

ARTICLE

Barriers for Peace Mediators when shifting to an online environment: A Case Study of The UN in Yemen

Obstáculos para los mediadores de paz en el cambio a un entorno en línea: Un estudio de caso de la ONU en Yemen

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Abstract

This research focuses on the opportunities and barriers of virtual peace diplomacy, examining the different aspects of this approach and analyzing its potential impact on the peace process. In an era where conflicts have evolved into new forms of warfare, the complexities of mediation have intensified. Furthermore, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the widespread availability of digital tools, has transformed peace diplomacy and, therefore, the role of mediators. The research aims to discover what influence the changing environment surrounding peace processes has on peace negotiation and how mediators can adapt most effectively to that environment. This will be done by looking at all the tracks introduced by the Multi-Track Diplomacy Framework, where the differences in approaches between the tracks will be highlighted. The research will provide an in-depth analysis of the complications regarding virtual trust-building in peace negotiations in the context of Yemen. This will be facilitated by examining previous peace attempts by the UN in Yemen and by analyzing the current landscape in Yemen.

Keywords: online peace mediation, virtual trust-building, UN peace efforts, Yemen peace process

Resumen

Esta investigación se centra en las oportunidades y barreras de la diplomacia de paz virtual, examinando los diferentes aspectos de este enfoque y analizando su posible impacto en el proceso de paz. En una época en la que los conflictos han evolucionado hacia nuevas formas de guerra, las complejidades de la mediación se han intensificado. Además, la llegada de la pandemia de COVID-19, junto con la amplia disponibilidad de herramientas digitales, ha transformado la diplomacia de paz y, por tanto, el papel de los mediadores. La investigación pretende descubrir qué influencia tiene el entorno cambiante que rodea a los procesos de paz en la negociación de la paz y cómo pueden adaptarse los mediadores a ese entorno de la manera más eficaz. Para ello, se estudiarán todas las vías introducidas por el Marco de la Diplomacia Multidireccional y se pondrán de relieve las diferencias de enfoque entre ellas. La investigación proporcionará un análisis en profundidad de las complicaciones relativas a la creación de confianza virtual en las negociaciones de paz en el contexto de Yemen. Para ello, se tendrán en cuenta los anteriores intentos de paz de la ONU en Yemen y se examinará el panorama actual del país.

Palabras clave: mediación de paz en línea, fomento de la confianza virtual, esfuerzos de paz de la ONU, proceso de paz en Yemen.

Introduction

Background and Context

International peace mediation has changed significantly over the last few years, with a decrease in state actors and an increase in a wide variety of non-state actors. Technological advancements have also impacted conflicts and peace processes, creating new possibilities while also making them more complex. While technological advancements have an immense scope and impact on how we communicate, it does not mean that the principles of peace mediation need to be drastically renewed. This is because peace mediation always centers on individuals or human entities, and human skills are still imperative throughout the process, whether virtually or face-to-face. Nevertheless, digital technology can optimize the efficiency of peace mediation and allow for new opportunities to mediate, which helps the mediator better understand the parties and bring them together (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, p. 7).

The digitalization of peace processes has offered many benefits, but most importantly, it has increased shareability, allowing many actors to be included and actively involved in the peace process. Subsequently, this also enhances the transparency of the process, both of which contribute towards a sustainable peace agreement (Hornsey et al., 2008, p. 751).

The negative side is that building trust is harder in a virtual setting because, while having a low threshold for accessing information, and a high speed of information flow, it can be subjected to data breaches and the spread of misinformation (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, p. 7). This is problematic as some parts of the principles amplify secrecy, which cannot always be offered or guaranteed in an online setting (Stai, 2022). Additionally, while shareability is an advantage of virtual negotiations, it is also a disadvantage, as it further marginalizes and excludes the illiterate, the poor, and those with insufficient technological knowledge (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, p. 534). As the UN's Multi-Track Diplomacy Framework emphasizes trust, inclusivity, and confidentiality, these challenges posed by virtual settings make its application more difficult.

When considering the psychological aspects of shifting to virtual negotiations, non-verbal communication is the most significant element that cannot be substituted. Conversations follow a different flow, causing the meetings to be less natural and more formal. Furthermore, people are less engaged in virtual peace negotiations and find it harder to empathize with the opposing party, and therefore building trust is more challenging (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, p. 549). The Construal Level Theory adds to this by saying that the more psychological distance there is between the parties, the more people tend to fill up gaps with their own abstract perceptions, making it harder for parties to be on the same page and work towards a common goal (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 441).

Virtual negotiations have been a part of the business world for a considerable time and have been viewed as a beneficial component in that sector. Crucial benefits for them are the enhanced availability and the cost-effective component. While the business negotiation literature also identifies obstacles when negotiating virtually, clear rules are set to overcome these barriers. This includes researching the other party, setting ground rules, receiving training, extensive communication, and consistent follow-ups (Schlair & Hammer, 2022, p. 308). Nevertheless, virtual peace negotiations have not yet been fully embraced as the future of peace mediation.

Research problem

This research will focus on the differences between face-to-face and virtual peace negotiations, supported by business negotiations. The research will further be supported through psychological theories, considering the context of peace negotiations. The research will use the current Yemen conflict as a case study, as this conflict has been ongoing before, during, and after the global pandemic, and technological advancements allow for more possibilities for an inclusive peace process in that context. The case study will focus on the UN, as they have attempted several peace efforts since the start of the conflict in Yemen, and their Multi-Track Diplomacy approach allows for a virtual or hybrid peace process.

Research objective

The objective of this research is to analyze and explain the potential of virtual peace negotiations, focusing on their advantages and challenges. Different topics will be explored, such as face-to-face negotiations, virtual business negotiations, and the use of digital tools in the peace process. These topics aim to highlight the differences between virtual peace negotiations and traditional methods, and to describe the environment in which they take place. This will be applied in a case study of Yemen, examining the UN's peace efforts. The case study will connect the psychological aspects of virtual mediation with its implementation in a specific context through the use of the UN's Multi-Track Diplomacy method. The research also aims to explore how the increasing digitalization of peace processes affects their outcomes.

Research questions

Main question: What barriers have emerged for peace negotiators when shifting to an online environment? A case study of the UN in Yemen.

Sub questions:

- How do online negotiations compare to face-to-face negotiations in terms of effectiveness?
- How can online peace negotiations be compared to virtual business negotiations?
- What psychological implication does the shift to an online environment for peace negotiations have in Yemen?

- How can digital tools be beneficial to peace negotiations?

Reading Guide

The research is divided into seven primary sections:

- 1- Introduction: Providing contexts, outlining the research and objectives.
- 2- Literature review: Covers relevant theories, previous studies and concepts that are related to peace negotiations, virtual trust-building, and digital tools.
- 3- Methodology: Outlines the data collection methods, and relevant conceptual frameworks that are used throughout the research
- 4- Case study: Yemen: Explains the historical and current conflict dynamics, highlighting the role of the UN in leading peace efforts.
- 5- Findings: Further analysis on theoretical frameworks to enhance understanding of opportunities in virtual peace negotiations, specifically in the Yemen context.
- 6- Discussion: Examines the impact and challenges of digitalized peace negotiations in Yemen.
- 7- Conclusion: Summarizes key findings, addresses the research questions, exploring opportunities for a peace process in Yemen.

Literature review

Digital tools that assist peace negotiations and stimulate the peace process have been available for years. Nevertheless, there has not been much academic research done on the specific topic of virtual peace negotiations and their effectiveness. Most researchers conclude that there are benefits and downsides to the use of digital technology in peace negotiations. However, it is imperative to know how, when, and in what context to apply specific tools.

Adler-Nissen & Eggeling researched the possibilities of digital technology in the world of diplomacy. Their paper argues that the world of diplomacy has already strongly embarked on a digital era, which has been framed as 'blended diplomacy'. The lack of training and the number of technological tools available result in a lack of clarity on how to use them. Diplomats are expected to be online all the time while remaining confidentiality experts. As this digitalization can create empowerment as well as loss of control, it is imperative to study what implications this has on diplomats' professional and personal lives. Additionally, while the available digital tools offer many opportunities, they also carry risks such as security breaches, privacy infringements, and the spread of misinformation (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022).

Technology can also impact the peace process, both positively and negatively. Adler-Nissen and Drieschova explain how ICT causes a track-change diplomacy, and the effects this has on international negotiations. Through 'shareability, visualization, and immediacy of information', ICT has the ability to change temporary power dynamics during international negotiations. The

author further explains how ICT can trigger a loss of control through track-change diplomacy, rather than providing oversight on negotiation, which is what it was initially intended for (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019).

The influence of technology extends beyond specific aspects of the peace process; it profoundly affects society in its entirety. People have become increasingly more dependent on their computers and the internet. Additionally, while people might feel like being in control of the information they want to receive, the internet carefully tailors and filters the information you receive, leaving very little space for independent thinking. Therefore, while technology allows us to work fast and have significant access, it is argued that this is traded for calm, focused, undistracted thinking. Additionally, as the computer gains control through filtering and selecting your preferences, the mind loses its creativity. It is in the messy process of intellectual exploration and social attachments that the individual develops their personal initiative, creativity, and whim (Carr, 2010, p. 132-133).

Moreover, neuroscientists have discovered that this technological increase is also impacting people's ability to read minds. The three highly active regions of the brain that can help us coordinate a large group of people are the prefrontal cortex, the parietal cortex, and the intersection of the parietal and temporal cortices. This helps us understand people's minds and is highly important in peace negotiations and during a peace process. The enhanced digitalization of society has caused us to overload those regions of the brain, affecting our ability to connect to other human minds. It has caused us to perceive minds that don't exist, even in spiritless objects. Additionally, the brain naturally mimics the states of other minds it interacts with, even if they are not real. While this may advance our ability to perform cognitive tasks, it threatens the integrity of human beings (Carr, 2010, p. 130).

Further, microsociologists have analyzed the rhythmic flow of conversations and how this is altered in a virtual setting. Face-to-face conversations follow a typical rhythm, where a comment is responded to with, for example, a nod, a giggle, or a smile. These joined rhythmic patterns, with only minor pauses, are crucial to relating to one another and breaking down mistrust. Virtual negotiation creates its own pauses, changing the natural flow of conversation. It does not allow for many interruptions and discussions and therefore tends to be more formal. Additionally, virtual negotiation complicates 'intense conflictual engagement', with fewer moments to escalate. This might be good to keep the dialogue civilized and respectful; however, sometimes escalation is required to arrive at the root of the problem (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, p. 549).

Bramsen and Hagemann further argue in their research that there is a sixth sense regarding physical peace negotiations. This is the instinctive feeling of potential spoilers in a conflict or the potential course of other events that cannot be observed in virtual negotiations. The sensibilities of creating a confidential setting cannot be created online, which, as the authors describe, results in a 'missing sense of peace.' The research does, however, see the possibilities of virtual peace negotiations as they enhance accessibility and frequency of meetings. Therefore, the author concludes that a hybrid

version of negotiations would be ideal, where the physical aspect is not fully dismissed (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021).

The emphasis on context-specific mediation approaches also must be emphasized, specifically regarding the conflict in Yemen, a multi-party conflict with deep-rooted cultural and political dimensions. The article “Assessing Context-Specific Peacebuilding Approaches in Contemporary Armed Conflicts” by Ako Muto and Rui Saraiva mentions the importance of context-specific approaches, and the need for locally grounded methods and maintaining local ownership throughout any peacebuilding process. Additionally, the importance of a middle-out approach was emphasized, specifically in the context of peacebuilding efforts in Syria. This entails connecting with and including middle-level leadership, for establishing infrastructures and involving communities for long-lasting sustainable peace (Muto & Saraiva, 2020, p. 247-250).

Applying this to the case study of this thesis, the conflict in Yemen, the article ‘Pathways for Peace and stability in Yemen (2017), by Maktary and Smith illustrates the fragmented political landscape, and the importance of inclusive peace talks amongst all stakeholders involved. This includes marginalized groups, localized peacebuilding efforts and the role of external actors in mediating the conflict. Furthermore, they mention “successful peace efforts in Yemen hinge on sustained engagement and adaptability to shifting conflict dynamics” (p. 10).

This literature review highlights the growing impact of ICT on politics and the increasing use of digital tools in peace negotiations. It further covers how virtual mediation offers accessibility and frequency; however, it also presents challenges such as security risks, loss of informal communication cues, and difficulties in building trust. Additionally, context-specific peacebuilding remains crucial, particularly in Yemen, where inclusive negotiations and sustained engagement are necessary for stability. Throughout this paper, the author further explores the implications of shifting peace negotiations to an online environment, considering the political and cultural landscape in Yemen. Additionally, the paper provides a deeper analysis of how to engage in virtual dialogue for a sustainable peace process.

Methodology

This research paper follows a single case study design, focusing on the UN’s efforts in Yemen. It utilizes a desk research approach, aiming to gather extensive information on the topic and connect the facts with the theoretical frameworks previously explained.

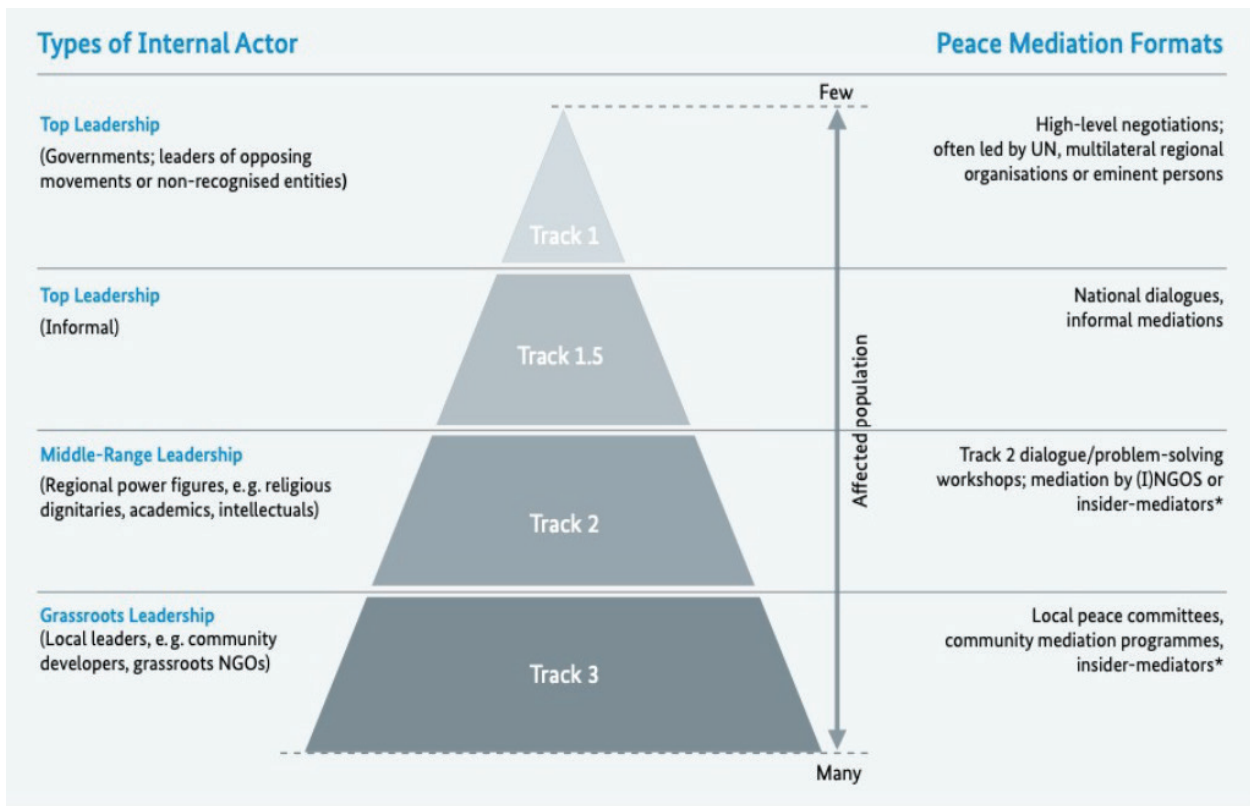
Conceptual frameworks

The author used conceptual frameworks in this paper to examine the psychological implications behind virtual negotiations, the increase in digitalization, and the effect this has on the peace process. From this perspective, the opportunities and barriers of virtual negotiations can be better

analyzed. This was done through the use of the Multi-Track Diplomacy Framework, the Construal Level Theory, and the Social Presence Theory.

Multi-Track Diplomacy

Figure 1: Multi-Track Diplomacy Framework



Based on Lederach, John Paul (1997). *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington D.C.: USIP, p. 39, adapted by IMSD.

Modern conflicts have far evolved beyond state-versus-state conflicts, with a majority of non-state actors and external parties involved. This requires a more developed peace process involving all layers of society. The UN approaches contemporary peace processes in a multi-level method, attempting to reach every layer of society. The UN uses John Paul's multi-track approach, as visible in Figure 1, where they aim to advance towards a collective, inclusive peace process through a bottom-up approach. (Albani & Ade, 2021). Track 1 is the most visible and transparent, between official actors. These actors usually have leverage that they can bring to the negotiations. This, however, is hard to use since the other tracks are mostly working under the radar. These other negotiations are framed as 'quiet diplomacy', mostly conducted between communities, NGOs,

private organizations, and other non-state actors. The advantages of quiet diplomacy are that it is a smaller step to start the dialogue, and repercussions are lessened when negotiations don't result in progress. Thus, these tracks must be under the radar and only report progress (Upeace, 2021).

Track 1.5 is imperative in this research, as it is the connector between Track 1 (government officials) and Track 2 (civil society). Track 1.5 is not necessarily resolution-oriented, it can also be more of an informal platform for stakeholders to gain new insights and perspectives (Wolleh, 2007, P. 2). The UN adjusts its method in the context to see what fits best, but every approach aims to bring parties closer together with cumulative potential towards a peace agreement (Wolleh, 2007, P. 13). The importance of this track for the research objective comes from the virtual perspective. A point of critique for the implementation of Track 1.5 thus far has been the lack of civil society inclusion, which is more attainable in an online setting when access is increased. On the other hand, the informal nature of this track might be compromised in an online setting, when everything can be logged and there is limited space for 'inter moments,' which will be further explored later in the research paper (Naylor, 2020, P. 590).

Track 2 involves more unofficial actors involved in the conflict, such as regional powers, religious groups, and academics. This Track is more public compared to Track 1, and focuses more on dialogue and peacebuilding. The Track emphasizes bringing parties together through relationship building while working towards sustainable peace. In this stage, the roots of the issues are addressed and mediated to allow for long-lasting partnerships (Wehrenfennig, 2008, P. 85). Track 2 also involves many private organizations and NGOs, participating in multi- sectoral dialogue, disseminating knowledge, and supporting off-the record meetings. Their participation is essential as they bring certain legitimacy, resources, and neutrality to the table that official actors cannot offer in certain instances (Tripathi & Gündüz, 2008, p. 17).

Track 3 diplomacy follows a community-based approach. It involves local leaders, community developers, and grass-roots NGOs. This Track involves the most affected people by the conflict, and the emphasis is on community engagement. Grassroots mediation is applied, which includes reconciliation exercises, co-existence between communities, and workshops focusing on the healing process (Turk, 2006, P. 222). The mediation approach is aimed at creating a calm environment where trust can be built. However, the multitude of actors involved in Track 3 and the calmness of the mediation approach cause the process towards peace to take a long time (Albani & Ade, 2021). In all tracks, there must be an ongoing peace process, as this is the only way to obtain progress and real dialogue. This enables all parties to work towards peace, through the tools of dialogue and negotiations. Peace is of the people and by the people, and it is most sustainable through an inclusive holistic approach where the needs and interests of all groups are integrated (Albani & Ade, 2021).

The author aims to operationalize the Multi-Track diplomacy peace mediation format to showcase the typical mediation structure. From this baseline, the author will showcase the differences between

physical and online mediation. This format will also be important to showcase how digitalization has influenced track diplomacy and how it introduced a track change.

Construal-Level Theory

Another relevant theory is the Construal-Level Theory (CLT) of psychological distance. This relates to how people perceive and represent information that is distant in psychological space. It helps understand behavior, decision-making, and thought by linking the construal level with the psychological distance between an observer and a target. The further this target is from the observer, the more abstract it is perceived (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 440).

This level of psychological distance is broken down into four dimensions: temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical. Temporal distance refers to the time between the present and an event or object in the past or future. Spatial distance is the physical distance between a person and an object or event. Social distance refers to the closeness between a person and another person or group. Hypothetical distance relates to the amount of improbability or hypothetical nature of an event or object (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 441).

The CLT argues that information with much psychological space between the observer and target is perceived abstractly with high-level construals, and vice versa. This relates to the research, as virtual negotiations create psychological distance between parties, specifically social distance. Building trust will be increasingly difficult as parties will have a more abstract image of each other, as the virtual environment creates a higher level of psychological distance between the parties. On the grassroots level, the people's psychological distance will be influenced by the extent to which the local population is affected by the conflict. The further people are removed from the conflict, the more psychological distance this creates and the more abstract their image of the conflict becomes (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 441-442).

The author aims to apply the Construal-Level Theory to the environment of virtual peace negotiations and explore what psychological implications this shift to a virtual setting has. Specifically, the theory will be applied in the context of Yemen to see how the psychological distance has affected the behavior and attitude of the main parties and civil society.

Social Presence Theory

In the context of this research, CLT can be complemented by the Social Presence Theory of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). This theory argues that the number of cues available impacts the amount of salience a person can convey to another. In a virtual context with fewer cues available compared to a face-to-face interaction, the other person will pay less attention to the person's presence. The theory further elaborates that the distance between the interactions causes us to perceive each other as 'semi-mechanical objects,' that can be ignored, insulted, and exploited

with minimal consequences. Thus, the research found that virtual mediation more often led to disrespectful behavior when communicating compared to face-to-face mediation (Stuhlmacher & Citra, 2005, P. 72-73).

The Social Presence Theory will be applied to support the findings of differences between face-to-face and virtual peace negotiations. In addition to the analysis of virtual negotiations in the business world, this theory aims to amplify and detect behavioral differences within negotiations, and supports the data in answering the main research question of the emerged barriers in peace negotiations when switching to an online environment.

Data collection methods

This information has been gathered through material from books, news articles, and published research. Search engines used to find research materials include official organizational websites, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and mainly Google Scholar for academic papers. Only English sources of information were considered for this research paper. The Author mainly used key words such as 'virtual peace mediation', 'barriers for peace mediators', 'trust-building in virtual environments', 'online peace mediation in the private sector', and 'digitalization in the peace process'. To understand the context of the conflict in Yemen the author used the keywords 'Conflict resolution in Yemen', 'Huthi-Saudi negotiations', 'Yemen Stockholm agreement', and 'UN peace negotiations in Yemen'.

Data Analysis

In this research paper, the author used abductive reasoning, looking at different theories and frameworks and forming the most sensible conclusion. This considers the language, culture, and worldview of the context in which the study is focused, as opposed to looking at the data and articles from my perspective. The author operationalizes this through a discourse analysis of the data and articles that are examined, which aims to look beyond the text and examine the context behind it. This is specifically imperative for this research since it emphasizes the 'why' behind the information. This type of reasoning is aimed at bringing the author closer to answering the research questions (Bryman, 2016, p. 401).

Research justification

Humanitarian Action often responds rapidly to an emergency situation, emphasizing the limited time humanitarian workers spend on their missions. Specifically, in a conflict setting, a lack of information on any side can create confusion that can prevent workers from saving lives. This can indicate not reaching the group in need of assistance, being received as perpetrators by locals, and many more misunderstandings. This shift to virtual peace negotiations will therefore not only impact peacemakers and peacebuilders but also allow actors to be better informed, which can increase access for humanitarian organizations. Thus, the increase in transparency and inclusivity

that this digitalization of the peace process offers creates many new opportunities for humanitarian organizations. As virtual peace mediation has only been widely practiced since the past couple of years, there is a significant shortage of research that covers long-lasting effects of virtual peace mediation on sustainable peace. Thus, this research will add to the research on the aforementioned topics, while acknowledging the limitations in the following chapter.

Research limitations

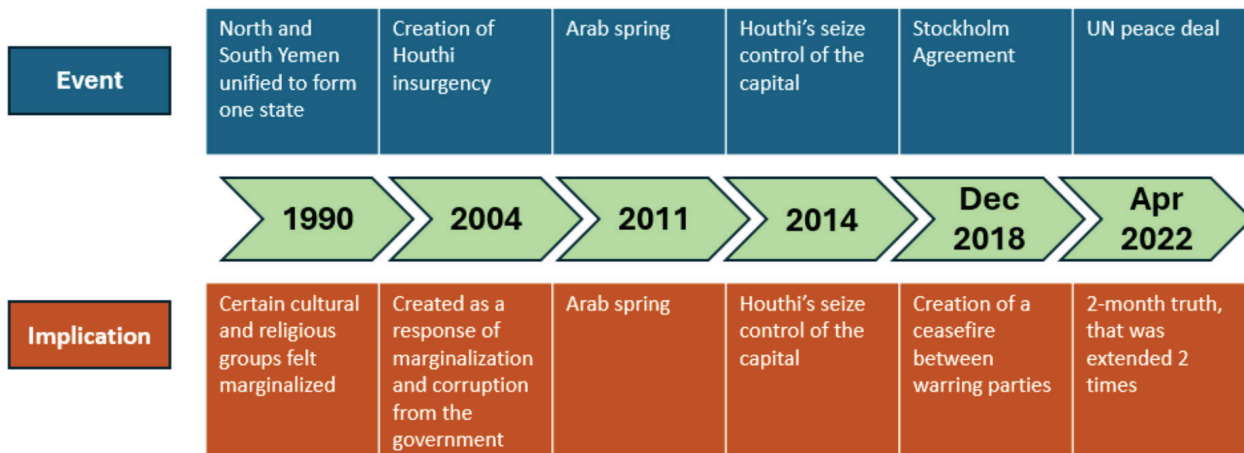
The main limitation of this research is its specificity. Specifying the research on a particular case and organization allows for a better understanding of the possibilities and downsides of virtual peace negotiations. However, it also limits access to information and interviews. Information on the actual results of virtual peace negotiations is limited since they have only been applied recently, and often in hybrid form, which makes it harder to find results. Additionally, in finding the interviewees, the author limited himself to UN peace negotiators that were active in Yemen, which is a small group. The author reached out to many, however, the few that responded were extremely busy, and further contact could not be established.

This made the author decide to conduct a desk study, with the addition of focusing on virtual business negotiations and the psychological aspects of virtual peace negotiations. Thus, the research paper has its limitations; however, with the increasing trend of digital peace processes, it might offer a new perspective on opportunities and pitfalls in virtual peace negotiations.

Case Study: Yemen

To analyze the strategy of the UN in Yemen accurately, it is important to first cover the history of the conflict, the main actors, and the current status.

Figure 2: Yemen conflict timeline



The Yemen conflict started in 2014, when Houthi rebels overthrew the government and took over the capital, Sanaa. Yemen was divided into two states until 1990, and after the unification of the two states, certain cultural and religious groups felt marginalized (Robinson, 2022). During the Arab Spring in 2011, long-serving President Saleh was ousted and replaced by Vice President Hadi. Economic instability, marginalization, and unequal distribution of resources increased, and in 2014 the Houthis decided to take over and respect the interests of the Shia Muslim minority in the North (Friends Committee on National Legislation, 2022). The government was comprised of Sunni Muslims, the majority in Yemen. Saudi Arabia also consists of a Sunni majority and has been significantly involved in the conflict. Together with the UAE, Saudi Arabia is fighting the Houthis to bring the original government back into power (Al-Muslimi, 2015).

Additionally, through colonization, Yemen has been built on a colonial legacy ruled by a European understanding of statehood. This entails that societies comprised of a 'multitude of communal groups' are being controlled and governed by one or a few dominant groups. This will eventually disrupt the social order, leading to a fragmented society, and potentially a protracted social conflict, as has become visible in Yemen (Ramsbotham et al., 2016, P. 90). Additional reasons for the start of the conflict were momentum and capacity. During the Arab Spring, religious and cultural differences were amplified, and the feeling of marginalization grew. This sectarianism only grew during the conflict, with the accusations of Saudi Arabia that Iran was supporting the Houthis, fueling the religious aspect of the conflict. In 2004, the Houthi insurgency was created as a response to corruption and marginalization by the government. During the Arab Spring, the government had significant governance struggles and was incapacitated, leaving the opportunity for the Houthis to take control (Ahmed, 2019).

Since the start of the conflict, the UN has made several attempts to mediate a peace agreement. While it did not result in a sustainable peace process, the UN did manage to negotiate multiple ceasefires, minimizing casualties. The most notable progress made was under UNSC Resolution 2451 in December 2018, when both parties signed the Stockholm Agreement. This agreement would cease fire and start the disarmament process (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2023). However, accusations between the actors of non-compliance on top of the already existing lack of trust endangered the peace agreement. Eventually, in May 2019, the Houthi troops continued their violent attacks, starting another period of full-blown conflict (Dijkstal, 2019).

In April 2022, the UN managed to negotiate a two-month truce in Yemen, which was extended two more times. The mistrust issue was addressed and accommodated through shuttle diplomacy. While the government was willing to compromise, the Houthis wanted more and demanded a large majority of resource revenue. When these conditions were not met, the Houthis targeted the government's oil tankers, and the truce period ended. After several failed peace resolution attempts, the conflict has become intractable, meaning that it is unclear at what stage the conflict is currently at (Crisis Group, 2022).

Additionally, the UN DPPA notes that in these critical times of ceasefires and peace attempts, the spread of unverified information and misinformation is also a significant contributor to the intractability of the conflict. Many accusations were made throughout the truce period from both sides regarding the violation of the truce conditions. This raises conflict expectations and can eventually lead to conflict escalation (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 8).

It has become evident that parties have entered a Mutually Hurting Stalemate, but have not yet been willing to compromise. This is imperative for a peace process, the actualization of both parties being in an MHS, which is slowly happening in Yemen (Mitchell, 1997, p. 6). Both parties have refrained from using extensive violence recently and have shown a willingness to negotiate a truce. The combination of factors shows that the conflict has entered a point of ripeness, which is an opportunity for peace that must be seized. (Zartman, 2000, P. 227-228).

A main factor in the failure of a peace process has been the lack of trust between the main warring parties, something that the UN also recognized. In a last-resort attempt to extend the truce, the UN attempted shuttle diplomacy; however, this was not as successful as desired (Crisis Group, 2022). Currently, both parties have shown a willingness to compromise on their military objectives and enter into negotiations, showing the ripeness of the conflict. It is important that a mediating party such as the UN support this process. Given that borders are still blocked, areas are contested, and lack of trust is still a big issue, virtual diplomacy seems like a viable solution (Lederer, 2023). However, how do you build trust in a virtual setting? What psychological implications are there with the shift to virtual negotiations? And how can digital tools assist the peace process?

Findings

In this chapter, the dynamics of virtual versus face-to-face peace negotiations are explored, considering the strengths and limitations of both approaches. The discussion extends to virtual business negotiations, which have been practiced for decades, addressing intercultural and non-verbal communication challenges. The psychological aspects of virtual negotiations, especially regarding trust-building and empathy, are also examined. Lastly, the chapter analyzes the impact of digital tools on peace processes, focusing on how technology can either facilitate or hinder collaboration, transparency, and inclusivity in complex conflicts.

Face-to-face and virtual peace negotiation comparison

In this section, the author focuses on the differences between face-to-face and virtual peace negotiations in terms of effectiveness. First, the discussion examines what mediation entails in the current virtual context and what is expected from it. Following that, the author explores both the opportunities, and the barriers associated with virtual peace negotiations.

Mediation is described as “a process whereby a third party assists two or more parties, with their consent, to prevent, manage, or resolve a conflict by helping them to develop mutually acceptable agreements.” The UN adds that mediation is intended to provide the right environment, to allow parties to improve their relationship and work towards cooperation. Mediation is voluntary and relies solely on the consent of the parties. The role of the mediator varies based on the substantive input they can suggest and is therefore flexible but structured. Mediators need to understand the causes of the conflict, the dynamics, positions, and interests of parties and civil society. Mediators should promote listening, dialogue, and collaboration through problem-solving (United Nations, 2012, P. 4).

The Increase in virtual diplomacy and the digitalization of peace processes require the mediators to also have digital literacy, meaning a basic understanding of communication technology skills. These skills need to be able to be transferred in the context of the national environment in which they are situated and be flexible with the preferred digital tools suggested by conflict parties. Additionally, mediators need to be able to analyze bulks of data regarding internet access, and analyze age, gender, language, and literacy (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 8).

The environment for effective mediation requires an encouraging external environment, as other states can positively promote or undermine mediation. As mediators also have the interests of international legal obligations in mind, they always need to be prepared to step back when solutions that would break these obligations are developing. Maintaining impartiality is crucial for mediators throughout the process to prevent undermining the effectiveness of their role due to perceived bias. This also means that mediators need to talk to all actors involved. Impartiality cannot be mistaken for neutrality, as mediators are still required to uphold certain universal principles and communicate this to the parties (United Nations, 2012, P. 5-10).

Although some argue that it is simply too early to arrive at any finite conclusions on the comparison between virtual and in-person diplomacy. Instead, attention should be directed toward the aspects that are lost in virtual diplomacy. Tristan Naylor, in his article *All That's Lost* (2020), unfolds two prime elements that cannot be satisfied without a summit (Naylor, 2020, P. 584).

The first relates to the performative element of summitry called sublime governance. This relates to the galas, performances, and dinners, which essentially hold no value and are distanced from the real meetings. Nevertheless, it emphasizes the meaning of the meeting, it allows the high-profile politicians to be more than just that and see each other in that capacity, and it provides an imperative break from the heavy meetings (Naylor, 2020, P. 585-P.589).

Secondly, the aspect that gets lost in virtual negotiations is inter-moments. These are moments in between meetings where political leaders can discuss terms and agreements. This can be used to follow up and dig deeper into the agreement, which can be more difficult in a momentary formal

meeting. These inter-moments are often breaking points to reach agreements and therefore hold much value. As mentioned by a UN diplomat, most people see what happens in the conference rooms, but that's not the UN at all. It's the corridors that determine what happens at the UN' (Naylor, 2020, P. 590).

Both these elements also contribute to relation-building and fostering interpersonal connections, which are essentially key to building trust in a peace negotiation setting. This connection is also crucial for the third party, as they need to be trusted by both sides in order to mediate successfully. The lack of informal space makes it more challenging to create this level of trust. This absence of a certain level of trust does not only affect the dialogue between the two conflicting parties, it also reduces the efficiency of the negotiations in producing results. Therefore, it can be argued that these trust relationships cannot be formed in an online setting, and initial face-to-face meetings are essential in establishing a certain level of trust (Bramsen & Hagemann, P. 556-557).

Furthermore, Backchanneling is also more challenging, as private messaging cannot fully substitute the power of face-to-face approaches. The flip side to this is that virtual negotiations have increased potential preparatory time as they avoid travel time. It has also helped reduce stress and tension, which would be higher in a face-to-face setting. So while relation-building can be more challenging virtually, there are more possibilities to do so (Bjola & Coplen, 2022, P. 82-83).

The UN DPPA also recognizes the benefits of virtual negotiations, looking at flexibility and trust-building. Video conferencing services allow for a significant decrease in costs, specifically in a complex such as Yemen with numerous actors involved in the conflict. It also increases efficiency; in that it allows for direct follow-ups with actors and decision-makers without communicating through a third party. The setting of virtual negotiation tends to be more informal, specifically when done through social media. This informality allows for trust-building between conflicting parties. Furthermore, it gives a variety of opportunities to start a dialogue in different settings. Private rooms for people to work on documents on specific issues, and rooms to speak to other actors and voice their needs and concerns (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 20-21).

When examining the effectiveness of virtual compared to face-to-face negotiations, there are some clear advantages to conducting online negotiations. Virtual negotiations increase flexibility, are cost-effective, and allow for more follow-up meetings (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 20-21). The downside is that relationship-building is more difficult in a virtual setting. Specifically, when focusing on informal meetings and ceremonies, face-to-face meetings allow the opportunity to take a break from the heavy meetings and see beyond just each other's capacity (Naylor, 2020, P. 590).

Virtual Business Negotiations

In the business world, virtual negotiations have been conducted for decades. However, companies

still struggle in the virtual business world, especially in an intercultural setting. Social norms such as body language, emotional intelligence, and cultural backgrounds have a considerable impact on the way people interact and therefore influence the result of the negotiation. These social norms, however, are more difficult to identify in an online setting, making virtual negotiations more complicated (Schlair & Hammer, 2022, P. 308).

Business negotiation literature talks about the importance of non-verbal communication, a feature that is very important in face-to-face negotiations. This includes eye gazing, blinking, facial expressions, gestures, and postures. This part of communication is complicated to read in a virtual setting and is less often used (Kazemitabar et al., 2022, P. 4). Additionally, relational communication is most effectively communicated through non-verbal channels, whereas verbal channels merely provide a more uncomfortable and unnatural alternative (Naquin & Paulson, 2003, P.114). Nevertheless, the complete removal of visual access limits the ability to assert dominance between parties, increasing their willingness to collaborate and reach a solution. This phenomenon is called the barrier effect and reduces attacking behavior (Stuhlmacher & Citera, 2005, P. 71).

Business negotiators have realized the advantages of virtual negotiations, specifically the flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and possibilities for follow-up meetings. Nonetheless, the drawbacks have also been clearly outlined, mainly regarding the increased probability of miscommunication and the extra barriers to building trust. This is why business negotiators emphasize the importance of setting clear ground rules before the start of negotiations. Other imperative factors include extensive preparations, follow-ups, consistency, and virtual negotiation training. The aforementioned criteria are additional guidelines that help towards successful online negotiations (Schlair & Hammer, 2022, P. 308).

Psychological implications

In the next section, the author will focus on the psychological implications of switching from face-to-face to virtual peace negotiations. In earlier sections, the author analyzed the noticeable differences when shifting toward virtual peace negotiations. The author also looked at the business world to find more quantitative results and rules for substitution. This section will be focused on the non-visible factors that can pose barriers to building trust in an online environment.

There has not been a detectable quality decrease for virtual negotiating compared to face-to-face negotiations. Nonetheless, it affects people's ability to trust other parties. Trust has been described as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another." The decision whether to trust the other party is often made based on a contextual risk assessment, analyzing the harm that the other party can do when the trust is violated. This is specifically important in peace negotiations, where the other party can violate trust and damage your reputation, making people less likely to confide in that party (Naquin & Paulson, 2003, P. 114).

This assessment of whether to trust other parties has also been affected by the increase in digitalization. Parties are more cautious, realizing the enhanced risk of security breaches and privacy infringements in this modern era (Adler-Nissen & Eggeling, 2022, P. 656). This has been particularly evident in Yemen, where mediators had very limited virtual access to the Houthis, who were reluctant due to a fear of revealing their location and security grounds (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 548) Additionally, there is another factor in which parties decide to trust one another, which is 'identification-based' trust. This relates to social identity theory, where the person relates their belongingness to the other person. People often identify themselves as part of a group, which can be religious, cultural, and more. Shared identity can help create empathy and concern for the outcome for the other party, which often results in a more trusting relationship. This social identity theory however is often one of the bottlenecks towards building trust in a peace negotiating setting, where actors perceive to have incompatible identities which creates mistrust. (Naquin & Paulson, 2003, P. 114).

Similar to virtual business negotiations, building trust appears to be the biggest challenge in virtual peace negotiations. Nevertheless, peace negotiations are slightly different from business negotiations, which are detected through certain behavioral patterns, and the consequences of those patterns. Face-to-face communication follows a certain rhythmic flow, with little pauses in between responses. Virtual negotiations have delays that alter the flow of conversation. In addition, some non-verbal responses are not being noticed at all. This causes the negotiations to be more formal, which has several implications for the outcome of the negotiations. Firstly, it creates more distance between the parties, which makes it harder for them to empathize with one another and build trust. Furthermore, the formal setting also does not allow sufficient 'intense conflictual engagement'. While this may be desired in business negotiations, as it decreases the risk of escalation, it can be required in a peace mediation setting to arrive at the core of the problem (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 549).

Digital Tools in the peace process

The rise of virtual negotiations and ICT has essentially improved the ability of states to oversee peace processes. Nevertheless, it has also made it more complicated. The concept of affordance explains the ICT development in the peace process, meaning that technology enables and constrains the tasks that the users aim to complete. Both sides of the concepts are unfolded through different influences in peace negotiations (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 534).

Shareability is the first influence on affordance, which means the way technological advances allow many actors to be included in the process. Shareability goes beyond actors being updated, they have access to add anything to any documents in the peace process. This increased virtual collaboration enhances the sense of teamwork and transparency and is specifically important in a context such as Yemen. Yemen has experienced multiple uprisings by groups that felt marginalized and chose to defend the needs of their people. An inclusive peace process seems to be the only way to move

forward and create an environment of inclusivity and transparency (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 534).

Nevertheless, in peace processes with many actors such as in Yemen, shareability can also be a negative aspect and slow the process down, as all actors are free to include their input. When examining the current situation in Yemen, the conflict appears to have reached a point of ripeness, and too many delays in the peace process can potentially ruin the chance of peace altogether (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 535).

The rise of mass communication and mass media is also an aspect of this shareability, which has a direct impact on the peace process. It gives people the idea that they have the full picture since they have access to all this information, however, this picture might not be accurate. Stereotypes are strongly transmitted through language; therefore, communication is imperative, as it can lead to social pain or social disadvantage. This is amplified by the harmful influence of mass media in two ways (Hornsey et al., 2008, P. 751).

Media bias is one harmful influence of this shareability, giving people a one-sided view of the situation. However, social psychologists believe this mostly exists in the mind of the reader, giving them the perception that the media is on their side. This still has a negative impact, as it aggregates and intensifies the situation (Hornsey et al., 2008, P. 752). This has been strongly visible in Yemen, where the Houthis have become anti-American and anti-West, and journalists are not allowed in their controlled territory (Mavaro-Stroller, 2017).

Secondly, People who feel they have a minority opinion are less likely to speak up, creating a spiral of silence. It is framed as a spiral because when people do not express their minority opinions, the collective sense of not speaking out strengthens, further marginalizing these groups (Hornsey et al., 2008, P. 753). Not only did the Houthis start the conflict based on a feeling of marginalization, but the war also caused the people in the South to feel further marginalized. This has caused them to push for a separation between North and South (Heibach, 2021).

Affordance also contains a visualization element, which refers to the ability to oversee the whole process, that affects the way we address them. Therefore, how the actors visualize a conflict significantly impacts their position, and willingness to compromise (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 535).

The third influence on affordance is immediacy, referring to immediate access to materials and world events during the occurrence. This speed and scale of information accessible nowadays are seen as richness; however, they raise issues of quality and a lack of critical analysis (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 535).

The rise of digitalization can be seen as a great opportunity to oversee peace processes and enhance

participation. It increases the speed and amount of information that is accessible to the public and enhances the transparency of the peace process. Nevertheless, digitalization can also negatively impact peace processes, as mass media can be used for spreading misinformation and controlling the population through a one-sided narrative (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 534-535). Additionally, it also further excludes the population that has no access to the internet or digital tools, which play a big role in the Yemen conflict (Hornsey et al., 2008, P. 751). Digital tools, therefore, come with responsibility and a certain usage consensus to avoid misuse.

Discussion

The Discussion will be divided into two topics: virtual peace negotiations and the digitalization of the peace process, after which there will be a part that combines the two topics in the exploration of potential digital peace in Yemen. In this chapter, the research questions will be addressed and answered. How do online negotiations compare to face-to-face negotiations in terms of effectiveness? How can online peace negotiations be compared to virtual business negotiations? What psychological implication does the shift to an online environment for peace negotiations have in Yemen? How can digital tools be beneficial to peace negotiations? The aim is to discover why the peace attempts have not yet been successful, what virtual peace negotiations can offer, and whether virtual negotiations can assist the UN in building towards peace in Yemen. This will further the author's ability to answer the main question: What barriers have emerged for peace negotiators when shifting to an online environment?

Virtual Peace Negotiations

In this part, the author aims to include different aspects of virtual peace negotiations and analyze them through the theories in the conceptual framework section. The author will discuss the findings in the context of Yemen and analyze how every Track is affected by the shift towards virtual peace negotiations. The Social Presence Theory and CLT will support the differences between virtual and face-to-face peace negotiations and how that applies to the context in Yemen. The case study aims to bring clarity on how virtual tools can be applied, whether they can be successful, and what extra barriers this creates.

Virtual peace negotiations have made progress in Yemen and allowed for regular follow-up meetings during COVID-19, when meeting face-to-face was not an option due to the lockdown. The lockdown in Yemen, a country already undergoing a dire humanitarian crisis, intensified the priorities for women's groups. Meetings were held more frequently, and accelerated collaboration was reported, specifically on tracks 2 and 3 (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 548). This corresponds with the literature, that mentions that virtual peace negotiations enhance participation, access, flexibility, and decrease expenses (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 20-21). Examples of the positives of virtual negotiations are Yemeni women, refugees, and IDPs who were suddenly able to participate in UNSC

meetings. Additionally, political elites are offered a more time-efficient substitution compared to face-to-face meetings, creating more time to meet with people they would normally not have time for. This means that the rise of digitalization and COVID-19 has offered groups virtual access where normally this would not be possible. (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 547). Thus, virtual peace negotiations have proven to be more efficient than face-to-face peace negotiations, as they have increased access and frequency of meetings and enhanced the possibility of meeting with political elites.

COVID-19 also posed challenges regarding Track 2 and 3 participation in the Yemen peace negotiations. In 2017, only 25% of Yemenis had access to the Internet, which mainly consisted of the elite (Nasser, 2017). Focusing on the shareability aspect of affordance, it appears that in the context of Yemen, while it does allow more people to include their voice, the voice of the marginalized groups is further excluded, as they do not have the technological equipment to participate (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 534). This spiral of silence is very evident in Yemen, fueled by controlled media. In this context, the reasons for speaking out are more due to external pressure. The feeling of not being heard or not even being allowed to talk are strong considerations for not speaking out as a marginalized group in North Yemen. This while simultaneously being fed a Houthi-controlled narrative as the only reality (Hornsey et al., 2008, P. 753). Therefore, while COVID-19 increased possibilities for Tracks 2 and 3 participation in the peace process, it further excluded the marginalized population of Yemen, who did not have access to the internet and were not able to speak out due to external pressure.

Moreover, considering the Multi-Track Diplomacy Approach, it is very challenging for the UN to start this peace process bottom-up, as the grassroots are separated. The controlled media in certain regions has increased the social distance between civil society in different areas of Yemen. Additionally, when assessing this separation of civil society through the CLT, people in the Houthi-controlled area are directly affected by the conflict, while other actors might be further removed from the issue. This spatial issue creates more room for speculative and abstract thinking, particularly considering the pervasive use of media for propaganda purposes. These different perceptions of the conflict make it very challenging to bring the grassroots closer together to start a dialogue (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 441).

Negotiations between official actors in Track 1 face other challenges in the virtual setting, specifically in the context of Yemen. In Track 1, negotiations are conducted between official parties, who often possess conflicting interests. This puts the success of the negotiation in direct correlation with the ability to build trust. Virtual peace negotiations tend to be more formal than face-to-face negotiations, which creates more psychological distance, as supported by the CLT. This psychological distance enfolds itself mostly in the social distance in Yemen (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 441). Additionally, the Social Presence Theory adds that this social distance is also harmful in peace negotiations between parties. When less cues are available, parties are less engaged and tend to perceive the other as 'semi-mechanical' objects. This increases the likelihood of disrespectful

behavior, which is harmful to building trust and, therefore, less effective and successful negotiations (Stuhlmacher & Citera, 2005, P. 72-73; Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 549).

The social distance also impacts the other tracks, as the more distance between the official parties and civil society, the less they will be able to adequately represent their interests and create an inclusive peace process. This is specifically problematic in the context of Yemen, considering the protracted nature of the conflict and the different interests within certain groups. This creates uncertainty about what the main interests are and requires much dialogue between tracks (Trope & Liberman, 2010, P. 441).

Regarding building trust, Yemen attaches much value to the ceremonial elements and relationship-building around the heavy negotiations. These rituals are important, as Arabic culture has an added layer of symbolism. In Yemen, settling disputes is mainly achieved through the exchange of gestures. This can be food and tea, but also the avoidance of conflict inside the cultural system (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P. 553). When these rituals are taken away, it is harder to build trust. This shows the significant psychological implications of shifting to virtual peace negotiations, specifically in the context of Yemen. While it might be more efficient, aspects such as building trust and creating a transparent and peaceful environment to negotiate cannot be neglected.

In the specific context of Yemen, where the conflict is driven by propaganda and sectarianism, overlooking the fundamental problem of mistrust between the main parties will never lead to a lasting and viable peace process. This mistrust falls under identification-based trust, as the perceived difference in identity prevents parties from entering into dialogue and prevents a trusting relationship (Naquin & Paulson, 2003, P. 114). According to the theory of improbable dialogue, peace negotiations should always include the main warring parties together, specifically when mistrust between the parties is a big issue. The theory describes that when parties with fundamentally different perspectives start a dialogue, it can help parties understand each other, which is the first step in working towards a peace agreement. In addition to the different perspectives, the parties have also been influenced by the intractability of the conflict in Yemen, blurring the original goals that motivated the parties to start the conflict. This dialogue can help to understand what both parties want and start a collaboration based on trust (Arias, 2021).

Since March 2023, Saudi Arabia has made considerable efforts to work towards a peace process, and the Houthis have been willing to negotiate. This has been described as international and regional momentum, Amplifying the ripeness of the conflict. As propaganda has been such a big factor in the conflict through sectarianism, controlled media, and limited access to information, bringing the main actors together could be the essential step towards starting a dialogue at the lower levels (Lederer, 2023).

Digitalization of the Peace Process

This section aims to explore the digital tools available in the context of the peace process and how

they can be used or misused to affect the peace process. A closer analysis of the context of Yemen will be provided to better understand the effects of digital tools on different layers of society. The context of Yemen will also be used to explore the possibilities of digital tools and discover their benefits.

A virtual peace process could be essential in Yemen to start a dialogue and connect the different layers of society. As earlier discussed, the advantages of a virtual peace process through affordance could be the breakthrough for the UN to set this Multi-Track diplomacy in motion while including all parties. Technological advancements have greatly facilitated progress in peace processes, increasing access, inclusivity, and opportunities for negotiation (Adler-Nissen & Drieschova, 2019, P. 534-535).

An example of a technological tool that can support the peace process is the Geographic Information Systems (GIS). This tool informs mediators about the exact security situation on the ground and gives them a better understanding of the actual situation. Additionally, it can also help monitor security agreements during a ceasefire, which is a useful asset that contributes to building trust between conflicting parties. The monitoring tool can be very useful in Yemen to create trust, as parties have more oversight over what is happening on the ground. Additionally, it gives parties more incentive to stick to the peace agreement, as parties know they are being monitored and breaches will be noticed and reported (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 12).

Social media can also play a pivotal role in assisting the peace process, as per the Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE. This peace agreement emphasized the importance of secrecy in Track 1, where much emphasis was laid on preparing the public's opinion. When sufficient progress was made, they introduced seven working groups. Social media played an important role, as it was imperative that the people in both countries perceive that they were gaining something. After that, extensive economic and political collaboration fostered the ties between the two countries, and the tension between the countries turned into a friendly relationship (Al-Otaiba & Saphira, 2021).

The aforementioned example shows the potential benefits of the use of social media during the peace process. When used correctly, social media can be used by mediators to support analysis and improve connections for dialogue between warring parties. Social media also increases the inclusivity of parties in the peace process, and strengthens public communication strategies. (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 10).

Nevertheless, there are notable drawbacks associated with the widespread dissemination of information and the influence of mass media, which can undermine the Multi-Track Diplomacy approach employed by the United Nations. This disruption has had a significant impact on the Yemen conflict, where the media has played a role in propagating sectarianism, exacerbated by

deep-seated mistrust among the parties involved. Since the Houthis took over power in 2014, they have been completely in control of the media in their controlled region, allowing them to form the narrative. They have been accused of murdering journalists who accused them of corruption, and behind ISIS, the Houthis are the worst press freedom abusers in the world (Nasser, 2017).

Thus, while digital technologies allow great opportunities regarding peace processes and virtual negotiations, the international community needs to recognize their responsibility. As was analyzed, controlling the media and spreading misinformation can have a significant impact on the peace process and directly affect peace negotiations and the ability for parties to trust each other (Kavanagh, 2021, P. 7).

Digital Peace in Yemen

This section will bring the discussion topics into a practical solution on how peace might be achieved in Yemen through the assistance of digital tools. Through the assistance of the different theoretical frameworks, the analyzed negotiation literature, and the discussions, the author will argue for the most realistic peace process in Yemen. In this part, the main research question will be answered: What barriers have emerged for peace negotiators when shifting to an online environment?

The UN favors a bottom-up approach with the application of the Multi-Track diplomacy framework for an inclusive and holistic peace process. However, it is also mentioned that there is no superior approach. Nevertheless, according to the UN methodology, for all tracks, the only time to make progress is during an ongoing peace process (Albani & Ade, 2021). This explains the previous attempts by the UN, which extensively tried to extend the truce and start a dialogue. As the dialogue was impossible to start and the truce period was ending, the UN tried shuttle diplomacy, where they went back and forth to the different parties to communicate the demands of the parties in an attempt to sign the peace agreement. This was a resourceful attempt to remove the tension from the situation and try to bring them together. This barrier effect takes out the ego aspect during the negotiations, making parties more willing to collaborate and work towards a common goal, peace. While this worked for the government of Yemen, which made considerable concessions, the Houthis saw it as an opportunity to ask for more, deeming their interests more important than an extension of the truce. Eventually, this truce broke for the same reason that the Stockholm Agreement did not last: there was a lack of transparency and a lack of trust (Crisis Group, 2022; Stuhlmacher & Citera, 2005, P. 71).

The lockdown following the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the necessity of virtual peace negotiations and the inclusion of digital tools. This has enhanced possibilities for Track 2 and Track 3 participants in peace negotiations in Yemen, allowing them to attend more meetings and talk to political elites more easily (Bramsen & Hagemann, 2021, P.547-P. 548). These digital tools include the use of social media to enhance and support dialogue between different tracks and tools that increase transparency to assist in building trust between the warring parties.

Nevertheless, limited access to the internet and external pressure prevent the marginalized population in Yemen from speaking out and participating in the peace process. Considering that the conflict area is mainly in Northern Yemen and the media is controlled, different groups in civil society have an alternative perspective on the situation in Yemen. Considering the CLT, psychological distance increases abstract thinking, making perceived reality more evident than reality, which creates a rift between the different societal groups. Continuing this peace process virtually will therefore maintain the social and spatial distance between the different groups in Tracks 2 and 3, making it hard to bring these parties together for a sustainable peace process (Trobe & Liberman, 2010, P. 441).

Because of this different perceived reality, it will be challenging to bring the grassroots together to start a dialogue. Therefore, a top-down approach to the Multi-Track diplomacy framework might be more favorable. This means starting in Track 1 in relative secrecy and focusing on building trust and relations between the warring parties, similar to the approach of the Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE. Hereby, the focus will be on preparing the other tracks and only informing the public of real progress. (Albani & Ade, 2021).

Starting the improbable dialogue in Track 1 between warring parties will be difficult in an online setting, even with both parties showing willingness to work towards a peace agreement. This is because as was emphasized through the Social Presence theory, behavior is harder to detect in an online setting, as less cues are available. The virtual setting increases distance, which causes parties to have more difficulty to create a connection with each other, and are more likely to see the other as 'semi-mechanical objects' (Stuhlmacher & Citera, 2005, P. 72- 73).

Rituals outside of official negotiations are also an imperative part of Arabic culture, and cannot be simulated virtually. Additionally, the mediating party also has to be trusted in order to create a safe and transparent environment. This is why the shuttle diplomacy of the UN produced significant progress, as both parties trusted the mediating party to adequately voice their interests to the other party (Bramsen & Hagemann, P. 553-557). This shows that virtual mediations in Track 1 have a higher probability when trust is established through face-to-face meetings between warring parties and the mediating party. After that base level of trust and transparency is established, parties can continue their negotiations virtually.

And while approaches might be slightly different with virtual peace negotiations and the use of digital technology compared to face-to-face peace negotiations, the mediation principles remain the same. The risks and opportunities become different from traditional face-to-face mediation due to a change in environment and dynamics between the parties (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2019, P. 20). Drawing from business negotiation theory, mediators need to set clear rules and boundaries to allow parties to negotiate virtually in the most suitable environment. Additionally, mediators need to prepare accordingly to minimize the risks and optimize the opportunities (Schlair & Hammer, 2022, P. 308).

This is highly relevant in peace negotiations since parties can be hesitant because of psychological distance and privacy concerns. Particularly in Track 1, mediators need to allow for full transparency from both sides while guaranteeing confidentiality about the private matters discussed (Albani & Ade, 2021).

Conclusion

To conclude, this research has analyzed the opportunities and barriers of virtual peace negotiations. The current environment, with its complexity of conflicts, multiplicity of actors, and availability of digital tools, has transformed the role of mediators. Virtual negotiations have allowed actors to meet more frequently and efficiently. It also reduces travel expenses and increases access and participation. Specifically in Yemen, this has increased Tracks 2 and 3 engagement, as they have been able to attend more peace meetings and communicate with political elites. Digital tools such as GSP, social media, and other online platforms enhance participation and transparency, which improve dialogue and build trust.

Nevertheless, the Social Presence Theory amplifies the difficulties of building trust in an online setting due to the limited cues available and the fact that people pay less attention to each other. It can eventually cause parties to perceive each other as semi-mechanical objects, making it harder to relate to the other party. The CLT adds that the psychological distance increases with virtual negotiations, which increases the level of abstract thinking needed to fill in the gaps. This is specifically problematic in Yemen, where mistrust between the main parties has been one of the main issues.

The marginalized groups in Yemen also struggle with technological barriers and the inability to speak out and participate in the peace process. Additionally, security breaches and privacy infringements are more likely in a virtual setting, causing individuals to be more cautious and less trustworthy, specifically in Track 1 diplomacy, which strongly relies on secrecy. The deep-rooted mistrust between warring parties and the emphasis on ceremonial rituals make building trust in a virtual setting particularly challenging in the context of Yemen.

Virtual business negotiations have shown the importance of mediators setting ground rules and clear boundaries to avoid miscommunication and allow for a successful negotiation process. The context also showed the power and efficiency of virtual negotiations and meetings in Tracks 2 and 3. However, as far as the dialogue in Track 1 is concerned, the first meetings should be conducted face-to-face, as the trust-building aspect cannot be dismissed. This is why a hybrid method would be ideal to fully utilize the positives of both negotiation methods.

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