

Prisoners and Detainees in Yemen:

The Humanitarian Dimension and Political Complexities

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Executive Summary

The issue of prisoners and detainees remains one of the most complex humanitarian question of Yemen's conflict, which has continued since 2015. This paper therefore examines the trajectory of negotiations between the internationally recognized government and the Houthi group, tracing key milestones that have produced both notable advances and recurring setbacks. It reviews major developments, including the Stockholm Agreement of 2018 and the prisoner exchange rounds held in Switzerland in 2020 and 2023, while also assessing the obstacles that hindered progress during negotiations hosted in Oman and Jordan. This paper gives a particular attention to the "Muscat Framework Agreement" of December 2025 and the role it played in facilitating the largest prisoner exchange deal concluded in May 2026 through bilateral regional channels.

The paper explores the factors that continue to impede the full implementation of the "all-for-all" principle and the resolution of the prisoner issue. It argues that the absence of mutual trust between the parties, coupled with the persistent use of detainees as political bargaining instruments, remains a central obstacle to progress. As a result, the issue has become increasingly intertwined with broader political and military dynamics, limiting efforts to preserve its humanitarian character and insulating it from developments on the military front.

The study also highlights the limitations of the UN and broader international role, which has retreated toward "technical and logistical facilitation" while lacking effective mechanisms of pressure capable of compelling the parties toward ending the prisoners suffering. In contrast, bilateral regional mediation—particularly the role of the Sultanate of Oman in coordination with influential regional actors—has demonstrated greater effectiveness in advancing negotiations.

Experience has shown that significant breakthroughs in this issue moves in direct correlation with the maturity of major regional understandings, rather than as a result of traditional international pressure.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive analytical approach based on tracing the development of the prisoners and detainees file in Yemen across different stages of negotiation, while analyzing the political, military, and humanitarian contexts that have shaped its trajectory.

The study is based on three main levels of analysis:

First: The Historical-Tracking Level

This level examines the principal stages of negotiation and agreements related to the prisoner issue, beginning with the Stockholm Agreement of 2018, and extending through the negotiation rounds held in Switzerland, Jordan, and Muscat. It also reviews the most recent understandings and prisoner exchange agreements reached in 2026.

Second: The Political- Analytical Level

This level analyzes the shift of the prisoner issue has shifted from a humanitarian matter that should be isolated from the conflict tracks into a strategy of political and military pressure used by the parties to secure negotiating advantages or manage escalation and de-escalation dynamics.

Third: The Regional and International Level

This level assesses the roles played by the United Nations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and regional mediators in facilitating negotiations and supporting the implementation of agreements. It evaluates the effectiveness of these actors in advancing progress on the prisoner issue, with particular attention to the growing prominence of bilateral regional mediation and the relative decline of traditional UN-led efforts.

The study also relies on analyzing the content of announced agreements and understandings, comparing the outcomes of negotiation rounds, and extrapolation of broader trends and possible future scenarios for this file.

The History of Negotiations: Partial Success and Comprehensive Failure

The Yemeni parties — with regional and international support, have engaged in prolonged rounds of negotiations aimed to resolve the prisoners and detainees issue. Despite all the efforts made over the past years, this file remains caught between distrust and political exploitation, leaving thousands of detainees tied to the prospect of a comprehensive agreement that does not appear to be within reach.

While negotiations should have proceeded on the basis of the “all-for-all” principle, many obstacles stood in the way, particularly on the Houthi side, who at times obstructed negotiations and at other times impeded implementation.

The following are the most important negotiation rounds related to prisoners:

□ **The Stockholm Agreement (December 2018):**

The two parties signed an agreement to exchange around 15,000 prisoners, detainees, and forcibly disappeared persons. Although the agreement was not fully implemented, it established an essential basis for negotiations in later stages.

□ **Montreux Round, Switzerland (September 2020):** This round led to the success of the first and largest prisoner exchange deal since the outbreak of the war, resulting in the release of 1,056 prisoners from both sides.

□ **Bern Round, Switzerland (March 2023):** This round produced the second exchange deal, which included 887 detainees from both parties. Among the most prominent political and military figures released on the government side were former Minister of Defense Mahmoud al-Subaihi, Nasser Mansour Hadi, brother of the former president, relatives of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and four journalists who had been sentenced to death by a Houthi-affiliated court.

□ **Amman, Jordan Rounds (2019 and 2021):** These rounds failed due to the linkage of the file to military and political tracks. The negotiations also became entangled in extensive details related to lists of missing persons, with both sides exchanging accusations over the inclusion of fictitious names.

□ **Muscat Round, Oman (July 2024):** The talks initially achieved tangible progress, but their subsequent linkage to regional military and economic escalation caused negotiations to stall and eventually collapse.

□ **Muscat Round, Oman (December 2025):** Although no final agreement was reached, the round paved the way for following round.

□ **Amman Round, Jordan (May 2026):** An agreement was reached for an exchange involving more than 1,700 prisoners from both sides.

Absence of Trust

The absence of trust between the parties concerned represents the most prominent structural obstacle that has transformed the prisoners and detainees file from a purely humanitarian issue into an extremely complex negotiating card. Despite the signing of several agreements and repeated declarations of goodwill, suspicion and mistrust have continued to dominate the parties' positions, transforming negotiation rounds into contests of political endurance and willpower.

The impact of this trust deficit is evident in several forms:

□ **Disputes Over Lists and Mutual Denial:**

Both parties exchanged lists of detainees, yet each submission was immediately met with suspicion. Each side accused the other of presenting fictitious names, including individuals killed on battlefronts, or demanding the release of fighters who had never been captured in the first place. These disputes consumed months of verification and counter-verification efforts in the absence of effective independent monitoring mechanisms.

□ **Politicization of prominent Figures (Political Detainees):**

The Houthis have treated senior political and military figures, as well as forcibly disappeared individuals, as strategic bargaining assets that cannot be released without major political or economic gains. In return, the legitimate government considers making concessions in certain files without the release of specific political figures to be a form of political capitulation. This dynamic has undermined the “all-for-all” principle, fragmented negotiations into selective deals, and tied exchanges to political and battlefield calculations.

□ **Conditions and Obstruction of Implementation:**

After an initial understanding is reached, mistrust emerges through sudden logistical conditions, such as disputes over the departure points of Red Cross aircraft, or refusal refusals to permit field visits to detention sites for fear of exposing military and security locations. This is reinforced by the lack of transparency regarding places of detention.

In essence, the absence of trust extends beyond negotiations into the implementation phase itself, linking the humanitarian file directly to cycles of military and economic escalation. Whenever battlefield conditions deteriorate or escalation resumes, the willingness to make concessions declines, and any flexibility during negotiations is viewed as weakness or a concession without return. As a result, the agreement shifts from a permanent humanitarian process into temporary and fragmented deals managed through a logic of gain and loss, prolonging the suffering of thousands of detainees and their families.

The Political exploitation of the Prisoners File: From Humanitarian Issue to Strategic Pressure Tool

In addition to the lack of trust between the parties negotiating over prisoners and detainees, the political exploitation of this file has greatly contributed to its complexity, creating numerous obstacles that prevent the achievement of a final and comprehensive solution that would end the suffering of thousands of detainees who have spent many years in captivity.

The systematic politicization of the prisoners and detainees issue is one of the most prominent factors preventing humanitarian understandings from being carried out into a reality that ends the suffering of victims. Although international humanitarian law — foremost among it the Geneva Conventions — stipulates the need to isolate humanitarian matters from the path of political bargaining, the Yemeni reality reveals that detainees have been transformed into “pressure cards” managed according to political and military calculations.

Three main dimensions stand out in the political exploitation of the prisoners and detainees issue:

1. Using the File as a Tool to Manage Escalation or De-escalation

The Houthis, in particular, have demonstrated considerable ability to use the prisoners issue as a mechanism for managing broader political dynamics. Periods of heightened external pressure to curb military escalation have often coincided with greater flexibility in negotiations and more positive engagement on prisoner exchanges, frequently accompanied by signals of “goodwill”. Conversely, when political or military conditions become more favorable, they frequently suspend negotiations or retreat from previous commitments and agreements.

2. Unequal Negotiating Value of Detainees and Prisoners

The parties have frequently assigned differing “negotiating value” to detainees, treating them not as individuals entitled to equal humanitarian consideration but as assets with varying political significance. The Houthis, for example, have retained senior political figures, journalists, and politicians as strategic hostages to extract major political and economic concessions. Ordinary fighters, meanwhile, are often treated merely as numerical assets used to preserve quantitative balance in partial exchange deals. This approach has undermined prospects for a comprehensive “all-for-all” agreement, replacing it with selective and incremental exchanges designed to serve immediate political objectives.

3. Propaganda and the Search for Local Legitimacy

Prisoner exchange operations are frequently exploited for political and media purposes aimed at mobilizing popular constituencies. This is reflected in celebratory receptions for released prisoners and the portrayal of exchanges as symbolic victories demonstrating each side's commitment to its members, while also investing the exchange in strengthening its local legitimacy.

The central problem with this political exploitation lies in its transformation of the file from a humanitarian issue into a bargaining mechanism in which human freedom becomes subordinated to political interests.

The External Role in the Prisoners File: Technical Facilitation Instead of Political Pressure

Observers of developments surrounding the prisoners and detainees file in Yemen can clearly see the limitations of external involvement and its gradual shift from an active and influential political role to a largely technical and facilitative one. As a result, the regional and international approach faces growing structural criticism centered on the transformation of external actors into marginal players, lacking both the political will and executive tools necessary to impose a comprehensive solution.

Despite the continued presence of the Office of the UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross, a wide gap remains between the hopes placed on the international role and its actual outcomes on the ground.

The manifestations of this structural weakness in external engagement can be understood through the following dimensions:

1. Retreat toward "Technical Mediation"

In many stages, the role of the UN mission and sponsoring organizations was limited to procedural and logistical functions, such as organizing meetings, providing negotiation venues, preparing agendas, and facilitating the logistical arrangements for transporting prisoners via Red Cross aircraft. This retreat toward the "technical" mediation strips the international role of genuine political influence, reducing it to a messenger and recorder of agreements rather than an effective guarantor of implementation.

2. Absence of Effective Pressure Mechanisms

International actors involved in the Yemeni peace process have generally avoided employing meaningful pressure mechanisms or offering substantial incentives and sanctions capable of compelling the parties to adhere to commit to the prisoner lists and move toward fully emptying the prisons. This hesitation stems from the desire of international mediators to maintain “open channels of communication” with all parties. In particular, the United Nations envoy has often been cautious about exerting direct pressure on the prisoner issue, concerned that doing so could prompt one of the parties—especially the Houthis—to disengage from wider political negotiations, including ceasefire arrangements and discussions related to a comprehensive settlement process. As a result, decisive action on humanitarian dimension of the issue has frequently been subordinated to preserve channels of communication in the political file.

3. Failure to Enforce International Resolutions as Binding Frameworks

Despite binding international resolutions and agreements exist—including UN Security Council Resolution 2216 and the 2018 Stockholm Agreement—the international community has largely responded to violations through soft diplomacy and expressions of concern rather than through enforceable accountability measures. No effective mechanisms have been established to hold parties accountable for denying prisoner lists, politicizing the issue of forcibly disappeared persons, or suspending exchange agreements at critical stages of implementation.

4. Prioritizing Regional Approaches over UN Will

Experience has shown that the most significant advances in the prisoner and detainee issue, such as the Muscat understandings in late 2025 and the major exchange agreement concluded in 2026, were not the result of direct UN pressure. Rather, they directly reflected bilateral regional understandings and the parties’ desire to reduce escalation for other strategic purposes. This suggests that the effectiveness of UN engagement remains closely linked to the prevailing regional climate, rather than acting as an independent driver capable of imposing a firm humanitarian agenda.

Taken together, the reduction of international involvement to a merely “technical facilitation” role has granted local actors broad room for maneuver and allowed them to evade commitments without fear of meaningful political consequences. Consequently, the prisoner and detainee issue is unlikely to move beyond its current cycle of incremental progress and recurring stagnation unless external actors assume a more active role in monitoring implementation and linking diplomatic and economic engagement to measurable advances in humanitarian commitments.

In this context, the trajectory of the “Muscat Framework Agreement” reached in December 2025, together with the major exchange deal signed in mid-May 2026, represents perhaps the clearest example of the shift in Yemen’s negotiating centre of gravity—from the multilateral UN system to bilateral regional channels. This shift has demonstrated in practical terms that progress on complex issues is now increasingly tied to direct regional arrangements rather than to traditional UN mediation mechanisms.

This transformation in favor of regional bilateral diplomacy can be observed through several dimensions:

□ **Riyadh’s support transformed Muscat from a mere logistical host into a political center of gravity**

Unlike previous negotiation rounds held in European or Arab capitals, where the host’s role was largely limited to logistics, the Sultanate of Oman played the role of direct regional mediator and actual driver of negotiations in the December 2025 round. However, this role would not have succeeded without the support of Saudi Arabia, which has become a trusted mediator among the Yemeni parties—particularly among components aligned with the internationally recognised government. Coordination with Riyadh therefore facilitated Muscat’s task, as Oman used its open channels with the Houthi group on the other side, leading to the formulation of the three-stage “framework agreement,” which overcame a deadlock that UN mechanisms had failed to break for years.

□ **The UN Role Reduced to “Endorsement and Technical Implementation”**
During the 2025 Muscat Agreement and the 2026 Amman understandings, the Office of the UN Special Envoy appeared largely confined to the role of a facilitator and endorser rather than an actual architect—or even a substantive participant—in the negotiations. Sensitive details of the understandings were left to the regional and bilateral arrangements led by Oman in coordination with influential regional actors involved in the Yemeni scene. Subsequent UN briefings merely built upon arrangements that had already been crafted behind the scenes through regional diplomacy. This dynamic illustrates how the United Nations has increasingly become a source of international legitimacy umbrella used to formalize agreements negotiated outside its official frameworks—whose inability and failure have been proven.

□ **Linking the Prisoner File to Broader Regional Interests:**

The success of the December 2025 agreement—which paved the way for the largest prisoner exchange deal in May 2026, involving approximately 1,750 detainees—was not the product of a sudden humanitarian awakening among the parties. Rather, it reflected a broader regional desire to reduce escalation in the Red Sea and southern Arabian Peninsula. The prisoners file was therefore treated as a “gateway to building trust,” as the deal included detainees from the Arab Coalition forces. This reflects broader regional bargaining, efforts, and negotiations that the United Nations does not possess the tools to manage or influence.

The Regional Ability to Provide Mutual Guarantees:

Unlike the United Nations, which lacks the means to impose binding penalties or offer sovereign-level incentives to the Yemeni parties, regional actors possess the ability to provide tangible guarantees linked to critical issues such as salaries, ports, airports, and military de-escalation. It is increasingly evident that these reciprocal regional guarantees enabled the Muscat Agreement to evolve from a mere “theoretical framework” in late 2025 into a large-scale executable exchange deal by mid-2026.

This transformation demonstrates that the prisoner file in Yemen moves in direct correlation with the state of regional relations: whenever bilateral understandings among influential regional capitals mature, progress on the humanitarian track accelerates with notable flexibility. Meanwhile, the role of traditional UN mechanisms remains largely restricted to overseeing logistical procedures and documenting historic moments—while implicitly acknowledging their inability to create such progresses themselves.

Challenges and Obstacles

A review of the trajectory of this file and the dynamics governing it reveals several major challenges that collectively obstruct the possibility of reaching a comprehensive “all-for-all” agreement capable of fully emptying detention facilities. These challenges can be summarized as follows:

1. Political Polarization and Turning the File into a Pressure Card

The greatest challenge lies in the absence of a decisive separation between the humanitarian track and the political-military conflict. The parties do not view the prisoners as humanitarian cases requiring immediate release; rather, they regard them as a “strategic stockpile” and negotiating cards to be released gradually or selectively in order to gain political and economic gains in other files, such as salaries, airport openings, or military de-escalation.

2. Unequal Negotiating Value and the Retention of High-Profile Political Figures

The “all-for-all” formula often collides with the problem of unequal classification of prisoners. The parties — particularly the Houthis — show considerable flexibility regarding ordinary fighters in order to maintain numerical balance in exchange deals. However, they have demonstrated rigid intransigence concerning senior political and military leaders, journalists, and forcibly disappeared individuals. This disparity transforms comprehensive negotiations into fragmented, temporary, and limited arrangements.

3. Technical Challenge of Verifying Prisoner Lists

This challenge becomes particularly acute during the exchange of detainee lists, where both sides frequently dispute the existence of specific names or accuse one another of submitting duplicate entries, including individuals already killed on battlefronts or civilians detained from roads, homes, and workplaces merely to inflate numerical totals. The absence of a unified and reliable database has therefore consumed months of negotiations in futile attempts to verify and refute submitted lists.

4. Weakness and Fragility of the International Umbrella

The retreat of the UN and broader international role into a narrowly technical and logistical function, combined with its inability to impose meaningful pressure or attach political costs to obstruction, has granted obstructive actors broad space to manoeuvre and withdraw from commitments at critical moments without fear of international consequences.

5. The File's Dependence on the Regional Climate

Although regional understandings — particularly the 2025–2026 Muscat process — have proven to be the actual driver behind major advances, this dependence is a double-edged sword. If any setback occurs in regional relations, or if new escalation surrounding maritime security and regional stability, the prisoners file immediately freezes, making it hostage to variables beyond the will of Yemenis.

Expected Scenarios

1. Continuation of the Current Situation — Most Likely

This scenario involves intermittent partial deals while a comprehensive solution remains absent.

2. Gradual, Conditional Progress

This scenario depends on confidence-building through multiple releases, with a larger role for international mediation.

3. Comprehensive Breakthrough — Least Likely

This scenario would involve implementing the “all-for-all” principle and would be linked to a broader political settlement.



Summary

Based on the foregoing analysis, several key conclusions can be drawn:

□ The experience of prisoner negotiations in Yemen demonstrates that efforts to resolve the issue through a single comprehensive agreement have repeatedly encountered significant obstacles. This is largely due to the differing political and negotiating value that the parties assign to various categories of detainees, particularly high-profile political figures and forcibly disappeared persons. Consequently, the limited progress achieved to date has largely depended on phased and partial exchange arrangements rather than comprehensive settlements.

□ **Regional Flexibility versus UN Fragility:**

The smooth transition from the Muscat understandings of December 2025 to the logistical implementation of the major 2026 exchange deal reveals that the negotiating centers of gravity have structurally shifted in favor of regional mediators capable of providing real mutual guarantees — both political and economic. By contrast, the role of the United Nations has increasingly been confined to providing political legitimacy, technical support, and procedural facilitation.

□ **The Prospects of a Sustainable Solution:**

This prisoners issue is unlikely witness a comprehensive and lasting solution unless it is removed from the context of political and military bargaining. As long as the fate of thousands of detainees remains tied to the regional climate and fluctuations in maritime or economic tensions, the file will remain vulnerable to repeated setbacks. This underscores the urgent need for binding independent verification mechanisms and a unified detainee database operating under robust international supervision.

Conclusion

The trajectory of negotiations over the prisoner and detainee issue in Yemen demonstrates that the issue can no longer be viewed as an isolated humanitarian matter. Instead, it has become deeply embedded within the broader political and military dynamics of the conflict, serving as a bargaining card shaped by shifting balances of power, pressure, and de-escalation. Although partial exchange deals have achieved important progresses and alleviated the suffering of hundreds of prisoners and their families, they have not yet established a comprehensive and sustainable path that would close this file once and for all.

The negotiations have shown that the greatest obstacle is not only the technical difficulty of verifying prisoner lists or arranging logistical procedures, but rather the absence of trust, the unequal negotiating value of detainees, and the parties' retention of high-profile political figures and political detainees as strategic pressure cards. At the same time, the negotiation trajectory has highlighted the limitations of the United Nations and broader international involvement, which has remained largely confined to technical and logistical facilitation rather than binding political guarantees.

In contrast, regional channels have emerged as more effective mechanisms for breaking deadlock, due to their possession of communication tools, practical guarantees, and overlapping interests with the influential parties. However, the dependence of the prisoners file on the regional climate makes it vulnerable to setbacks whenever political or military tensions escalate in Yemen or across the region.

Accordingly, a sustainable solution to this issue requires restoring recognition of its humanitarian nature, separating it as much as possible from paths of political and military bargaining processes. This would necessitate the establishment of an independent and unified verification mechanism for detainee lists, alongside linking progress in political and economic negotiations to measurable commitments by the parties to release prisoners, detainees, and forcibly disappeared persons. Keeping this file open does not only mean the continuation of the suffering of thousands of Yemeni families; it also reflects the inability of the peace process to address one of the most urgent humanitarian issues in the Yemeni war



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