

6. Peace negotiations in the Middle East

- The Middle East was the scene of five peace processes and negotiations in 2023, accounting for 11% of all cases worldwide.
- The difficulties in reviving the deal on the Iranian nuclear programme became clear throughout 2023 amidst an impasse in the negotiations and rising tensions between the parties involved.
- In 2023, a series of factors encouraged expectations of a historic opportunity to address the Yemeni conflict, but by the end of the year the prospects were in doubt due to the regional impact of the Gaza crisis and the escalation in the Red Sea.
- Thirty years after the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian-Israeli issue returned to the centre of international attention and various initiatives had not achieved a permanent ceasefire by the end of the year.
- In Syria, the different negotiating formats between multiple local, regional and international actors yielded no progress towards a political solution to the conflict.

This chapter analyses the main peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East throughout 2023. First, it presents the main characteristics and general trends of the negotiating processes in the region. Second, it studies the evolution of contexts during the year, including references to the gender perspective and implementation of the international agenda on women, peace and security. At the beginning of this chapter, a map is also presented identifying the countries of the Middle East that were the scene of negotiations in 2023.

Table 6.1. Summary of peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2023

| Peace processes and negotiations | Negotiating actors | Third parties |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Iran (nuclear programme) | Iran, France, United Kingdom, Germany, China, Russia, EU, USA ¹ | UN |
| Israel – Palestine | Israel, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Palestinian Authority (PA) | Qatar, Egypt, USA, France, UN, ² International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) |
| Palestine | Fatah, Hamas | Egypt, Türkiye |
| Syria | Government, political and armed opposition groups, regional and international actors ³ | UN (Geneva process); Russia, Türkiye, Iran (Astana process with Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, UN and ICRC as observers); Arab League (Jordanian initiative) |
| Yemen | Internationally recognised Yemeni government (backed by Riyadh), Houthis / Ansar Allah, Saudi Arabia ⁴ | ONU, Oman, ICRC |

6.1 Negotiations in 2023: regional trends

This chapter analyses five negotiating processes that took place in 2023 in the Middle East and account for 11% of the peace processes worldwide that year. Three of the cases were linked to armed conflicts (Israel-Palestine, Syria and Yemen) and two were related to socio-political crises (the internal dispute between the Palestinian groups Hamas and Fatah and

the development of the Iranian nuclear programme). Except for the Palestinian case (Hamas-Fatah), which was internal in nature, the rest were internationalised (Syria and Yemen) or international (Israel-Palestine and tension over the Iranian nuclear programme). In geographic terms, two cases were located in the Persian Gulf (Iran and Yemen) and three were in the Mashreq (Israel-Palestine, Palestine and Syria). In the previous edition of the yearbook, the case of Israel-Palestine had stopped being analysed as a peace process due to the chronic impasse in the negotiations, broken off

1 In 2018 the Trump administration decided to withdraw the US from the nuclear agreement and reimpose sanctions on Iran. The Biden administration has remained indirectly involved in the negotiating process with Tehran.

2 This table does not include the Middle East Peace Quartet -made up of the US, Russia, the UN and the EU- due to its inactivity in the field of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, especially since the increase in tensions between Washington and Moscow over the war in Ukraine. The last statement by the Quartet envoys dates back to the end of 2021. The Quartet Office remains operational in Jerusalem but focuses its activities on the part of its mandate related to supporting Palestinian economic and institutional development.

3 Although some regional and international actors present themselves as third parties, in practice they also operate as negotiators and favour understandings to ensure their presence and influence on Syrian soil.

4 Saudi Arabia also plays a role as a mediator/facilitator in disputes between various actors on the anti-Houthi side.

Map 6.1. Peace negotiations in the Middle East in 2023



■ Countries with peace processes and negotiations in the Middle East in 2023.

since 2014, and the gradual exhaustion of the two-state formula amidst Israel's persistent occupation and annexation policies and its structural discrimination against the Palestinian population that was increasingly described as apartheid. After the events of 2023 and the crisis in Gaza, the case is being analysed again in this edition of the report to address the mediation attempts, the diplomatic initiatives, the dynamics that shaped the achievement of a ceasefire and some of the approaches to addressing the Israeli-Palestinian issue in the longer term, which among other proposals aim to revive the two-state path when the 30-year anniversary of the Oslo Accords is commemorated.

Governments were involved in all negotiating processes in the region, either through direct and formalised contact or indirectly with other actors, with states and/or with other types of armed and unarmed organisations, some of which operated as de facto governments in the land under their control. Despite the deadlock of the negotiations, the framework of the agreement on Tehran's nuclear programme continued in force during 2023, in which Iran participated along with the rest of the signatory countries (Russia, China, France, the United Kingdom and Germany) and the EU. The US, which abandoned the agreement in 2018 during the Trump administration, also maintained indirect contacts with Iran. The internationally recognised government of Yemen, supported by Riyadh, also remained involved in the UN-backed intra-Yemeni process, although the talks

between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, who control most of the north and centre of the country, took centre stage during 2023. The Israeli government maintained indirect contacts with Islamic Jihad for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip in the first half of 2023 and with Hamas for dealing with the escalating situation starting in the last quarter. Hamas has controlled Gaza since 2007. Though limited, talks also continued between the Palestinian Authority (Fatah) and Hamas aimed at intra-Palestinian reconciliation to address the fracture and division between the West Bank and Gaza. The Syrian government also continued to participate in the different officially active formats for addressing the armed conflict, at least formally and with varying degrees of involvement (the UN-promoted Geneva process, the Astana process promoted by Russia, Türkiye and Iran and the new Amman track, which started in 2023 at the initiative of the Arab League). Unlike the previous year, Damascus' contacts with the Kurdish administration (AANES) that controls the northeast of the country were blocked in 2023. The case of Syria illustrates the fluid nature and diffuse roles played by some regional and international actors that are formally involved in mediation or facilitation efforts but in practice seek to prioritise their agendas and interests and/or ensure that their areas of influence are maintained.

As in previous years, the **significant influence of regional and international actors in the dynamics of the disputes and/or the prospects for negotiations** in the Middle

East was especially clear. This influence was the result of their direct or indirect participation in some of the armed conflicts that are the subject of negotiation or in attempts at mediation, their ability to sway some of the local actors involved in the respective disputes and/or their power and influence at a more general level in the regional and international scenario and in some of the dialogue and negotiating mechanisms or other types of diplomatic initiatives launched. **In 2023, an illustrative example of this dynamic was the repercussions that the announcement of rapprochement and subsequent reestablishment of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia had in various contexts.** The rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran based on contacts initially facilitated by Iraq and Oman ended up taking form after China got involved, which thereby demonstrated a greater role in the future of Middle Eastern affairs. This understanding between Iran and Saudi Arabia announced in March, seven years after their diplomatic break in a context of intense geopolitical conflicts and power struggles in the region, raised certain expectations due to its possible impacts on the situation in Yemen due to the role played by both actors in recent years in support of the rival sides. In fact, one of Riyadh's conditions for restoring relations with Iran was for Tehran to end its military support for the Houthis and influence their positions in the negotiating process. The rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran also encouraged some positive prospects for dialogue on Iran's nuclear programme, partly also because the announcement coincided with other developments, such as some limited progress in implementing Iran's commitments under the agreement overseen by the IAEA and indirect talks between Tehran and Washington mediated by Oman.

In a similar vein, according to various analysts, reports in the second half of the year indicating the possible establishment of formal relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel as part of the "normalisation" agreements promoted by the US may have also influenced Hamas' calculations to launch its attack in October to expose that it was not possible to reach this type of agreement in the region while ignoring the Palestinian issue. Another illustrative example of this dynamic in 2023 was Washington's positioning in the face of the escalation of violence in Israel-Palestine, the crisis in Gaza and the growing instability in the Middle East. The US was involved in the mediation attempts between Israel and Hamas, but it also gave political and military support to Netanyahu's government and exercised its veto power in the UN Security Council to ensure Israel's interests at the same time. This blocked the approval of a UN Security Council resolution that openly called for a ceasefire.

Following the trend of previous years, third parties were involved in all peace processes in the region, in

Third parties were involved in all peace processes in the region, in some cases with several different actors involved in mediation and facilitation efforts, either consecutively or simultaneously

some cases with several different actors involved in mediation and facilitation efforts, either consecutively or simultaneously. As a multilateral actor, the United Nations continued to be involved in these efforts through its special envoys for Syria and Yemen. Different figures also worked on the Palestinian-Israeli issue –in addition to the usual role of the envoy for the Middle East, the UN Secretary-General became actively involved in efforts to bring about a permanent ceasefire and ensure unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. UN activities focused on supervising the implementation of the 2015 agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and by monitoring the commitments made in the UN Security Council resolution to endorse it through periodic reports issued by the UN Secretary-General. In terms of regional organisations, the Arab League launched an initiative regarding the situation in Syria in 2023. Amidst greater contact with Bashar Assad's regime, especially after the earthquakes that rocked northern Syria in early 2023, the Arab League decided to readmit Damascus, which had been expelled from the regional forum in 2011 for its brutal repression of opposition protests. It also opened a channel of dialogue with Assad's regime for the stated purpose of addressing the Syrian crisis and all its repercussions, a move criticised by the Syrian opposition. According to various analysts, amidst international disinterest in the Syrian issue, the Arab countries prioritised their agendas: guaranteeing a certain level of stability in Syria, reducing the influence of Iran, achieving a solution for the situation of the Syrian refugee population in several countries of the region and stopping drug trafficking affecting the area.

As in previous years, **various countries in the region played an important role in mediating and facilitating talks between conflicting parties.** These included **Oman**, involved in the dialogue between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, and in indirect contacts between Washington and Tehran in 2023; **Qatar**, which played a prominent role in contacts between Hamas and Israel that led to a partial one-week truce, exchanges of hostages and prisoners and the temporary lifting of obstacles to accessing humanitarian aid; and **Egypt**, involved in Israel's truce with Islamic Jihad, in the meeting between Hamas and the PA to address intra-Palestinian reconciliation, in the attempts to achieve a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and in the new mechanism established by the Arab league to talk with the Syrian regime. Iraq and Jordan continued in their role as observers in the Astana process and also joined the Arab League's liaison team with Damascus. The **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** has played a role in Yemen, in Syria and more recently in the agreement between Israel and Hamas, especially in matters of prisoners and in facilitating exchanges.

The subjects of the active negotiating agendas and processes in the Middle East in 2023 were varied, given the specific nature of the different contexts. However, three subjects were especially important for the armed conflicts. The first was the search for ceasefire agreements. It was a crucial issue in the Palestinian-Israeli context in the first half of the year, then after the significant escalation of violence starting in October, which activated several different diplomatic initiatives as the weeks passed and alarms about the serious humanitarian crisis and the commission of genocide in Gaza. A ceasefire was also important in the discussions about the future of Yemen, where a de facto cessation of hostilities was maintained during 2023, despite the breakdown of the UN-backed truce agreement. A second important issue, which remained central at the end of the year, was that of **prisoner exchanges**. The release of nearly 900 people in compliance with previous agreements and commitments by the parties marked a milestone in Yemen in 2023 and helped to raise certain expectations about the political process. In the last quarter of 2023, the issue of hostages and prisoners was also central to the negotiations between Israel and Hamas. The issue of prisoners has also been very important in the peace processes in Syria. Finally, the most pressing issues on the agenda in these three cases has also included **humanitarian challenges** and access to aid for the enormous needs of the civilian population. In Syria, this also resulted from the earthquakes that devastated the region.

In general, the **trend of the negotiations confirms the problems, obstacles and inertia faced by the various negotiating processes in the region, which make it difficult to achieve negotiated political solutions** to the armed conflicts and socio-political crises. **The events of 2023 also illustrate the interconnections between the dynamics of the various contexts** and how they not only impact levels of regional instability and volatility, but also the prospects for negotiation and moving forward on diplomatic tracks. The case that encouraged the greatest expectations during the year was that of Yemen, given the convergence of a series of factors: the reduction in levels of violence compared to previous years as a result of the de facto maintenance of the ceasefire reached in 2022, the exchange of a thousand prisoners as part of the provisions of previous agreements facilitated by the UN, the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the prospects of influence in the political process due to both countries' role in supporting different sides of the Yemeni conflict and progress in negotiations between Riyadh and the Houthis, mediated by Oman. This confluence of factors led to warnings about a "historic opportunity" to address the Yemeni dispute. At the end of the

Issues such as the search for ceasefires, prisoner exchanges and humanitarian challenges played a prominent role in the negotiating agendas in the region

The cases in the Middle East illustrated the problems, obstacles and inertia faced by various processes and the interconnections between the different cases, which shaped how the negotiations developed

year, the parties seemed to be committed to address a new nationwide ceasefire agreement and resume the UN-sponsored peace process. However, the future of the Yemeni process was in doubt due to the regional repercussions of the crisis in Gaza and the escalating tension in the Red Sea, where the Houthis assumed a leading role. The situation in Gaza also affected the intra-Palestinian reconciliation process, which raised very few expectations before the events of October, and negatively influenced the context of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme. Throughout 2023, the difficulties in reviving the Iranian nuclear deal became clearer amidst the impasse in the negotiations and growing tensions between the parties involved. Despite the various schemes formally established to address the conflict in Syria, there were no prospects for a political solution to the armed conflict in 2023, which was experiencing an escalation in violence by the year's end.

Some of the processes underway also revealed problems and challenges regarding **inclusivity**. In Yemen, for example, some warned of the risks that a possible agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis would be reached to the detriment of other actors in Yemeni society. Analysts also warned of the marginalisation of local actors in Syria from the negotiating formats compared to the prioritisation of the interests of regional and international actors involved in the conflict.

In 2023, as in other years, **several different challenges for the equal and substantive participation of women also continued to be observed, especially in formal negotiating forums**. Yemeni women continued to complain of their exclusion from these areas and demanded to participate in discussions about the future of their country as a right, and not as a privilege. In meetings and exchanges during the year, they identified issues that they thought should be priorities in any possible agreement and confidence-building measures, while continuing their mediation efforts in resolving local disputes, reintegrating child soldiers, opening humanitarian corridors and documenting abuse, while taking the gender perspective into account. Women's participation in Syria continued to be affected by the deadlock in the negotiations, particularly the UN-backed Geneva process, where they had achieved 30% participation in the Constitutional Committee.

Beyond the cases analysed in this chapter, other dialogue initiatives were also carried out in the region in 2023. Thus, for example, after a year of preparations, an announced "national dialogue" was launched in Egypt in May, though it was subject to much criticism. The complaints highlighted its unilateral nature and the

fact that it was orchestrated by the government, with various analysts describing it as a “façade”, “political manoeuvring”, a “public relations stunt” and other things, denouncing that it was launched alongside the intensified persecution and arrest of opponents and activists, including some groups formally participating in the dialogue.

6.2 Case study analysis

Mashreq

| Israel – Palestine | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Negotiating actors | Israel, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Palestinian Authority (PA) |
| Third parties | Qatar, Egypt, USA, France, UN, ⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) |
| 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.

Thirty years after the Oslo Accords were signed, the Palestinian-Israeli issue returned to the centre of international attention in 2023 due to a significant intensification of violence with serious repercussions in the Middle East region and beyond. Hamas’ unprecedented attack on various Israeli towns, which caused around 1,200 deaths and led to around 200 people being taken hostage, made 7 October the bloodiest day since the establishment of the state of

Israel. The attack sparked a retaliation by Israel of a nearly unparalleled magnitude in recent times that had caused the death of over 25,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and another 300 in the West Bank by the end of the year and in just three months. These events caused a flurry of diplomatic activity at various levels that barely yielded results by the end of the year, despite the critical humanitarian situation in Gaza and the growing evidence that acts of genocide were being committed against the Palestinian population.

Before the events of October, at least two previous dynamics were in play. The first was **Egypt’s intervention in May to achieve a ceasefire between Israel and Islamic Jihad**. The death of a spokesman for Islamic Jihad (Khader Adnan) after a nearly three-month hunger strike in protest of his detention without trial in Israel prompted the group to launch more than 100 rockets into Israel. The Netanyahu government responded with a new five-day operation in Gaza (Operation Shield and Arrow). The hostilities, in which Hamas was not involved, resulted in the deaths of 33 Palestinians and one Israeli and subsided after an agreement was brokered by Cairo on 13 May. These events occurred against a backdrop of increasing violence in the West Bank (the highest number of Palestinian deaths since 2005 had already been reported by mid-year) and growing criticism of the Palestinian Authority (PA) for its security agreements with Israel. The second was **information about a possible upcoming formal establishment of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia as part of the “normalisation”** agreements (Abraham Accords) with Arab countries promoted by the US under the Trump administration that the Biden administration continued to push. Washington also organised meetings between Israeli, Jordanian and Egyptian representatives during the year, but after months of talks the priority was the agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel in a context marked by shifting regional balances due to the thawing of relations between Riyadh and Tehran in March.

In September, in exchange for “normalisation”, Riyadh wanted a deal that included a security agreement with the United States, with fewer restrictions on US arms sales to the kingdom, assistance in the development of its own civil nuclear programme and progress in the creation of a Palestinian state. Senior Israeli officials assured that an agreement could be made in a few months, though **the Netanyahu government rejected any concessions to the Palestinian Authority (PA) or any freeze in settlement building as part of the “normalisation” with Riyadh**. Saudi Arabia had tried to gain the PA’s support for the initiative by offering to resume financial support. A Palestinian delegation reportedly travelled to Riyadh in August to present their demands, which according to media reports included

⁵ This table does not include the Middle East Peace Quartet -made up of the US, Russia, the UN and the EU- due to its inactivity in the field of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, especially since the increase in tensions between Washington and Moscow over the war in Ukraine. The last statement by the Quartet envoys dates back to the end of 2021. The Quartet Office remains operational in Jerusalem but focuses its activities on the part of its mandate related to supporting Palestinian economic and institutional development.

more control over parts of the West Bank, the reopening of the US consulate in East Jerusalem and Washington's support for full Palestinian representation in the UN. The PA's requests demonstrated a change since its reaction to the announcement of the other normalisation agreements, when it accused the Arab countries signing it of betrayal. Although it was not the first agreement of its kind with Israel (the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco signed it in 2020 and Sudan in 2021), a possible deal with Saudi Arabia potentially had greater political and symbolic weight. In 2002, Riyadh had been the promoter of the Arab Peace Initiative (or Saudi Initiative), which made the normalisation of relations with Israel and the recognition of its right to exist depend on its withdrawal from the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967 and the Golan Heights in Syria. Therefore, beyond the motivations that Hamas publicly acknowledged for its attack on 7 October, some analysts argued that the Palestinian group also intended to react to these regional dynamics and assert that it was not possible to reach agreements with Israel by excluding the Palestinian issue.

Following the events of October, various channels were activated. In late October, Qatari mediation efforts achieved the release of four Israeli women hostages, but it was not until the end of November that Qatar brokered a week-long truce (between 24 and 30 November) with the support of Egypt and the United States. Indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas then led to an agreement to temporarily suspend hostilities for an initial period of four days, in which 50 hostages would be released in exchange for 150 Palestinian prisoners, while access to fuel and humanitarian aid would be given to the Gaza Strip. The mechanism was designed to promote a renewal of the deal, which was extended first for 48 hours and then for another 24 hours, or three days in total, despite mutual accusations of violations of the cessation of hostilities. With the assistance of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), more than 100 hostages held by Hamas (86 Israelis and 24 foreigners) were finally released during the week and nearly 240 Palestinian women and minors were freed, many of them kept in prison by Israel under the controversial label of "administrative detention". Qatar continued with its diplomatic efforts, but it had not reached a new deal by the end of the year. It was not until mid-January 2024 that Doha announced a limited agreement, reached with the help of France, by which Israel pledged to allow the entry of medicine and other basic supplies to the Gaza Strip in exchange for Hamas promising that the hostages it held would be able to receive medical treatment.

In addition to the attempts at mediation between Hamas and Israel, the situation in Gaza prompted intense diplomatic debates within the United Nations

The renewed debates on the two-state formula coincided with critical assessments of the international approach to the conflict three decades after the Oslo agreements

Egypt, another regular mediator between Israel and Hamas, also became involved in mediation efforts and organised a high-level diplomatic meeting (peace summit) in late October that was attended by representatives of several countries (including

Germany, China, Spain, the USA, France, Jordan, the United Kingdom, Russia, South Africa and Qatar), the EU, the UN and the PA, but not Israel. The summit was held amidst speculation about the Israeli authorities' intention to forcibly expel the Palestinian population to Egypt and Jordan, a possibility that both countries rejected. Various analyses highlighted that Cairo's priority was to avoid the repercussions of the crisis in Gaza on its territory, in particular the arrival of the refugee population and the reactivation of armed groups in the Sinai. According to reports, **by the end of the year Egypt was working on a proposal with three interconnected phases.** The first would be a two-week truce to allow the release of part of the hostages held by Hamas (40) in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners (120). The second phase included a Palestinian national dialogue to resolve internal divisions between the different factions, establish a technocratic government that would take over the government of Gaza and the West Bank, supervise the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and move towards holding the postponed presidential and parliamentary elections (the last ones were held 15 years ago, in 2006).⁶ The third phase of the plan would aim for a permanent ceasefire, an end to Israel's attacks on Gaza and the withdrawal of its military forces from the Strip. In early 2024, however, Egypt decided to (temporarily) suspend its mediating role after the assassination of Hamas' second-in-command, Saleh al-Arouri, in an attack attributed to Israel that occurred in southern Lebanon.

In addition to the attempts at mediation between Hamas and Israel, the situation in Gaza prompted intense diplomatic debates within the United Nations. Amidst growing political tensions, **the exercise and threat of a veto by the US was crucial for defending Israel's position and interests.** The United States and European countries refused to publicly demand a ceasefire to refrain from challenging the Israeli government's claims to its alleged "right to self-defence". However, the substance and form of this argument was questioned by other international actors and experts

in international law who objected to Israel's military offensive in Gaza according to this right because it is a territory occupied and controlled by Israel. Since October, both the UN General Assembly and the UN Security

6 See the summary on Palestine in this chapter.

Council have held meetings to address the Palestinian-Israeli and Middle East issues. **The UN Security Council met at least 15 times and considered many draft resolutions, but only approved two.** The first, Resolution 2712, approved on 15 November, was limited to calling for “establishing pauses and humanitarian corridors in Gaza for a sufficient number of days” to allow access to aid and secure the unconditional release of the hostages. In December, after the collapse of the truce agreement between Israel and Hamas, **António Guterres invoked Article 99 of the United Nations Charter**, which empowers the UN Secretary-General to draw the attention of the Security Council to matters threatening international peace and security and has only been used exceptionally in the history of the UN, **to demand a “humanitarian ceasefire” and “avoid a catastrophe”.** **However, the proposed resolution presented to the UN Security Council two days later was sunk by Washington’s veto.** After several postponements and changes to avoid a new US veto, UNSC Resolution 2720 was approved on 22 December, with the US and Russia abstaining, which repeats the demand to release the hostages and calls on the parties “to take urgent steps to allow safe, expanded and unhindered access to humanitarian aid and to create the conditions for a cessation of hostilities”. In late December, **the government of South Africa chose to appeal to the highest UN justice body, the International Court of Justice (based in The Hague) to denounce the growing evidence of genocide by Israel against the Palestinian population** and try to get the court to prescribe precautionary measures, including a ceasefire order.

The drift of events triggered a discussion about different short- and medium-term future scenarios, both for Gaza and for the more general approach to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. In this scenario, **various actors insisted on the two-state solution as the only way to resolve the conflict**, including the UN Secretary-General, the United States and the EU (in late October, the European Council accepted Spain’s proposal to hold an international peace conference based on this formula). Washington approved of this option and of the PA assuming control of Gaza, but the Netanyahu government made it clear that it intended to control the entire territory and, in line with positions expressed for years, that it was opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state. **The fresh debates on the viability of the two-state formula coincided with criticism of the lack of international commitment and desire to address the conflict three decades after the Oslo Accords**, a period in which, among other dynamics, Palestinian territory has increasingly fragmented, Israeli settlements have multiplied (from nearly 200,000 in the early 1990s to over 700,000 in 2023) and the dispossession of and structural discrimination against the Palestinian population has worsened in a context of impunity, despite increasing descriptions of it as apartheid.

| | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Palestine | |
| Negotiating actors | Hamas, Fatah |
| Third parties | Egypt, Türkiye |
| 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.

For most of 2023, the dynamics of delayed intra-Palestinian reconciliation followed the same trend as in previous years, with limited contacts and low expectations. Yet in the last quarter, the prospects changed completely and were shaped as a result of the very serious situation in Gaza and its different derivations, including political ones. The most notable event in the first few months of 2023 was the **high-level meeting between Hamas and Fatah held in late July to address delayed intra-Palestinian reconciliation.** Unlike 2022, when the rapprochement between the parties was promoted by Algeria, this time it was Egypt that pushed and hosted the initiative, another common mediator between both factions. Türkiye also attempted to facilitate rapprochement during the year.

The meeting took place in the city of El Alamein, on the Egyptian Mediterranean coast, and was attended by both the leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, and the top leader of Fatah and president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas. A couple of days earlier, both Palestinian leaders had met in Ankara with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Abbas and Haniyeh had not had a public meeting for a year; in July 2022, they had met in Algeria for the first time in five years. Representatives of most Palestinian political groups also attended the meeting in El Alamein. One of the exceptions was Islamic Jihad, which said it would only attend following the release of the organisation’s prisoners detained by PA security forces in the West Bank. During the meeting, Ismail Haniyeh called on

Abbas to stop political arrests and end collaboration with Israel on security matters. The Hamas leader also stressed the importance of forming a new Parliament through free and democratic elections. Abbas praised the meeting as a first step to continue the dialogue with a view to achieving Palestinian national unity and thereby ending the 17 years of separation. The Fatah leader emphasised the need to return to having “a single state, a single system, a single law and a single legitimate army” and announced the formation of a committee to continue the dialogue. The disagreements between both leaders were clear around some issues such as the PLO (Haniyeh urged the restructuring of this platform in which most Palestinian factions participate, but not Hamas and Islamic Jihad) and around how the Palestinian resistance should take shape. Abbas called for “peaceful popular resistance”, while Haniyeh advocated “comprehensive resistance”. The meeting took place amidst an intensification of violence, especially in the West Bank, where by mid-year the deaths of over 200 Palestinians had already been reported in actions by Israeli military forces and settlers. Various analysts indicate this violence had intensified criticism of the PA by groups complaining of its inaction, inability to protect the population and its collaboration with Israel.

After the meeting in El Alamein, various observers noted the lack of expectations about the results of the dialogue and about the possibility that the meeting in Egypt and the announced committee would lead to intra-Palestinian reconciliation or to the announcement of a schedule for new elections. In April 2021, the president of the PA called off what would have been the first Palestinian elections in 15 years. After the meeting in El Alamein, analysts said that Abbas and his political group, Fatah, would surely continue to postpone the elections since polls indicated that Hamas would obtain the highest percentage of votes if they were held. According to a study by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) published in June, in a legislative election Hamas would receive 34% of the votes, compared to 31% for Fatah, and in a hypothetical presidential election between Abbas and Haniyeh, Abbas would receive 33% compared to 56% for Haniyeh. In addition to these polls, analysts said that another indicator of this trend was the triumph of the Islamist group’s lists in the student council elections in universities in the West Bank (at Birzeit University in Ramallah in 2022, and at the An-Najah National University in Nablus in 2023). In line with previous studies, the PCPSR poll also found a decline in Fatah’s popularity in both the West Bank and Gaza and great disapproval of Abbas: 80% of the people surveyed thought he should resign. Likewise, the proportion of the Palestinian population that believes that the PA exists to serve Israeli interests and that its dissolution could help the Palestinian

cause has increased. According to the PCPSR opinion study carried out to mark the 75th anniversary of the Nakba, internal division was an issue of special concern for the Palestinian population, according to which the split between the West Bank and Gaza was the most damaging event since 1948.

Starting in the last quarter, the debates on the intra-Palestinian political struggles were overshadowed and shaped by events after the 7 October attack by Hamas, the Israeli retaliation and the very serious situation in Gaza and in the West Bank at the end of the year. The Israeli government explicitly declared its intention to eradicate Hamas and to not allow it to continue controlling the Gaza Strip. Other actors, such as the US, proposed that in the future the PA could assume control of Gaza as part of a plan aimed at restoring the two-state formula as a long-term solution. **Abbas did not rule out the possibility of regaining control of the Gaza Strip, though he did link it to a broader approach to the conflict that would also address the situation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.** However, various analysts say it would be difficult for the PA to control Gaza, not only due to the impossibility of eradicating Hamas as Israel wishes, but also due to the weakness of the PA itself, which is increasingly questioned and perceived as autocratic and corrupt. Alongside intense debates about possible short- and medium-term scenarios in Gaza, there were indications that recent events had boosted Hamas’ popularity, as it was seen as willing to confront Israel, and sharpened criticism of the PA and Abbas among the Palestinian population. According to a new PCPSR study published in December 2023, levels of support for Hamas had risen in both Gaza and the West Bank (42% and 44% support, respectively), while 90% wanted Abbas to resign, 10 points more than months before.

At the end of the year, Fatah publicly underlined the need to achieve unity with Hamas and said that national dialogue was the way to reach a consensus on how to govern and present the Palestinian cause to the world. In this context, Fatah reportedly asked Türkiye for support to act as a mediator and try to revive reconciliation efforts. Egypt was also reportedly attempting to mediate between Israel and Palestinian factions and had outlined a three-phase plan that included a Palestinian national dialogue aimed at resolving internal divisions, the establishment of a technocratic government in Gaza and the West Bank, oversight of the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and work towards the holding of parliamentary and presidential elections. Delegations from Hamas and Islamic Jihad were in Egypt in December. Meanwhile, media reports echoed **internal struggles and tensions within both Hamas and Fatah regarding the strategies to follow in the new context.**

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Syria | |
| Negotiating actors | Government, political and armed opposition groups, regional and international actors ⁷ |
| Third parties | UN (Geneva process), Russia, Türkiye, Iran (Astana process, with Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and the ICRC as observers), Arab League (Jordanian initiative) |
| 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)) |

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 Türkiye and Iran. In 2023, the Arab League began a new attempt to get involved in addressing the Syrian crisis. The various rounds of negotiations held since the beginning of the armed conflict have shown the deep differences between the parties and have not been able to halt the high levels of violence in the country.

The Syrian conflict's formal forums for negotiations, the Geneva and Astana processes, remained open during the year, though the former was practically blocked and the latter had limited activity. Meanwhile, a new forum was launched between Damascus and Arab countries, the Amman (Jordan) track, which ended up leading to Syria rejoining the Arab League. Yet by the end of the year, these various processes did not offer any prospects for a political solution to the armed conflict, which reported an escalation in violence in the last months of 2023. **In the UN-led Geneva process, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen's different contacts and meetings with various actors did not lead to any progress.** Despite Pedersen's attempts to reactivate the negotiating process, **in 2023 no meeting was held with the Constitutional Committee in charge of drafting a new proposed Constitution** in line with the provisions of UNSC Resolution 2254 (2015). This marked the end of more than a year of impasse in the Committee, mainly

due to the lack of involvement of the Assad regime, which was more active in the other two formats (Astana and Amman). The last meeting involving delegations from the opposition and the Syrian government took place in June 2022 and concluded without progress. As part of its strategic relationship with Russia, Damascus then demanded a change of venue for the meetings amidst accusations that Switzerland was no longer neutral due to its support for sanctions against the Kremlin for the war in Ukraine. The Geneva negotiation path is the only one that has the explicit support of Western actors such as the US, the United Kingdom and EU countries. However, neither the US nor the EU included dealing with Syria among their international policy priorities and although rhetorically they insist on the importance of maintaining the Geneva process as an important forum for dialogue, global geopolitical tensions, particularly between Washington and Moscow, have also had an impact on its viability, which is why it is increasingly being described as a failed process.

In the first few months of 2023, much of the diplomatic activity was oriented towards humanitarian issues due to the serious consequences of the earthquake on 6 February that devastated Türkiye and northwestern Syria, the latter controlled by forces opposing Assad. The regime attempted to take advantage of the impact of the earthquake to rehabilitate itself internationally and control humanitarian aid flows and benefited from a partial lifting of sanctions. In this context, Assad visited Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had a telephone conversation with the King of Jordan and received a visit from the Egyptian Foreign Minister in the highest-ranking visit by a representative of Cairo since 2011. Saudi Arabia even decided to reopen its embassy in Damascus. Diplomatic contacts between the Syrian regime and several Arab countries accelerated after the earthquake as part of rapprochements that had begun in 2018. **In April and May 2023, representatives of several states in the region met to discuss an initiative led by Arab countries aimed at addressing the Syrian crisis. What is now known as the "Jordan initiative" first convened the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria in Amman and paved the way for the subsequent readmission of Damascus into the Arab League,** from which it had been expelled in 2011 due to its brutal repression of anti-government protests. The decision to allow Syria to rejoin this regional organisation was taken on 7 May during an extraordinary meeting of the Council of the Arab League in Cairo that discussed the need to take "practical and effective" action to move towards resolving the Syrian crisis through a step-by-step approach within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Through its own resolution (8914), **the Arab League decided to establish a ministerial liaison committee made up of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit to maintain dialogue with the Damascus regime**

⁷ Although some regional and international actors present themselves as third parties, in practice they also operate as negotiators and promote understandings to guarantee their presence and influence in Syrian territory.

and reach a global solution to the Syrian crisis and all its repercussions. Two weeks later, on 19 May, Assad participated in the Arab League summit held in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia).

According to several analysts, the change in position towards Damascus by countries in the region can be explained by an interest in guaranteeing a certain degree of stability in Syria amidst chronic impasse in the political process and the weakness of the regime, and especially a desire to reduce the growing influence of Iran. Several countries in the region also hope to address the issue of the Syrian refugees and promote their return home and to halt growing drug trafficking. Regarding the latter, their main concern is the huge amounts of drugs leaving Syria with the complicity of the regime, and particularly “captagon”, a highly addictive synthetic drug that is wreaking havoc in countries of the Persian Gulf. In general, **the attempt to “re-regionalise” the Syrian issue has also been interpreted as a response to the West’s limited commitment to addressing the crisis and the ineffectiveness of the conflict resolution mechanisms employed thus far.** It has also been part of a more general trend to normalise relations between various Arab countries after years of tension and confrontation.⁸ Various actors, including Syrian opposition representatives, blasted the Arab League’s decision to readmit Damascus, considering it a betrayal of the victims of the crimes of the Assad regime. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria also highlighted the scant reference in the Arab League’s approach to the many human rights violations that have been widely documented in recent years and are one of the central elements of the conflict.⁹ In a similar vein, others pointed out that this pragmatic approach had left out the deep causes of the conflict and that it would surely open a new chapter to it, rather than guarantee its end. Some analysts thought that the Arab League’s initiative would have a partial impact, considering the Arab countries’ limited ability to influence Damascus, the unlikely distancing between Damascus and Tehran and the organisation’s own history, which has shown a limited ability to address some of the main regional challenges due to their internal divisions.¹⁰

Alongside these dynamics, the Astana process remained active throughout 2023. Begun in 2017, it is led by Russia, Iran and Türkiye, countries with a direct military presence in Syria. This format is perceived

The Arab League readmitted Syria into the regional organisation and activated a track to try to address the conflict and move its priorities forward amidst impasse in other mechanisms

as a mechanism that has essentially been used to normalise its main promoters’ military presence in Syria and minimise friction between them. In general terms, the Astana format has also received criticism from the start from Syrians and Syrian opposition groups, who consider it a forum where external actors impose their interests at the expense of the aspirations of the Syrian population. According to some analysts, there is also disillusionment among Syrians with some political and military leaders of the Syrian opposition, whom they accuse of having given in to pressure from Türkiye and Russia and of compromising the objectives of the revolt.¹¹ As part of this format, Turkish, Iranian, Russian and Syrian government representatives held meetings between defence ministers in April 2023 and between foreign ministers in May 2023, both in Moscow. There was also a meeting on 20 June, the twentieth and only round of the Astana process in 2023, held in Kazakhstan on 20 and 21 June (the previous year there had been two rounds and the last one had taken place in November 2022). The Astana process continued to involve Jordan, Iraq, the United Nations and the ICRC as observers. At the end of the June round, Kazakhstan surprisingly announced that the Astana process had achieved its objectives and could be concluded, noting the end of Syria’s isolation in the region as evidence, and said that it would not continue to host meetings for the format. However, Türkiye, Russia and Iran insisted that the talks would continue and that there would be a new round at the end of the year. Yet by the end of 2023, there had been no new meeting, nor any information about any city that would host one.

The official statement **after the twentieth round in Astana highlighted the progress made in preparing a road map for reestablishing relations between Türkiye and Syria amidst rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus** that has been observed since mid-2022, when Recep Tayyip Erdogan said ahead of elections that he intended to repair relations with Syria and even hold a meeting with Assad. Bilateral relations between both countries in the context of the armed conflict (Türkiye has supported Syrian opposition actors for more than a decade) was also a main topic of discussion during Assad’s visit to Moscow in March, given Russian interest in facilitating this political shift. **However, 2023 ended without any news or concrete steps in this area. Various analysts cited the obstacles to this bilateral approach, considering the respective priorities and interests and the difficulties in making them compatible.** To normalise

8 Middle East Policy Council, “Syria Normalization Faces Challenges in the Region and Beyond”, *Breaking Analysis*, 12 September 2023; Saban Kardas and Bulent Aras, “What Drove Syria Back into the Arab Fold?”, *Middle East Policy Council*, Fall 2023, 1 September 2023.

9 Human Rights Council, *Informe de la Comisión Internacional Independiente de Investigación sobre la República Árabe Siria*, A/HRC/54/58, 14 August 2023.

10 There was also no complete consensus on the reestablishment of relations with Syria (Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Bahrain and the UAE approved; Qatar was against it, but did not veto, though it refused to meet with Assad; Saudi Arabia had doubts, but it ended up leading the readmission process)

11 Faysal Abbas Mohamad, “The Astana Process Six Years On: Peace or Deadlock in Syria?”, *Sada*, 1 August 2023.

relations, Syria demanded the end of Ankara's support for Syrian opposition groups and a total withdrawal of Turkish military troops from the north of the country (estimated at 10,000). The Turkish government rejected these conditions. According to some analysts, Ankara's priorities include the issue of the refugee population (Türkiye hosts more than three million Syrians and does not want new flows into its territory) and Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria, which it perceives as an existential threat. Analysts indicate that the Turkish government is sceptical about Damascus' ability and willingness to address its concerns, meaning to prevent possible attacks from northeastern Syria and to challenge Kurdish autonomy, and to guarantee that there will be no further flows of refugees into Türkiye in case Damascus regains control of areas currently held by the Syrian opposition in the northwest. Erdogan's re-election in mid-2023 seemed to have diminished the urgency in establishing a substantive dialogue with Damascus, although the 2024 municipal elections in Türkiye suggested that the issue would continue to occupy a prominent place on the agenda. From Assad's point of view, the end of Syria's isolation from the Arab world diminished the importance of a political reconciliation with Türkiye.

A final dynamic to consider regards the meetings between Damascus and the Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria, known as the AANES, which is supported by the United States. Several meetings were held between the parties in 2023, but **in April Kurdish sources reported that contact with the Assad government had ended, so a proposal presented by the AANES** in April to address the distribution of resources (mainly hydrocarbons and grain in areas under the control of the Kurdish forces) and the autonomy of the region could not be considered. As part of regional changes and the normalisation of relations between Syria and Arab countries, the Kurdish administration publicly reaffirmed its willingness to negotiate with Damascus and other Syrian actors. **According to reports, Kurdish representatives had tried to get the UAE to mediate and facilitate dialogue with the Assad regime.** The military leader of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Mazloum Abdi, allegedly travelled to Abu Dhabi for this purpose, though UAE authorities have denied it. While returning to the AANES-controlled area from Iraq, the Kurdish military leader targeted by a Turkish drone attack. Türkiye has vetoed Syrian Kurdish representatives' involvement in the Geneva process and the three promoters of the Astana process have periodically rejected Kurdish self-government initiatives in northeastern Syria, which they describe as an attempt to create de facto realities. In media statements, Kurdish sources also expressed

concern about the lower level of commitment and support from the US during 2023. **At the end of the year, the UN special envoy maintained contacts with the parties involved in the different formats and warned that the status quo in Syria was not sustainable since the lack of political progress raised the risks of greater escalation of violence in the country,** in a regional scenario of greater instability due to the repercussions of the situation in Gaza.

Gender, peace and security

The possibilities of **women's participation in political dialogue initiatives on the future of Syria continued to be affected by the deadlock in the negotiations, particularly the Geneva process.** Women represent 29% of the delegates in the Constitutional Committee and during the eight previous debates, which ended more than a year ago, in June 2022, they have raised issues related to the rights and political participation of women, female quotas, non-discrimination, gender violence and the importance of considering women's needs and priorities in defining the future of the country. UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015) also calls for the effective participation of Syrian women in the political process. Under this framework and in line with the international agenda on women, peace and security, the office of the UN special envoy for Syria has attempted to maintain regular contact with Syrian women who participate in the Constitutional Committee and who are part of an advisory council mechanism, the Women's Advisory Board, as well as with Syrian women who are in Türkiye, Lebanon, northern Iraq and Syria. At a meeting in August, the UN Security Council's Informal Experts Group on Women, Peace and Security said that these contacts have enabled exchanges not only on gender equality issues, but also on issues related to sovereignty, equality and equal citizenship, pluralism and diversity, civic space, protection, local administration and decentralisation, transparency and accountability, re-establishing regional contacts with Syria and protection-related concerns for the safe and voluntary return of the refugee population. The issue of detained, kidnapped, missing and unaccounted persons remained a top priority for Syrian women.

During 2023, **the WAB continued to meet with Pedersen and his team. It was also subject to some criticism due to its degree of representativeness,** to the point that some suggest that it should not be hastily replicated as a mechanism for including women.¹² In this context, the office of the UN envoy for Syria activated a call to renew the members of this forum. After eight years, the aim is to

12 Marie Joëlle Zahar, "Seeking Inclusion, Breeding Exclusion? The UN's WPS Agenda and the Syrian Peace Talks", *International Negotiation*, 4 May 2023.

begin a rotation process that allows more Syrian women to be part of the WAB and influence the political process facilitated by the UN. During 2023, UN Women also stressed the importance of giving stronger support for the participation of Syrian women in track 2 and 3 diplomatic initiatives, such as those dedicated to community mediation, and of holding talks at the local level.

The Gulf

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Iran (nuclear programme) | |
| Negotiating actors | Iran, France, United Kingdom, Germany, China, Russia, EU, USA ¹³ |
| 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 led to the signing of an agreement in 2015 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.

During 2023, contacts continued as part of the 2015 agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), although **the difficulties in reviving it became clearer throughout the year amidst an impasse in the negotiations and growing tensions between the parties involved.** Since the US Trump administration announced it was withdrawing from the agreement in 2018 and reimposing unilateral sanctions on Iran, Tehran has remained formally committed to it. However, in recent years it has taken

The accusations levelled against Iran for its atomic activities came alongside growing criticism and action against Tehran for its harsh repression on the internal opposition

action that transgresses the limits established in the agreement and hinders the external supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) aimed at confirming the peaceful nature of its atomic programme.

After the negotiations were blocked in November 2022, IAEA Director Rafael Grossi kicked off 2023 warning that the constant violation of the limits established in the JCPOA was turning it into an empty agreement and that it was essential not to allow a political vacuum to develop around such a delicate issue. Meanwhile, CIA Director William J. Burns warned about the level of development of the Iranian nuclear programme. **The accusations levelled against Iran for its atomic activities came alongside growing criticism and action against Tehran for its harsh repression of the internal opposition** in the country, which intensified after the death in police custody of a young Kurdish woman, Mahsa Amini, in September 2022. Throughout the year, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and the EU announced sanctions against individuals and bodies of the regime for their links to human rights abuses, as well as for other reasons, including some related to military and ballistic programmes and the provision of military material to Russia, especially drones used in Ukraine. The latter was described as a violation of the restrictions established in UNSC Resolution 2231, which formalised the UN's support for the JCPOA. Nevertheless, the commitment to address the nuclear issue through diplomatic channels continued. In February, an IAEA report indicated that the agency had detected traces of 83.7% enriched uranium at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, which Iran claimed was an accident. During a visit by Grossi to Tehran, Iran and the IAEA then announced a commitment to allow the international agency to install cameras and other devices to support its verification and monitoring activities. The announcement allowed Iran to avoid a fresh rebuke from the IAEA Governing Council, though the US and the three European states involved in the JCPOA (France, the United Kingdom and Germany, known as the E3) repeated their concern about Iranian atomic activities. In May, an IAEA technical report confirmed that the explanations for the origin of the 83.7% enriched uranium particles were consistent and that it had no further questions on the matter at the time.

Between March and June, the IAEA noted some "limited progress" in implementing the commitments. This coincided with other important events, including the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia announced in March and the indirect talks between Tehran and Washington mediated by Oman in May. These contacts were reflected by a certain détente in

¹³ In 2018 the Trump administration decided to withdraw the US from the nuclear agreement and reimpose sanctions on Iran. The Biden administration has remained indirectly involved in the negotiating process with Tehran.

the following months and raised expectations for their possible repercussions on the nuclear talks. In July, the US approved a temporary sanctions waiver to allow payments from Iraq to Iran for electricity supplies on the condition that the resources were used for humanitarian issues. In August, US media outlets reported that Tehran had reduced the growth of uranium reserves at their highest levels and that incidents between US forces and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria had decreased, after having intensified in the previous months. **In mid-September, the US and Iran reached a bilateral agreement under which Tehran freed five US citizens imprisoned in Iran in exchange for Tehran's access to \$6 billion in oil revenues that were held in South Korean bank accounts, which were transferred to accounts in Qatar and could be used for humanitarian purposes.** The deal also reportedly included informal agreements to ease tensions between US forces and pro-Iranian militias in the region. Starting in October, however, **expectations about the evolution of these contacts were directly affected by the events in Gaza, given Iran's political and economic support for Hamas and Washington's unconditional support for Israel.** Thus, the US and Qatar agreed to temporarily block Tehran's access to funds while tensions rose between Washington and all the groups in Iran's orbit in the region.

The difficulties in reviving the Iranian nuclear programme became clearer throughout the year amidst an impasse in the negotiations and growing tensions between the parties involved

During the second half of the year, the outlook for nuclear dialogue also worsened due to other variables. In mid-September, the director of the IAEA reported that Iran had withdrawn authorisation from one third of the most experienced inspectors to perform their verification activities, which Grossi described as disproportionate and unprecedented. Although Iran is allowed to withdraw authorisation under the JCPOA, Grossi warned that the decision compromised the agency's effective ability to conduct its inspections. The United States and the E3 countries issued a joint statement calling on Iran to reverse the move and fully cooperate with the IAEA. In October, the United States announced new sanctions on individuals and bodies linked to Iran's ballistic missile and drone programme over alleged transfers to Hamas and Russia. The EU and the United Kingdom also decided to uphold the restrictions through their own sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile programme, which according to UNSC Resolution 2231 expired on 18 October 2023, arguing for Iran's non-compliance since 2019. Iran described the decision unilateral, illegal and politically unjustifiable. **In its November technical report, the IAEA stated that inspection activities had been seriously compromised by Iran's failure to implement its commitments under the JCPOA and noted that it had not been able to verify Iran's total enriched uranium stockpiles since February 2021.**

Given this scenario, some analysts thought that Tehran's non-compliance with the JCPOA could motivate (though not imminently) some members of the UN Security Council to initiate a procedure to overturn UNSC Resolution 2231 and decree that the agreement is no longer viable. This mechanism, which is not subject to a veto, would restore the UN sanctions that were in force before the agreement was signed. In his biannual report on the implementation of UNSC Resolution 2231, published in mid-December, **UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted the stalled diplomatic efforts and insisted that the JCPOA remained the best option available to guarantee the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear programme and non-proliferation and security in the region.** Given this, Guterres called on Tehran to refrain from taking new steps that would distance it from implementing the agreement and to reverse the action that it has been taking outside the plan since July 2019. The UN Secretary-General also urged the US to lift sanctions on Iran in line with what is established in the agreement and extend exemptions related to its oil trade.

| Yemen | | |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Negotiating actors | Internationally recognised | Yemeni government (backed by Riyadh), Houthis / Ansar Allah, Saudi Arabia ¹⁴ |
| Third parties | UN, Oman, ICRC | |
| Relevant agreements | Stockholm Agreement (2018), Riyadh Agreement (2019), truce agreement (2022) | |

Summary:

Affected by 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. In 2019, under the mediation of Saudi Arabia, various actors signed the Riyadh Agreement to try to resolve the struggles and differences within the anti-Houthis faction. In 2022, the internationally recognised

14 Saudi Arabia also plays a role as a mediator/facilitator in disputes between various actors on the anti-Houthi side.

government backed by Riyadh and the Houthis reached a five-point truce agreement at the request of the UN. Though it ceased to be formally in force months later, in practice the de facto drop in hostilities and violence has held up, as well as some parts of the agreement. Meanwhile, direct negotiations began between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, mediated by Oman.

The development of events in Yemen during 2023 raised expectations about the possibilities of moving towards a political solution to the conflict, but by the end of the year the prospects for a possible agreement remained in doubt given the regional impact of the hostilities in Gaza and particularly the rising tension in the Red Sea. Despite the identification of many different challenges, **in the first months of 2023 local, regional and international factors came together to shape conditions that observers described as a “historic opportunity” to address the armed conflict in Yemen through negotiations** after eight years of clashes and high-intensity violence that have cost the lives of tens of thousands of Yemenis and have pushed the country into a dramatic humanitarian crisis.

The first factor leading to this assessment was the significant drop in violence in the country compared to previous years, a result of the ceasefire agreement promoted by the UN in April 2022. Though the deal formally fell apart in the last quarter of 2022 (it was renewed twice, but not in October 2022), it was informally maintained. **The hostilities continued at low levels throughout 2023, albeit in a context of fragility, while other parts of the agreement remained in force.**

Despite the failure to reissue the truce and the deadlock in the UN-sponsored process, attributed to the Houthis for making additional demands in the intra-Yemeni negotiations, the channels of dialogue remained open. **Since October 2022, the main negotiating track has been the one established between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, mediated by Oman.** The Houthis had made no secret of their interest in dealing directly with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Riyadh’s involvement in the Omani track was interpreted as a reflection of its intention to withdraw as soon as possible from an armed conflict that has been costly, has gone far beyond what it anticipated and has not achieved its objectives, as it has not restored the deposed government, defeated or weakened the Houthis, which it claims have links with Iran. On the contrary, the relationship between the Houthis and Tehran has been strengthened during the conflict and the group has consolidated its control over much of the northern part of the country.

Alongside the meetings in the Omani track, rapprochement was announced between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023 under the auspices of China as part of Beijing’s greater role in Middle Eastern affairs. The agreement to reestablish relations, reached after a

diplomatic breakdown that had dragged on since 2016 amidst geopolitical tension and power struggles in the region, was made possible through contacts initially facilitated by Iraq and Oman. **The rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran was interpreted as a factor that could potentially help to address the Yemeni conflict, considering both countries’ role in it.** In fact, one of Riyadh’s conditions for restoring relations with Iran was that Tehran had to end its support for the Houthis and sway them in the negotiating process. However, analysts raised a series of doubts about Iran’s ability to influence the Yemeni group due to its more limited influence compared to other organisations operating in the region. **Another factor that encouraged positive expectations about the Yemeni process was an exchange of prisoners resulting in the release of over 900 people in April.** The internationally recognised Yemeni government and the Houthis released 869 detainees following a deal made in Switzerland in March after a series of agreements facilitated by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as part of the implementation of the 2018 Stockholm Agreement. Also in March, the ICRC facilitated Saudi Arabia’s release and return of another 104 prisoners to Yemen. Overall, it was the largest prisoner exchange since October 2020, when a thousand prisoners were released, also as part of the Stockholm Agreement. The coordination committee for the prisoner exchange met again in Amman in June and the parties reaffirmed their commitment to achieving the release of all detainees under the principle of “all for all”.

The Omani track led to several meetings in the following months, including a visit in April by Saudi representatives and Omani representatives to Sana’a, the Yemeni capital controlled by the Houthis since 2014. In June, in another sign of the détente between the parties, the first flight took place from Sana’a to Saudi Arabia, which transported 270 Yemenis to Jeddah for the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. According to media reports, General Yahya Ruzami, the head of the Houthi military committee for negotiations, travelled on a second flight of Yemeni Muslim pilgrims that same month. **In September, a Houthi delegation travelled to Riyadh in its first official visit since the escalation of hostilities in 2015. According to the official version of the event, the parties addressed the points of the road map to support a peace process in Yemen during five days of meetings.** The issues subject to negotiation in these talks included the use of Yemeni resources to pay salaries in Houthi-controlled territory, the opening of ports and roads in Yemen and the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Yemeni soil.

During 2023, **UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg continued with his shuttle diplomacy and tried to coordinate the different diplomatic efforts in**

Yemen through meetings with several different actors, including periodic meetings with representatives of the Houthis and the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), senior officials in Washington, Riyadh, Muscat and Abu Dhabi, ambassadors of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom) and meetings with representatives of Egypt, the Arab League, Iran (virtual) and others. In April, Grundberg recognised that developments in various areas created the most serious opportunity to end the Yemeni conflict, but insisted then and throughout the year on the need for the Omani track to support UN mediation efforts with a view to an intra-Yemeni process that would address different political, security, economic, governance and other types of challenges. **Some Yemeni analysts and stakeholders, like the Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies, warned of the risks of reaching an agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis at the expense of other Yemeni actors,** stressing the importance of achieving an inclusive agreement mediated by the United Nations and of considering principles of transitional justice to avoid dynamics of revenge and new cycles of violence. The US also continued to be involved in the Yemeni peace process. In September, Washington promoted a trilateral meeting with the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to address differences between the two main regional actors that have become militarily involved in supporting the internationally recognised government.

In late 2023, the Yemeni peace process was affected by the events in Gaza and the subsequent escalation of regional tensions

In this context, **in the final quarter of 2023, the Yemeni peace process was affected by the events in Gaza and the subsequent escalation of regional tensions across multiple fronts.** From a position declaredly opposed to Israel, which has been part of their political ideology for decades, the Houthis began launching missile and drone attacks in mid-October, first against Israel and then against Israeli-owned ships, ships bound for Israel and other commercial vessels in the Red Sea. The Houthis said they would only stop these attacks if the Israeli attacks and siege on the Gaza Strip stopped and if access to food and medicine were provided there. In mid-December, the US announced the establishment of an international military operation to counter and deter attacks by the Houthis in the Red Sea. From the outset, the UN envoy stressed the importance of maintaining a favourable environment for continuing negotiations leading to a political agreement for Yemen. According to him, contacts between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in December had led to an understanding very close to a long-term ceasefire agreement. At the end of the year, the office of the UN special envoy reported that after speaking with the president of the PLC in Riyadh and chief Houthi negotiator Mohamed Abdulsalam in Muscat, **the parties confirmed that they would set the conditions for a nationwide ceasefire and resume a peace process under the auspices of the UN.** According

to reports, the parties would work on a road map that would include a truce, the payment of all public salaries, the reduction of restrictions around the port of Al Hudaydah and the Sana'a airport and the opening of roads in Taiz and other parts of the country. **According to media reports, however, by the end of 2023, the United States was pressuring Riyadh to delay signing the agreement with the Houthis and, on the contrary, to join the international coalition to stop the Yemeni group's attacks in the Red Sea.** Faced with how events were developing, Riyadh made public calls for restraint and to avoid escalation, while the Houthis' chief negotiator said that their attacks in the Red Sea did not threaten the peace talks with Saudi Arabia.

During the year, the UN special envoy and other figures also drew attention to provocative attitudes that could jeopardise the de facto ceasefire and warned about intermittent incidents on the front lines. The war also continued to be fought economically. **Some of the main challenges for Yemen's political process continued to be the division in the Houthi camp, reflected in the disputes between the different factions that make up the**

Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and the separatist aspirations of some armed groups in the south of the country. As such, various southern Yemeni political groups held a five-day meeting in Aden in May in which they approved a "national charter". Several of them announced that they were joining the separatist platform Southern Transitional Council (STC), supported by the UAE. Subsequently, STC President

Aidarous al-Zoubaidi, who is also the vice president of the PLC, pushed for changes in the leadership of the separatist platform that brought on Abdelraman al-Mahrami, the commander of the Giant Brigades, one of the strongest armed groups in the country, and General Faraj Salmeen al-Bahsani. This meant that now three of the eight members of the Presidential Leadership Council are part of the STC, thereby strengthening the separatist platform's political and military position. In May and June, Saudi Arabia hosted meetings of political and tribal representatives of Hadhramaut governorate, which announced the creation of the High Council for Hadhramaut and its own political charter. The movement was interpreted as an alternative to the STC and a further sign of the divisions between anti-Houthi sectors.

Gender, peace and security

Yemeni women continued to complain of their exclusion from formal negotiating forums and demand to participate in discussions about the political future of Yemen. As talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis moved forward and prisoner exchange agreements between the Houthis and the internationally recognised government progressed, some activists publicly and worriedly raised alarm about the exclusion of women and

other marginalised groups. In November, in a meeting with the UN special envoy in Amman (Jordan), over 30 Yemeni women (activists, academics and civil society representatives) demanded a place in the deliberations as a right, not a privilege, and as a guarantee for sustainable peace in the country. During the meeting, they defined some priorities for an agreement on the future of Yemen, some of which coincide with those outlined in the commitments reached by the parties at the end of the year: a ceasefire, the reopening of roads and public sector salary payments. They also exchanged opinions on possible confidence-building measures on issues such as maps of explosive devices to facilitate demining, the unconditional release of all detained people and a commitment to avoid new kidnappings

and arbitrary detentions. Some reports also stressed the disconnect between dialogue tracks 1 and 3 due in part to the different visions of peace held by the different actors involved. The Yemeni women's approach was more complex than envisioning the mere absence of war and included aspects of daily life and meeting the population's basic needs. As such, **analysts highlighted the crucial peacebuilding work that Yemeni women continued to carry out despite the many obstacles and impacts of the war. These efforts included supporting programmes for reintegrating child soldiers, opening humanitarian corridors and mediating tribal disputes.** During 2023, women's organisations also continued to document abuses committed as part of the armed conflict.