



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Saudi Arabia and the Houthis: Pathway to a Diplomatic Settlement

Dr. Tughral Yamin ¹

The escalating confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Yemen's Houthi movement presents a serious challenge to regional diplomacy. Missile and drone interceptions over Saudi territory, threats to airports and energy installations, and the postponement of the European Union-Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh point to a conflict whose consequences extend beyond Yemen.

Saudi Arabia wants to protect its territory, critical infrastructure and economic transformation program. The Houthis, meanwhile, have demonstrated that relatively inexpensive missiles and drones can impose substantial costs on a much wealthier adversary. Neither side can be certain of achieving its objectives through military action alone.

The question is whether diplomacy can offer an exit ramp before the conflict escalates further. Oman, China, Iran, Pakistan, the United States, Russia and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) could all contribute, but their roles and influence differ considerably.

Who Can Act as an Honest Mediator?

No single country possesses the necessary combination of trust, influence and leverage to guarantee a settlement. A division of diplomatic labor offers a more realistic approach.

- **Oman**

Oman is best positioned to facilitate the process of negotiations. Muscat has maintained channels with Iran and the Houthis and has experience hosting sensitive regional discussions. It is less threatening to the parties than a direct American initiative and could provide a venue for indirect talks. However, Oman cannot compel either side to accept a ceasefire.

- **China**

Beijing could provide the diplomatic weight. It maintains substantial economic relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran and helped broker their 2023 agreement to restore diplomatic relations. It could encourage Riyadh to keep negotiations open and press Tehran to use its influence to restrain Houthi attacks. Nevertheless, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement has not resolved their competing interests in Yemen. China would need to demonstrate sustained commitment rather than simply sponsor an agreement.

- **Iran:**

Tehran's role in the process of mediation is indispensable, but it cannot easily be considered neutral. Tehran has close relations with the Houthi movement and could encourage restraint and participation

¹ Brig (r) Dr. Tughral Yamin is a Senior IPS Associate. He can be reached at tughral@ips.net.pk

in negotiations. Saudi Arabia, however, views Iranian influence over the Houthis as a security concern. Moreover, the Houthis have their own leadership and strategic interests; Iranian influence should not be confused with complete control. Iran should be part of the diplomatic process, but preferably not its sole mediator.

- **United States:**

The U.S. has substantial leverage over the mediation process but faces a credibility problem. Its military capabilities, intelligence and diplomatic influence could help protect Saudi infrastructure and support security guarantees. However, its wider confrontation with Iran makes it difficult for Tehran and the Houthis to regard Washington as an impartial mediator. The United States would be more useful as a supporter of a negotiated settlement than as its principal facilitator.

- **Russia:**

Moscow may reinforce a multilateral initiative. It maintains regional diplomatic contacts and could support a potential UN-backed ceasefire. However, it has less obvious leverage over the Saudi–Iranian relationship than China and is unlikely to be the most effective lead mediator.

So the assessment would be that Oman opens the door, China lends diplomatic weight, Iran helps secure Houthi's participation, and the United Nations provides an internationally-recognized framework.

The Potential Role of Pakistan

Pakistan has a genuine opportunity to contribute, although it should aspire to facilitate a settlement rather than guarantee peace single-handedly.

Islamabad maintains important relationships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. It also has a strong interest in preventing a wider regional conflict that could disrupt energy supplies, maritime trade and the economic well-being of Pakistanis working in the Gulf.

There is, however, a complication. Pakistan's close defense relationship with Saudi Arabia could lead the Houthis to question its neutrality. Islamabad would, therefore, need to distinguish its bilateral security commitments from its diplomatic efforts.

A practical initiative for Pakistan to facilitate the process could be in five stages:

1. Pakistan should consult Riyadh to identify the minimum conditions for a settlement, including an end to missile and drone attacks against Saudi territory and credible safeguards for civilian infrastructure.
2. Islamabad should engage Tehran privately, seeking specific commitments to encourage Houthi restraint and participation in negotiations.
3. Pakistan should coordinate with Oman rather than compete with it. A joint initiative would reduce suspicions that mediation serves one country's interests.
4. China should be brought into the process to encourage Saudi–Iranian cooperation and support a broader diplomatic framework.
5. Pakistan could offer to host indirect talks or a regional contact-group meeting once preliminary understandings have been reached. A summit should not be announced before both parties agree to participate.

The principal obstacle is Pakistan's limited influence over Houthi decision-making. If the movement regards its campaign as inseparable from the wider confrontation involving Iran and the United States, it may reject a Yemen-specific ceasefire. Pakistan can help bridge differences, but it cannot resolve that strategic impasse alone.

Can the OIC Play a Role?

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) provides a platform for Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan and other Muslim-majority countries to address the crisis collectively.

Its comparative advantage lies in political legitimacy, regional consultation and humanitarian coordination.

The OIC could call for an immediate halt to attacks on civilians, airports, energy installations and commercial shipping. It could convene a smaller contact group involving Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, Qatar and Oman to agree on principles for de-escalation.

It could also coordinate humanitarian assistance for Yemen, where renewed fighting risks worsening an already serious crisis.

However, the OIC cannot substitute for direct negotiations. Its members have different security interests, and collective declarations will achieve little without commitments from the combatants. A small contact group working alongside Oman and the United Nations would be more effective than a large summit dominated by political speeches.

What Might a Diplomatic Settlement Look Like?

A comprehensive agreement is unlikely to emerge from a single meeting. The immediate objective should be to stop the escalation and then address the underlying political issues.

The diplomatic settlement process may proceed in four phases:

1. An Emergency Ceasefire

The Houthis would suspend missile and drone attacks against Saudi territory, while Saudi Arabia would halt offensive strikes against Houthi-held areas, subject to reciprocal compliance. Direct communication channels would help prevent misunderstandings.

2. Maritime Security

Both sides would commit to protecting commercial shipping in the Red Sea and around Bab el-Mandeb. Internationally

supported monitoring and incident-reporting arrangements could help verify compliance.

3. Indirect Negotiations

Oman could host separate consultations with Saudi and Houthi representatives, while Pakistan and China encouraged Tehran and Riyadh to support the process. Discussions would cover border security, attacks on critical infrastructure, humanitarian access and arrangements to prevent renewed hostilities.

4. A Broader Yemeni Settlement

The UN-led process would address governance, power-sharing, reconstruction and the representation of Yemen's different communities. A Saudi–Houthi agreement alone cannot settle Yemen's internal conflict; the internationally recognized Yemeni government and other relevant Yemeni actors must be included.

Verification will be essential. Saudi Arabia needs credible assurances against renewed attacks, while the Houthis need confidence that a ceasefire will not simply create an opportunity for a renewed offensive against them.

Conclusion: An Opportunity Pakistan Should Seize

The danger is that both sides will continue to believe military pressure can improve their bargaining positions. Saudi retaliation may provoke further Houthi attacks, while those attacks may strengthen demands in Riyadh for a more forceful response. The wider US–Iran confrontation could make the conflict still harder to contain.

Pakistan should pursue a realistic, incremental diplomatic initiative. Oman can facilitate, China can support, Iran can exercise influence, and the United Nations can provide the framework. The OIC can reinforce the effort through political coordination and humanitarian assistance.

The immediate priority should be to secure agreement to indirect talks, halt attacks on civilian infrastructure, and establish a verifiable mechanism for reducing hostilities.

The most promising formula is not a contest between rival mediators, but a coordinated effort in which Oman facilitates, Pakistan

bridges, China supports, Iran encourages restraint, and the United Nations provides legitimacy. The test of diplomacy will be whether Saudi Arabia and the Houthis are prepared to exchange the uncertain promise of military gains for the tangible benefits of security, economic stability and a political future for Yemen.

