

<p>Many things may happen in Geneva when the Yemen peace negotiations finally get underway. But as the Huthi delegation arrived a day late one thing is sure; no peace will be declared, says Charlie Pratt.</p> <p>The reason is simple. Each side still thinks they are in a war they can win. The three participants in the negotiations - the legitimate government, backed by Saudi Arabia, under President 'Abd-Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, the Zaydi Shi'a rebel Huthi group and a delegation associated with the Party of the former, and still Machiavellian, President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih ♦ each feel that they have time and strength on their side. Neither side has fought to the sort of standstill required to further the peace talks, and the humanitarian crisis currently unfolding in Yemen, alongside the rise of AQAP, seem to be distant concerns; certainly not ones forcing any of the sides to accept their responsibility in amending them.</p>

<p>The best the conference can hope for is the designation of further humanitarian ceasefires, to alleviate the worst of a crisis in which over 50% of Yemen's population need aid, and which threatens the very existence of Yemen. There will be no cessation in the violence. The Huthis in particular, still feel belligerently in the ascendancy on the ground and, in truth, they are. Where once they were a small guerrilla organisation fighting in the mountainous Northern province of Sa'dah for more representation in Yemeni politics, they are now a national quasi-military/political system, more capable than the Yemeni state they face of engaging in concurrent ground battles across the entirety of the country. Their confidence is reflected in their recent demand to bypass the government of President Hadi and negotiate directly with Saudi Arabia for peace. That stance reflects their knowledge that they are effectively a national entity capable of negotiating at that level, a knowledge granted by their military success.</p>

<p>Their position also reflects the weakness of the Yemeni state. As if recognising the fragility of his rule, President Hadi has sent a weak and divided delegation to Geneva, and where once I had hope for his rule, he seems overwhelmed by the challenges of Yemen. His is surely the most unenviable positions in international politics. The recent rise of the Huthis was unpredictable, but the weakness of the state that they exploited was obvious. The challenges are overwhelming - the AQAP enclaves in the South of the country, the demands for Southern secession, a crippled economy, burgeoning humanitarian crisis and an incredibly weak and corrupt state ♦ but Hadi has proven recently to be a weak and ineffective leader. He retains his position only because of the backing of Yemen's powerful neighbour, Saudi Arabia, and in accepting their support and patronage, he has also accepted their political direction unquestioningly. This is more true than ever in Geneva. Whether or not Hadi's delegation can seriously negotiate any form of peace, they will be unable accept it unless Saudi Arabia can, and, as the leader of the GCC Op "Decisive Storm", designed to destroy the Huthis, the Saudis seem unwilling to accept anything less than the disappearance of the Huthis into the mountain caves of Sa'dah once again.</p> <p>Saudi Arabia has poured money and bombs into Yemen in an effort to defeat the Huthis, a group they see as the sharp end of Iranian foreign policy parked kilometres from their border. They cannot accept this situation and, perhaps looking at the example of Hizballah in Lebanon, felt forced to act. They continue to be impeded by this fear, and cannot countenance the Huthis walking away from Geneva with their territorial hold or political power enshrined in agreements. Where Hadi has sent a weak delegation to Geneva, the Saudi line is strong; they are fighting an existential Iranian threat, and they will not back down from it, nor back down from the military campaign yet. As such, the Yemeni state cannot either. The Huthis know this, and allied to their success on the ground have little real incentive to negotiate, or seek peace, particularly not with a Yemeni government they have emasculated. While the Huthi demand to negotiate directly with Saudi seems ridiculous it is perhaps the only

way that a viable settlement will be found.

The tenuous position of the Geneva negotiations reveal the political shortcomings of each side. There is, ultimately, no solution but a political one to these issues, but equally there seems little recognition of this in Sana'a and Riyadh. The man who recognises this, indeed the only man really capable of bringing it about, is the man most likely to undermine any chance at peace; former President 'Ali 'Abdallah Salih.

Salih is the man who held Yemen together for 33 years. To do so proves his political genius, but he remains an intensely selfish and Machiavellian one, for Salih has no purpose other than the maintenance and acquisition of power for himself and his family. Since being deposed in 2011 he has played an intensely complex political game designed to undermine the rule of Hadi, in which, as ever, he has forced all sides to rely on him. The hallmark of Salih's rule was the centralisation of power and political decision making in his office. It remains so ♦ President Hadi may have his Palace in Sana'a, but the real centre of power lies in Salih's office. The tribes allied to Salih continue to fight alongside the Huthis and have proved a vital enabler for their chase through Yemen. In the towns where fighting still goes on, such as Ma'rib, these tribes are omnipresent, as is Salih's invisible hand ♦ he believes he is in a fight he can win. The launch of a SCUD missile towards Saudi Arabia a week ago also bore his mark; a bold move succeeding in throwing Saudi Arabia off its guard. Salih will no doubt continue to destabilise the talks in Geneva, ensuring that no deal goes ahead, and furthering the chaos until he deems the moment right to make an all out bid for power; it is what he has done since he first rose to power, and what he will do until he dies.

Despite his strength, that moment is not now, illustrative of the dark hours that Yemen is still travelling through. There is no sign of peace in Geneva, no sign of either side truly winning, and no sign of relief for those trapped in a humanitarian crisis not of their making. Each side will try to win in Geneva, as they feel they are winning on the ground. But each side is fighting a war that cannot be won. There is only a political solution to this; an acceptance that Hadi is the legitimate ruler, but that the Huthis too are a legitimate part of the Yemeni fabric, with the right to some share of political power. The war they must win is the one they have to fight together, against the humanitarian, economic, political and security challenges that confront Yemen. These challenges are the poisoned inheritance of Salih's rule and the only real existential threat in Yemen. To face them requires a strong and united government, reflective of all Yemen's citizens and political groups, and signed up to the idea of a unified and strong Yemen; that government will not be found in Sana'a, or in the Saudi bombs, and certainly not around the polished tables of Geneva. Until it is found, Yemenis will continue to suffer, and die, needlessly in a crisis not of their own making.