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Charity Registration Number: 208223

## Middle East and North Africa Programme: Yemen Forum Meeting Summary

# Rebuilding Yemen: Roadmap for a National Dialogue

March 2012

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary of the discussions which took place at the roundtable event on 'Rebuilding Yemen: Roadmap for a National Dialogue' held at Chatham House on 14 March 2012. The meeting brought together key Yemen Forum stakeholders, including academics, journalists, private-sector representatives, NGOs and members of the UK-based Yemeni diaspora. The discussion addressed two of the major challenges Yemen currently faces: the 'Southern question'; and developing a 'national dialogue' process as stipulated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) agreement.

Key points that emerged from the meeting included:

- The 'Southern question' remains a key issue for Yemenis to address, and pro-independence sentiment is on the rise.
- The security situation in the south is acute and deteriorating.
- The Yemeni government needs to take confidence-building measures to bring southerners, and other previously excluded groups, into the national dialogue.
- There remains a lack of clarity over certain aspects of the transition process, including representation in the national dialogue and security-sector reform.
- In order to be successful the national dialogue needs to prioritize inclusive participation.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an *aide-mémoire* to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

### The Chatham House Rule

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

## **SESSION 1: THE SOUTHERN MOVEMENT**

### **The situation on the ground**

The atmosphere in Aden, the main city in south Yemen, is very different from that in the capital, Sana'a. In Sana'a, there is a general sense of optimism towards the transition process, whereas Adenis are very pessimistic. The security situation in the south is much worse than in Sana'a, with the lack of policing contributing to the presence of armed gangs affiliated to various political tendencies. These tendencies include the Southern Movement (an amorphous grouping of various organizations mostly calling for Southern secession; the Islamist party, Islah; and the General People's Congress (GPC), the former ruling party affiliated to ex- president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Participants at the workshop who had recently visited Aden noted an increase in radical pro-secession sentiment on the street. Last year's revolution initially acted as unifying factor between the north and the south, but as inter-elite rivalry began to dominate events in Sana'a, southerners felt increasingly alienated from the situation in the north, contributing to further support for the idea of an independent South Yemen.

There are conflicting reports regarding the extent of extremist influence in the south, particularly in Abyan, but the situation is increasingly worrying. It was argued that President Hadi should prioritize security improvements in the south. Some participants felt that the new president – a southerner himself – was aware of the problems and was taking steps in the right direction, such as replacing the governor of Aden and the southern regional army commander. There is a great deal of speculation as to the extent, if any, of Iranian involvement in the south but little evidence until now.

### **The troubles of unity: statements in favour of secession**

Southerners perceive widespread discrimination on the basis of their identity (such as exclusion from networks of wealth and influence, or access to employment). For some members of the Southern Movement, their grievances are underpinned by a fundamental feeling that unity itself – as it was originally envisaged by southerners at the time of unification, in 1990 – is no longer viable. A number of participants argued that unity has resulted in a state of northern 'occupation'. It was proposed that southerners should make a final decision on their status in the form of a referendum. Any negotiations over the southern question and future structure of the state must be

conducted on a bilateral basis (i.e. between 'north' and 'south') with supervision from the UN and the international community.

### Questions of identity

Participants discussed whether the Southern Movement was driven by questions of identity or simply by economic grievances. Some participants argued that the call for secession would diminish if the southern economy improved, with a corresponding increase in job opportunities. Others argued that calls for secession are underpinned by a distinct south Yemeni identity.

The wounds of the 1994 civil war remain largely open and there is a sense that North–South unity – as formally agreed in 1990 – has never been fully implemented. No national reconciliation process took place after the civil war. Violations such as the appropriation of land in the south by northern allies of the president and the destruction of cultural heritage continue to fester, adding a new dimension to the question of southern identity. In view of this, it was stated that the government must develop confidence-building measures to show southerners that they are ready to address these grievances in the context of the national dialogue.

Some participants expressed their concern that southerners still perceive a 'Sana'a-centric' approach on the part of the international community, including during the transition period. This may exacerbate any existing tendencies among the Southern Movement to look to Iran for support. Others raised concerns that there was a general feeling among the international community that all southerners are pro-independence; they emphasized that this is not the case and that many see a solution within unity, for example in a federal structure.

### Leadership

The Southern Movement has no coherent ideological leadership and no clear position on the events currently taking place in Yemen. Furthermore, there are a number of splits between the internal leaders and the external exiled leadership. The internal leaders are more pragmatic; they have appealed to southerners to give the new president time to implement the programme laid out by the GCC initiative. The exiled leaders are known for their more erratic behaviour, while some figures among this group are said to be working on a five-year plan for independence.

One participant argued that although there were divisions within the movement, this did not undermine the just cause of the southern people. Others argued that the number of southerners who voted in the 2012 presidential election was surprisingly high, despite the Southern Movement's attempted boycott of the ballot. Some viewed this as a symptom of the movement's fragmented leadership. It was also suggested that as the Southern Movement becomes more militant it risks losing its core moderate middle-class supporters.

Participants heard that an internal southern dialogue had already begun, among different groups within the Southern Movement. Many felt that this internal dialogue represented a positive step, allowing southerners to come together in order to air their differences and discuss them. However, one participant highlighted the risk that an internal south–south dialogue could entrench radical positions rather than preparing the southerners for compromises required for engaging in a new national dialogue.

Some participants suggested that the Southern Movement needed international support in order to come up with an agreed position before engaging in the national dialogue. Despite complaints that the international community had not done enough to engage with the Southern Movement, participants acknowledged that before the elections some ambassadors had visited Aden. This had been useful in providing the Southern Movement's leadership with a clearer understanding of the thoughts and suggestions of the international community.

### **Weakness of civil society**

A free press in the south is much needed as a pillar of democratic reform and in order to open public debate on key issues. The youth movement in the south has been unable to establish itself in the same way as the youth movement in Sana'a, struggling to set up an organization, for example. The poor security situation is one cause of this.

### **Fragmentation across Yemen**

The people of Taiz – a city just to the north of the old border between North Yemen and South Yemen – have also become increasingly alienated as a result of the brutal response of the regime to youth-led protests there. Citizens of Taiz feel that the response was more brutal than that meted out to

protestors in Sana'a, and that the young people there were better protected than to the youth of Aden and Taiz.

The eastern desert province of Hadramawt has experienced both unity and the revolution very differently, and some Hadramis are now calling for the province to have its own place within a multi-party federal structure.

## SESSION 2: DEVELOPING A NATIONAL DIALOGUE

### A new political context

Yemenis view previous attempts at national dialogue in 2009–10 as a failure, because political actors in charge of these efforts did not reach out beyond the GPC and the opposition coalition – known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP). Consequently, a great deal of work must be done in order to prove that there is a chance of forming a new social contract between voters and their representatives. The depth of change that has already occurred as a result of last year's political upheaval is debatable, but the regime has been sufficiently weakened to allow new voices to be mobilized and heard. However, one participant noted that this new abundance of political pluralism has created its own problems for moving forward.

### General principles of a national dialogue

One of the main questions around the new national dialogue is to determine what the primary aim will be. There are a number of different priorities to choose from, including peace, security, stability, democracy and justice. Once priorities have been decided there are number of other issues that need to be addressed, including who participates in the national dialogue and who they represent. If there are particular ideas regarding the outcome of the national dialogue, these may predetermine the participants and how they should be selected.<sup>1</sup>

It should also be noted that the perceived goals of the national dialogue will differ from person to person, and that for some engaging in a national dialogue may be a way to maintain the status quo.

In order for national dialogue to succeed, its sponsors and organizers need to set explicit benchmarks, along with guarantees that these will be met. Furthermore, committees need to be small enough to facilitate decision-making. There must be no red lines. No topic can be taken off the table and this includes the question of secession. One participant highlighted the distinction between dialogue and negotiation, arguing that negotiation becomes increasingly difficult when more than two parties are involved. He warned of the danger that the national dialogue may be used as a space for negotiation, which will make it harder to move forward.

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading on this issue, please see Professor Stefan Wolff's remarks: <http://www.stefanwolff.com/notebook/developing-the-national-dialogue-in-yemen>.

## Security-sector reform

Certain taboos have now been broken within Yemeni society, enabling more open discussion of military restructuring and security-sector reform. However, there is still a tremendous amount of confusion over this issue, as there is not yet any clear mechanism or agenda for achieving change. Participants called for the role of the US government to be clarified, particularly given the tension between the technical (or structural) and political aspects of security-sector reform. Although participants recognized the need to stabilize the security situation before embarking on the national dialogue process, they also expressed concerns that prioritizing security might bolster perceived Saudi and American preferences for a strong central state. Participants agreed that discussions about security must include Yemeni aspirations for greater political autonomy.

## An inclusive process

Given the events of the past year and the breaking of a number of taboos, it has become clear that the old dialogue model – of bilateral meetings between the JMP and the GPC, which excluded the ‘non-party’ groups, such as southerners and the Houthis – is no longer viable. A new model is needed, which will allow the ‘non-party’ groups to come to the table, along with new voices, such as youth activists and women. Not only must the participation of these new actors be guaranteed but their voices must also be heard during the dialogue.

Some creative suggestions were made for rendering the dialogue process more inclusive, such as using a snowball sampling method to select participants (i.e. asking invited participants to recommend other participants – contrary to expectations, people will often recommend others who have different opinions, rather than those who share their views). However, it was also noted that a number of groups are explicitly cited in the GCC agreement (‘youth, the Southern Movement, the Houthis, other political parties, civil society representatives and women’), and therefore may to some extent be guaranteed a place at the table.<sup>2</sup>

In addition it was stated that there must be a real effort to inform the general public about the national dialogue, through the media, particularly television, as well as to address the role of the diaspora. Finally, it was noted that the

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<sup>2</sup> See section 20 of the agreement: <http://www.yemenpeaceproject.org/wordpress/?p=458>.



issue of transitional justice needed to be addressed either within or in parallel with the dialogue.

### **The Joint Meeting Parties in the dialogue**

Participants heard that while the national dialogue should be non-partisan, the JMP opposition coalition had the potential to play a beneficial role. The nature of the JMP's work over the past decade had made the coalition better versed than most other groups in accommodating difference, and they had a vision of unity which accepted diversity.

The JMP had cultivated a competent cohort of politicians who were hoping to become future Yemeni leaders, yet they had hit a glass ceiling. This missing generation of JMP leaders in their thirties and forties should be included in the dialogue process and could provide links to senior partisan figures and activists. The JMP could potentially help recruit other groups to the process. It was also notable that by 2008 and 2009 Yemenis had started to call themselves 'JMPers' rather than Islahis or socialists. Nevertheless, the JMP is still regarded by many as part of the problem rather than the solution because they were the 'official opposition' during Ali Abdullah Saleh's rule and were to a great extent part of the regime rather than outside it.

### **The role of the international community**

It was highlighted that any dialogue must be a Yemeni-led process. However, well-coordinated diplomacy should play a key role in supporting the national dialogue, and the international community should focus on understanding the processes and consequences of dialogue. Participants called for an increased role for civil society organizations during the preparation stages, including the presence of civil society representatives at Friends of Yemen ministerial meetings. It was suggested that the UK should develop a strategy for promoting women's rights in Yemen, as it had done in Afghanistan.

Participants questioned the extent of effective coordination among international actors, with some countries playing a self-appointed role as mediators, some giving money and some identified as stakeholders with a real interest in the outcome of national dialogue. An informal 'G10' contact group has assigned member countries to support work in certain areas of implementing the GCC agreement – for example, the French are leading on constitutional reform, and the Russians on the national dialogue. Participants expressed concern that external actors taking on these roles might bring their

own particular preconceptions to bear. It was highlighted that external actors should facilitate decision-making, rather than dictating terms.

## **Spoilers**

Saleh's departure from Yemen was seen as a precondition for successful dialogue. It was felt that as long as he remained in Yemen, he would attempt to manipulate the political situation, and try to undermine the power of the new president.

Saudi Arabia also possesses enough influence over political actors in Yemen to contribute to the eventual success or failure of the national dialogue. Participants wondered whether Saudi Arabia would tolerate having a vibrant democracy on its own doorstep.

## **A long road ahead**

Optimists believed that the national dialogue could eventually succeed, with the caveat that fundamental reforms would take time to achieve and not all the changes people wanted to see would occur instantly. Participants agreed that expectations must be managed, both within Yemen and outside the country. It was not possible to resolve twenty years' worth of problems in a matter of weeks or months.

## **ABOUT THE YEMEN FORUM**

The Yemen Forum is a specialist global network that pursues policy solutions for Yemen. The collective knowledge and influence of Yemen Forum members raises awareness, shares expertise and supports governments in forming policies that directly address the causes of conflict, poverty and poor governance in Yemen. The current phase of the project has two major strands: political economy analysis, and the politics of inclusion and legitimacy.

[www.chathamhouse.org/yemen](http://www.chathamhouse.org/yemen)

## **ABOUT THE MENA PROGRAMME**

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa. To complement our research, the MENA Programme runs a variety of discussion groups, roundtable meetings, workshops and public events which seek to inform and broaden current debates about the region and about UK and international policy. We also produce a range of publicly available reports, books and papers.

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