

Solving Yemen's intractable war

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Opinion Plus

James Wilson explains how a negotiator could play a key role in the UN's plan for solving the crisis in Yemen.



Rescue workers inspect the rubble of a building that was destroyed in an alleged Saudi-led airstrike targeting a Houthi-held detention centre | Photo Credit: PA

In September, the world suddenly turned its attention back to Yemen. The reason for this sudden spotlight on a war that has gone on far too long was a drone attack on facilities in Saudi Arabia that destroyed approximately half of Saudi crude oil production.

The Houthi militia in Yemen claimed responsibility for that attack. International attention was really drawn by the fact that both Saudi Arabia and the United States quickly voiced their belief that Iran was the real culprit.

What does this mean for Yemen, a country that has been devastated by years of conflict? Certainly,

there are implications that regional tension could escalate and that this in turn could have a detrimental impact on the global economy.

We have known for a long time that the dire situation in Yemen is essentially a war between proxies. What will become of the country if the masks come off and we see a full-blown regional conflict between players who have long been stalking each other?

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For too long Yemen has been placed in the “intractable problems” category, that graveyard of international relations where the problem just seems to have no resolution and the international community stops making anything more than surface-level efforts.

But the human toll inside Yemen ought to be impossible for us to turn a blind eye to. The war has surely touched every Yemeni child and family.

Martin Griffiths, the United Nations special envoy for Yemen, wrote eloquently about his [seven steps to bring peace to Yemen](#) [6].

First, he outlined that the monopoly on force must be returned to the government of Yemen, with Yemenis outside the state prevented from using violence to achieve their ends.

He wants to see an end to militia rule and a United Nations process to transfer weapons from the militias to the new government.

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Griffiths also wants to see the government be more than a coalition. He envisages an inclusive partnership among the political parties that now take different sides.

Third, Griffiths wants to see the government ensure that Yemen is not used for attacks on its neighbours.

Fourth, Griffiths wants to see the government guarantee the safety of trade by securing its seas and properly policing its borders.

Fifth, he demands a shunning of terrorists. Sixth, he asks Yemen's neighbours to step up and ensure Yemen's stability by showing the generosity needed to lift Yemen through trade and support.

Finally, the Griffiths plan wants the Yemenis to decide their own future, free from pressure and war.

There is no arguing with the Griffiths plan. It is comprehensive and has an optimism that the country so dearly needs and a willingness to have high expectations, both inside and outside the country. It's admirable and we should all be supporting it.

I would add that an eighth element is needed. Griffiths sets the framework, but, within that, an extra ingredient is needed to move the process along.

"The Yemeni people deserve that we do not give up, that we do not consign them to the "intractable" category, but rather that we work tirelessly to bring the people the peace that they crave"

Often, a player is needed who can bring sides together, allow conversations to happen and allow the all-important compromise to be made. In Lebanon, we saw the unthinkable happen.

A total deadlock was undone when presidential candidate Michel Aoun needed the seeming support of rival politician Samir Geagea, and after a 20-month stalemate, he clinched it.

To understand how miraculous that was, you had to comprehend that these two men had fought on opposite sides in the civil war.

In the Lebanese case, it is believed to have been writer, scholar and negotiator Melhem Riachy, the former communications minister from the Lebanese Forces party, who brought the two men to do what had seemed unimaginable.

This style of intervention could be a useful component in unlocking not only the Yemen situation, but also prolonged regional tensions, from the Turkish situation with the Kurds, the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the longstanding conflicts in Libya.

Returning to Yemen, the Yemeni people deserve that we do not give up, that we do not consign them to the "intractable" category, but rather that we work tirelessly to bring the people the peace that they crave.

It's possible that we need to look to step eight to bring that peace and find a negotiator who can ask each side to truly compromise and put peace first.

About the author

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