by the Quartet for the Middle East: recognition of the previous agreements signed by the PLO and a commitment not to launch rocket attacks at Israel.²⁰ Hamas rejected Abbas’ proposal. Despite the death toll during the clashes in May, the Islamist group presented itself as victorious, boosting its support and popular legitimacy, as revealed by some polls.²¹ The PA appeared as a spectator in the conflict between Hamas and Israel and the events encouraged criticism of its lack of legitimacy and irrelevance. Criticism and protests against the PA intensified after prominent activist Nizar Banat, a well-known critic of Abbas’ government, was killed by Palestinian security forces in June.

After the ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas (21 May), Egypt deployed new efforts to try to reach an agreement between the Palestinian group and Fatah. However, the contacts yielded no results due to disagreements about the issues to be agreed upon and Egyptian officials were unable to organise a direct meeting between the parties in June. Hamas wanted the negotiations to involve all the Palestinian factions and not be bilateral (as the PA prefers) and said that the discussions should focus on the PLO and the calling of elections. However, the PA insisted that the only item on the agenda should be the formation of the unity government.²² According to reports, the PA demanded acceptance of the Quartet’s conditions, including recognition of Israel, and that the PLO issue not be addressed for the time being. Likewise, there were

15. Salem Barrameh, “The Israeli and Palestinian elections offend democracy – each in their own way”, *The Guardian*, 17 March 2021.

16. International Crisis Group, *Why Palestinian Elections Should be Back on Track*, ICG-USMEP Joint Statement, 30 April 2021.

17. Adnan Abu Amer, “Postponed Palestinian Elections: Causes and Repercussions”, *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 May 2021.

18. See the summary on Israel-Palestine in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

19. Adnan Abu Amer, “Hamas ignores Abbas’ call for unity government as cease-fire holds”, *Al-Monitor*, 21 May 2021.

20. Daod Kuttab, “Will PLO and Hamas find common ground?”, *Al-Monitor*, 25 May 2021.

21. Policy and Survey Research, *Press Release: Public Opinion Poll No (80)*, PSR, 15 June 2021.

22. Adnan Abu Amer, “Hamas’ Inability to Capitalize on the War in Gaza”, *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 July 2021.

disagreements between Hamas and Fatah over which actor should lead the reconstruction of Gaza.²³

Throughout the year, the distance grew between both sides, especially after Abbas held meetings with representatives of the new Israeli government, such as his meeting with Defence Minister Benny Gantz in Ramallah in August.²⁴ This took place in a context in which the new governments in the US and Israel were willing to back up the PA. In November, as part of the 17th anniversary of Arafat's death, Abbas repeated his call for a Palestinian unity government made up of forces committed to "international legitimacy" and recognition of the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people. Hamas has refused to join the PLO until it conducts internal reforms.²⁵ At the end of 2021, **Algeria expressed its willingness to mediate between the Palestinian factions.** After meeting with Abbas in early December, Algerian President Abdelmajjid Tebboune highlighted the role that his country could play in the Palestinian cause in the face of "normalisation" agreements with Israel signed by other Arab countries, including its regional rival, Morocco, and announced that a conference of Palestinian groups would be held in Algeria. Hamas publicly confirmed its participation in the meeting, which would take place in early 2022, describing Algiers' position as equidistant from all Palestinian groups. In addition to the dispute between the two main Palestinian groups, Palestinians and international figures expressed doubts during the year about the significance of the elections given the Israeli domination and occupation, stressing that they would only support the structures of oppression and fragmentation, to which Fatah and Hamas have also contributed. Experts also warned about the generational gap that is stressing Palestinian society and about a status quo that benefits Hamas, Fatah and Israel and makes it difficult for alternative types of leaders to emerge.²⁶

Syria	
Negotiating actors	Government, sectors of the political and armed opposition
Third parties	UN, EU, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and also Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq (acting as observers in the Astana process)
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)) ²⁷
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 the year that marked the 10th anniversary of the armed conflict in Syria, negotiations and mediation initiatives continued to show little effectiveness in stopping the cycle of violence in the country. Despite a drop in the death toll in recent years, hostilities persisted in the country and in 2021 they claimed between 3,900 and 5,500 lives, according to counts from various sources, with the involvement of many different local, regional and international actors. Meanwhile, the economic and humanitarian situation worsened in the country.²⁸ In line with what was reported in previous years, **the United Nations' backed negotiating process continued at an uneven pace and did not offer any significant results.** The Syrian Constitutional Committee only met twice in all of 2021. At the end of both meetings, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Otto Pedersen did not hide his frustration at the lack of progress. The first meeting of the year, corresponding to the fifth round since the committee began its work in September 2019, took place in January in Geneva and again included representatives of the government, the opposition and civil society. After five days of work, Pedersen acknowledged the lack of progress with respect to the limited expectations he had set for this round due to the procedural and substantive differences between the parties, considered the meeting a missed opportunity and singled out the Syrian government delegation for its lack of commitment to the process. According to him, the representatives of Damascus rejected a comprehensive proposal that the opposition accepted. Various analysts said that the Syrian regime was not

23. The Arab Weekly, "Cairo fails to bring together Hamas, Fatah as common ground is elusive", AW, 19 June 2021.

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

25. Khaled Abu Toameh, "What are the chances for a Palestinian unity government? – analysis", *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 November 2021.

26. Alaa Tartir, "A new approach to elections in Palestine", *al-Shabaka*, 1 May 2021; Domínguez de Olazábal (2021), op. cit.

27. 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.

28. See the summary on Syria in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

willing to advance in the negotiations a few months before calling a new presidential election in the country, in May, in which Bashar Assad intended to win a new seven-year term (his fourth), and in which he finally received 95% of the vote, although many international figures denounced it as fraudulent.²⁹ In this context, Western actors denounced the self-interested Syrian regime for deliberately delaying the drafting of a new Constitution and thereby preventing the elections from being held under the supervision of the United Nations, as established by the UN Security Council resolutions of reference on Syria, especially UNSCR 2254 (2015). Along these same lines, the leader of the opposition delegation to the Syrian Constitutional Committee, Nasr al-Hariri, warned that the regime was buying time to regain control of the country militarily.

In January, the fifth round reunited the 45-member Constitutional Committee in charge of drafting the proposal, (15 from each delegation, 30% women), but due to pressure from Turkey the representatives of the Kurdish-controlled autonomous administration of north-eastern Syria were excluded. Consequently, the Kurdish authorities said they do not consider the committee's work to be binding. In February, after reporting to the UN Security Council, Pedersen stressed that the lack of progress in the political discussions on Syria also reflected the lack of "constructive international diplomacy" and that the disagreements among the international players obstructed any advancement along the constitutional or any other track. In this context, the UN special envoy resumed his efforts and contacts with key international actors.³⁰ The diplomatic deadlock lasted several months and it was not until September that Pedersen announced an agreement on the methodology for holding a sixth round of the Constitutional Committee, which involved regular meetings between the UN envoy and the heads of delegations. Pedersen also stressed that for the first time he had met with the co-chairs of the commission (Ahmad Kuzbari, appointed by the government, and Hadi al-Bahra, appointed by the opposition) and had been able to negotiate directly on how to proceed with the constitutional reform (17 October). According to Pedersen, both representatives had agreed that the drafting phase of the new Constitution would finally begin in the sixth round, after the failure of the five previous rounds.³¹ With these precedents, a new meeting of the Constitutional Committee took place in October, also in Geneva. For four days the different delegations (absent any Kurdish representation) offered their visions on basic principles,

The Syrian Constitutional Committee met twice in 2021. After both meetings, the UN special envoy expressed his frustration at the lack of progress

along lines that had been distributed among them. The official delegation presented a text on the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria and on terrorism (18 October); the opposition delegation presented another on the armed forces, security and intelligence agencies (19 October); and the civil society delegation presented a text on the rule of law (20 October). Later, Damascus' representatives presented a second text on terrorism and extremism (21 October). However, there was no agreement on how to continue the discussions in the plenary session (22 October). According to reports, the Syrian government delegation refused to revise its proposed constitutional text, while the opposition delegation and the civil society delegation submitted observations and revised texts. In the end, there was no understanding. The debates ended with mutual recriminations and there was no agreement to define a new meeting for the committee. Opposition representatives reiterated their claims about obstructionism and the Syrian regime's attempts to stall the process. Analysts argued that Damascus has shown that it has no real will to negotiate and that Assad has no interest in the process because any genuine reform would mean his removal from power.³¹

Pedersen recognised progress and setbacks during the negotiations, but forcefully admitted that the sixth round had ended in great disappointment and that mechanisms had to be defined for the process to be truly substantive.³² Days after the meeting in Geneva, the UN special envoy admitted that the refusal of the Syrian regime's delegation to negotiate the proposed constitutional text was one of the keys to the failure of this latest round of meetings. However, Pedersen insisted that the process could build trust if it were properly carried out, but real political will would be needed to try to reach agreements.³³ In previous statements, the UN representative had said that the committee would not resolve the Syrian conflict by itself, that it was essential to address other aspects of the crisis, such as the issue of prisoners and missing persons, and that it was important to implement a nationwide ceasefire. In Pedersen's closed-door consultations with members of the UN Security Council in November, some countries reportedly voiced concern about the consequences of the efforts of the UN-sponsored negotiating process, including improvements in diplomatic and economic relations between the Syrian government and other countries in the region, including Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, which proposed that Syria should be readmitted to the Arab League in 2021. These concerned countries said that the

29. Jennifer Holleis, "Geneva talks: Is Syria's new constitution a mission (im-)possible?", *Deutsche Welle*, 30 January 2021.

30. Security Council Report, *Syria: March 2021 Monthly Forecast*, 26 February 2021.

31. Security Council Report, *Syria: November 2021 Monthly Forecast*, 29 October 2021.

32. Paul McLoughlin, "Constitutional crisis: The Syria peace talks that are going nowhere", *The New Arab*, 6 December 2021; Sara Hëllmüller (interview), "What's next for Syria's peace process?", *Geneva Solutions*, 2 November 2021.

33. Sarah el Deeb, "UN: Syria constitution drafting process 'big disappointment'", *AP*, 22 October 2021.

34. Associated Press, "UN Envoy Blames Syria for Failure of Constitution Talks", *AP*, 27 October 2021.

“normalisation” process would discourage Damascus’ further engagement in the political negotiations.³⁵ According to reports, in the middle of the year Pedersen held some exploratory meetings with key players to assess the possibilities of a new international format to address the conflict in Syria.

Meanwhile, the “Astana process” remained active. Started in 2017, it is led by Russia, Turkey and Iran, which act as guarantors, but are also the international actors most militarily involved in the Syrian armed conflict. The previous high-level face-to-face diplomatic meeting under this format had taken place in December 2019; these kinds of meetings were reactivated in 2021. Three other rounds were held during the year, on 15 February in the Russian city of Sochi and on 16 July and 17 December in the Kazakh capital, Nur-Sultan. The meetings addressed issues such as the problems faced by the Constitutional Committee in the UN-backed process, the humanitarian situation in Syria and the development of events in the north-western part of the country. In the meetings, the parties restated their commitment to the ceasefire in Idlib and discussed the release of prisoners and missing and kidnapped persons and the exchange of bodies. Some detained persons were exchanged in July. Representatives from the United Nations, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq participated in the meetings of the Astana process with “observer” status. **Furthermore, Russia facilitated tasks to reactivate some ceasefire agreements between the Syrian government and other armed actors in 2021.** For example, at the beginning of the year it intervened in response to growing clashes between Syrian troops and Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the northwest. Later, in the middle of the year, Moscow addressed an escalation of violence between the regime and opposition forces in the southeast, despite the “reconciliation” agreements signed for the area at Russia’s request in 2018. These events, together with the continuous violations of the ceasefire in Idlib, led some analysts to raise doubts about Moscow’s abilities to guarantee long-term agreements in Syria and the complexities of its role in the conflict, as it fights aligned with the regime in some areas and mediates, protecting its interests in others.³⁶

Gender, peace and security

During the year, the UN special envoy continued to meet with the Women’s Advisory Board (WAB), which continued to urge consideration of the impacts of the armed conflict on the population and to reinforce the mechanisms to guarantee the protection of women and their participation in the future of Syria. Echoing reports prepared by the Women’s Advisory Board, Pedersen told the UN Security Council about the lack of progress regarding detained, kidnapped and disappeared people

in Syria, an issue that especially affects women fighting to know where their relatives are. **Syrian representatives also addressed the Security Council directly and indicated priority issues.** Thus, for example, at a meeting held in June, Abber Hussein, representing the Syrian Women’s Political Movement, emphasised the importance of reaching a genuine political solution in Syria, giving priority to international instruments in the draft Constitution to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women and focusing efforts on living conditions in the country, aggravated by COVID-19. In September, the director of the organisation Sawa for Development and Aid, Rouba Mhaissen, demanded that the UN Security Council be more actively involved in the communities affected by the conflict and said it was important to address humanitarian issues in political discussions and deal with issues such as the forced return of refugees to Syria. The activists said that the demands of the women who rose up against the Syrian regime in 2011 were still valid and questioned the presidential election in which Bashar Assad won another term. Others, such as Mouna Ghanem of Syrian Women’s Forum for Peace (SWFP), who resigned from the WAB in 2018, repeated their criticism of the UN-mediated process, arguing that the plan outlined in Resolution 2254 (2015) had failed and urging a new approach that addresses the root causes of the conflict, helps the Syrian population to break the cycle of violence and convulsion and ensures substantive participation of Syrian women.³⁷

The Gulf

Iran (nuclear programme)	
Negotiating actors	Iran, P4+1 (France, United Kingdom, Russia and China plus Germany)
Third parties	UN, EU
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

35. Security Council Report, *Syria: December 2021 Monthly Forecast*, 30 November 2021.

36. Taim al-Hajj, “Is Russia Reneging on its Reconciliation Agreements in Syria?”, *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 November 2021.

37. Mouna Ghanem, “The UN-Led Peace Process for Syria Has Failed. Women Must Be Part of the Next One”, *PassBlue*, 8 March 2021.

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 negotiations around the Iranian atomic programme resumed in 2021, but developed unevenly due to multiple factors, including changes in leadership in the US and Iran, Tehran's retreat from the commitments made as part of the 2015 nuclear agreement and a background characterised by security incidents on several different fronts. At the end of the year, uncertainties about how the talks might develop threatened to put their future at risk. In early 2021, much attention was focused on the possibility that the Trump administration would engage in some last-minute offensive action as Trump's presidency came to a close. With the arrival of Joe Biden to power in late January, expectations were focused on the change in policy towards Iran, given the new administration's desire to return to the nuclear agreement, since Trump had withdrawn US from it in 2018, and stepped back from the "maximum pressure" strategy promoted by his predecessor. In this context, the new US government appointed Robert O'Malley, who had already been involved in the 2015 negotiations, as the special envoy for Iran. In the weeks that followed, both the US and Iran said that the other side was responsible for taking the first step to re-establishing negotiations. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that Tehran must first resume compliance with the 2015 agreement. A day later, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, said that Iran would only act once it had observed initiatives taken by the other side, while Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif insisted that the US must lift all sanctions effectively and without conditions.

The diplomatic process did not start back up again until April, when Iran and the P4+1 countries (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and Germany), which still adhered to the agreement, held new meetings, some virtually and others in person, in Vienna. **In May, the Austrian capital hosted a new round of negotiations (the sixth) with the participation of the EU. The US was also indirectly involved, as it had withdrawn from the agreement. According to reports, progress was made in this round from 12 to 20 June, but the process was put on hold pending the inauguration of the new Iranian government** after ultra-conservative politician Ebrahim Raisi won 61.9% of the vote in the presidential election on 18 June. In the months that followed, there was a breakdown in the negotiations amid EU and US warnings to Tehran regarding taking other kinds of action in case the diplomatic impasse persists and a climate of growing

alarm over the development of their atomic activities.

Throughout the year, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) warned of Iran's failure to comply with the terms of the 2015 agreement. Among other issues, it drew attention to the signs of 20% uranium enrichment activity, which is at pre-agreement levels (according to the agreement, uranium production is prohibited until 2031 and uranium reserves are being enriched 14 times higher than what it stipulates), while the supervision of activities in some facilities is being made difficult through restricted access. Additionally, information emerged about sabotage at Iranian nuclear facilities (Natanz, in April; Busher in June), some of which Iran blamed on Israel. As a result, Iran announced its intention to enrich uranium up to 60%. European countries involved in the negotiations expressed serious concern about some of these developments and the US said it viewed Iran's atomic progress as provocative. In September, the head of the IAEA visited Tehran to try to extract a series of commitments but said that concerns remained

about Iran's level of cooperation due to difficulties in performing monitoring and verification work. In December, Iran and the IAEA reached an agreement to replace the surveillance cameras in the Karaj facilities, enabling Iran to circumvent a possible motion of censure against it by the organisation.

Potentially destabilising incidents continued to occur throughout 2021 and stoked tensions between different actors with interests in the nuclear discussions. Several episodes, some of unclear authorship, took place at sea, such as an explosion that rocked an Israeli ship in the Gulf of Oman that was blamed on Iran in February, another explosion on an Iranian ship in the Mediterranean in March, a bomb attack on another Iranian ship in the Red Sea blamed on Israel in April, incidents between US and Iranian ships in the Strait of Hormuz in April, May and November and an attack on a cargo ship off the coast of Oman that was also blamed on Iran. Other incidents that escalated tension took place in the context of the armed conflicts in Iraq and Syria, such as US attacks against armed groups backed by Iran in both countries and attacks against US interests in Iraq, for which Tehran was blamed, although the Iranian authorities denied their involvement.

In this scenario, given the persistent deadlock in the Vienna negotiating process, some analysts described it as a strategy of delay by the new Iranian authorities so they could present the new government with a different strategy than the previous one, which had been criticised domestically for appearing too gullible to its Western dialogue partners. Khamenei reportedly asked the Raisi government not to make the same mistakes as Rouhani had in this area. Consequently, the new administration seemed committed to changing the

The negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme resumed in 2021, but they developed unevenly, amidst a tense climate due to Tehran's retreat from the obligations defined in the 2015 agreement and other factors

pace of the negotiations, since among the elites there was general a consensus that lowering sanctions was imperative to the economy's recovery.³⁸

Finally, **after a five-month break in the negotiations, they resumed in late November in Vienna (seventh round). However, the talks stalled and were suspended within days after Iran raised new demands.** Representatives of the European countries participating in the negotiations reported that the new authorities in Tehran had stepped back from the agreements reached with the previous Iranian government after months of work. Among other issues, Iran reportedly required the lifting of some US sanctions by the new Biden administration not related with the nuclear agreement. Faced with warnings from European countries and Washington that they would abandon the negotiations and after pressure from China and Russia, Tehran revised its position and said it was willing to negotiate based on the texts agreed in June. After the Iranian negotiator returned to his country for consultations and the P3 European countries (France, Germany and the United Kingdom) and the United States warned that time to save the nuclear agreement was running out, the talks resumed in Vienna on 27 December (eighth round), coordinated by senior EU diplomat Enrique Mora. Meanwhile, Iran conducted some tests with missiles, drones and space research devices that once again prompted criticism from Western countries. According to some analysts, if the impasse persisted, one possible scenario was for the UN Security Council to denounce Iran for non-compliance with the agreement. This could lead to Tehran withdrawing from the agreement and a subsequent demand to involve Israel in the agreement as a condition for rejoining it.³⁹ Israel, which according to various sources possesses nuclear weapons, has not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and is not part of the negotiating process with Iran, insisted that Iran is only looking to buy time to develop its atomic programme.

Yemen	
Negotiating actors	Government, forces of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Houthis/Ansar Allah, Southern Transitional Council, Saudi Arabia
Third parties	UN, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, USA
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 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.

Throughout 2021, obstacles continued to undermine the establishment of a nationwide ceasefire and a negotiated path to address the multidimensional conflict in Yemen. In general terms, the conflict remained militarised, with high levels of violence as reported in recent years, which had very serious consequences for the civilian population. The diplomatic and mediation initiatives focused on the main line of confrontation in the country, the one pitting the Houthis against the forces of the government of Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi, supported by Saudi Arabia and other forces, such as southern separatist groups, tribal forces and Salafists. Third-party efforts were led by the United Nations, Oman and the US, which assumed a new role after Joe Biden took office. Meanwhile, growing tensions were evident in another line of conflict in Yemen between Hadi's forces and the separatists of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), despite the signing of the Riyadh Agreement in 2019 and the formation of a unity government in late 2020. Saudi Arabia continued to try to mediate between the parties in a climate marked by mutual accusations, growing protests in the south and clashes and acts of violence that intensified at the end of the year.⁴⁰

In February, the new US administration reversed Donald Trump's decision in early 2021 to designate the Houthis and their top three leaders as "terrorists", which threatened to hinder contact with the group, accused of operating with support from Iran. The new US government also decided to halt support for what it described as "offensive operations" launched by the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia and appointed diplomat Timothy Lenderking as the US special envoy for Yemen. This appointment was interpreted as a sign of Washington's renewed commitment to diplomatic channels and a way to strengthen support for UN mediation efforts led by Special Envoy Martin Griffiths. In the following months, it emerged that Lenderking had proposed a ceasefire plan throughout

38. Esfandiyar Batmangheledi, *Nuclear talks under Raisi: Iran's diplomats going slow to appear smart*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 October 2021.

39. Patrick Wintour, "Talks with Iran on restoring 2015 nuclear deal suspended", *The Guardian*, 3 December 2021.

40. See the summary on Yemen in chapter 1 (Armed conflicts) in Escola de Cultura de Pau, *Alert 2022! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding*, Barcelona: Icaria, 2022.

Yemen in exchange for lifting the restrictions on the Sana'a airport and the port of Hodeidah, in addition to a mechanism to resolve the nationwide payment of wages to entice the Houthis. In March, Saudi Arabia also presented an initiative to end the Yemeni conflict, in line with a previous proposal that the Houthis had already discarded. Meanwhile, the Houthis maintained their position throughout the year that the reopening of the port of Al Hudaydah and the Sana'a Airport and the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country were preconditions for political dialogue. Midway through the year, both Griffiths and Lenderking expressed frustration at the lack of progress in agreeing on a cessation of hostilities.

The new UN special envoy for Yemen was in favour of a more inclusive peace process, led by Yemenis, and insisted that the negotiations should continue even without a cessation of hostilities

In this context, Griffiths finished his role as UN Special Envoy for Yemen and he was appointed the new head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Before leaving his post, however, he stressed the negative outlook for the conflict and held out hope for Oman's mediating efforts. In an unusual event in March, the official Omani agency reported a series of meetings to address the Yemeni conflict in coordination with Yemeni actors, Riyadh and the UN and US envoys.⁴¹ An Omani delegation travelled to the Houthi-controlled Yemeni capital (Sana'a) in June to address proposals for a ceasefire and the re-establishment of negotiations and continued with its efforts in the following weeks. The delegation's trip, which was joined by Houthi leaders residing in the Omani capital, Muscat, was considered another unusual visible example of the mediating role played by the Arab country, involved in other processes in the region. Oman maintains good relations with both the US and Iran and has recently strengthened its relations with Saudi Arabia.

In August, Swedish diplomat Hans Grundberg took office as the new UN special envoy for Yemen and held meetings with Saudi officials, such as Hadi and members of his government in Riyadh in September, and with Houthi delegates in Muscat in October, with senior Iranian officials in Tehran and other Yemeni actors in Aden and Taiz in November, confirming the disagreements between the parties. In this context, events affecting the Hodeidah area highlighted the fragility of one of the three points of the Stockholm Agreement. The ceasefire in the area was called into question after the Joint Resistance Forces, one of the armed actors allied with Saudi Arabia and the Hadi government, decided to withdraw, allowing a shake-up in the correlation of forces in the area. After this group withdrew, in a move that was not reported to the UN mission that monitors the ceasefire in Hodeidah

(UNMHA), the Houthis occupied their positions and reopened the road to Sana'a. In the following weeks, there were many clashes between the Houthis and rival forces in the area, as well as air strikes from Riyadh in support of their allies. The armed clashes caused the highest number of victims on the Red Sea coast since 2018. Unlike in 2020, when the release of a significant number of prisoners was announced, thereby fulfilling another stipulation of the Stockholm Agreement, there was no progress in the negotiations between the Houthis and the Hadi government for an exchange of prisoners throughout 2021. Moreover, at the end of the year Grundberg alerted the UN Security Council that there was an alarming increase in the number of people detained by the parties to the conflict.

Given this scenario, the new UN special envoy for Yemen expressed concern about how the conflict was developing, the military escalation and the possibility that the war could evolve into an even more violent and fragmented scenario. **Grundberg said that he was in favour of a more inclusive peace process led by Yemenis** and stressed the need to keep communication channels open to try to address the disagreements between the parties, which have deepened since their last talks in Kuwait in 2016. In December, at the briefing to the UN Security Council, the diplomat highlighted the importance of involving Yemeni actors in the political process that are not involved in the hostilities, supporting initiatives that reduce violence in the short term, opening parallel channels of negotiation and continuing the dialogue even without a ceasefire. Before this session, Grundberg had made another visit to Oman where he met with Yemeni and Omani officials and with the Houthi chief negotiator, Mohamed Abdul Salem. At the end of the year, the Houthis continued to deny him entry to Sana'a.

Some analysts reported the need to reformulate the negotiating framework so that it more fittingly reflects the different actors and lines of the Yemeni conflict and therefore allows the incorporation of new voices in the negotiations on a ceasefire and in political discussions. In this vein, it has been underlined that until now the interpretations of UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015) have limited the negotiations to two large groups (the Houthis and the Hadi government) that in practice do not have either territorial or political control or legitimacy among the Yemeni population. Therefore, it seems imperative to overcome the reluctance of both sides and of Saudi Arabia and bring other actors into the negotiations, including local entities and women's organizations

41. The Arab Weekly, "Oman brings into the open its mediation on Yemen", *The Arab Weekly*, 31 March 2021.

42. International Crisis Group, *The Case for More Inclusive –and More Effective– Peacemaking in Yemen*, Middle East Report no.221, 18 March 2021.

that have been key promoters of peace and stability in Yemen in recent years.⁴² Regarding the prospects for the negotiations, some mentioned Grundberg's experience as EU ambassador in Yemen as a positive factor, as it increases the possibility that he will be able to agree on a European position on the conflict. The recent rebalancing in relations between the Gulf countries and particularly the more visible role played by Oman as part of its closer ties with Riyadh were also indicated as having the potential to break the deadlock. Others suggested that the Houthis would find it difficult to agree to a ceasefire while the battle for Ma'arib is at stake. Additionally, the growing political and economic tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE were identified as potentially destabilising, considering Abu Dhabi's role in supporting the STC.

Saudi media openly criticised the UAE for its role in Yemen, accusing it of boycotting the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, especially with regard to security deals.⁴³ Finally, meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia were re-established after having cut all their diplomatic ties in 2016. According to reports, their security talks focused mainly on the situation in Yemen.

Yemeni women denounced exclusion and also highlighted some priorities for negotiations, such as a ceasefire and the eradication of military camps and arms depots from cities

Gender, peace and security

Throughout 2021, organisations working on gender, peace and security continued to draw attention to the gendered impacts of the conflict. **The need for an inclusive peace process was also stressed, with the substantive participation of diverse Yemeni women (from all regions and political affiliations) at all levels and stages. It was also seen as important for the UN special envoy for Yemen to maintain regular contacts with women's groups.** Women were not involved in consultations on the release of prisoners during the year. The need became clear to consider some of the priorities indicated by women's groups in addressing the conflict, such as their call to eradicate military camps and weapons depots in the cities and the urgency of a ceasefire in Ma'arib. Activists demanded support for the #NoWomenNoGovernment campaign launched in December 2020 to denounce the total exclusion of Yemeni women from the unity government formed under the Riyadh Agreement. They also asked the international community to financially support implementation of the Yemeni National Action Plan for Resolution 1325, considering the recommendations made by civil society to improve the plan.

43. Eleonora Ardemagni, *Saudi Arabia's New Balances on Yemen*, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), 20 July 2021.