
Yemen: Key Players and Prospects for Peace

17–18 November 2015

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Introduction

This is a summary of discussions that took place at workshop sessions hosted in London by the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme on 17–18 November 2015. The discussions brought together international scholars, policymakers, regional analysts and civil society representatives to discuss critical aspects of the current conflict in Yemen. Participants examined the principal local, regional and international actors involved in the Yemen war, analysed their agendas, and evaluated the prospects for continued violence or a mediated peace process.

Each session of the workshop explored a specific area in the conflict, and speakers offered insights into the main political interests and economic needs of each group. This approach provided the basis for group discussions about areas of potential agreement that could help resolve the increasingly complex conflict and ultimately build a sustainable peace.

Key points that emerged from the discussion were:

- Yemenis, who are victims of decades of bad governance, hold a wide range of grievances that have led to an entrenched sense of marginalization across the country. The current conflict has only deepened these long-standing resentments. Providing basic services and meeting the most basic needs of the population is key to future legitimacy.
- The increasingly fractured nature of the two broad coalitions fighting the civil war means that loyalties are often fluid. The motivations for fighting are manifold, contrary to the widespread portrayal of a straightforward pro-Houthi versus pro-Hadi conflict. Furthermore, the ultimate goals of the different factions vary widely.
- Any political agreement to end the current conflict that excludes the crucial actors on the ground risks repeating the mistakes of the 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) deal and the subsequent transition process. A meaningful deal needs to include a broad spectrum of voices in order to prevent further conflict. Owing to the multiple factions involved in the fighting, any peace deal, or ceasefire, will need to be negotiated at the local level if it is to be comprehensive.
- There is an urgent need to reach a political settlement and lasting ceasefire amid the escalating humanitarian crisis. The main threat to the civilian population, besides the violence and siege tactics on the ground, is the de facto blockade endorsed by the UN Security Council, which has deprived the country of food, fuel and medical supplies.
- Post-conflict, it will be essential to integrate local fighters into a newly structured, salaried military and security force in order to ensure stability and security and curb the ability of groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS in Yemen to take advantage of what is currently a growing security vacuum.
- The economy has been severely disrupted by the conflict. The deterioration of the banking system has had a widespread impact not only on the ability of businesses and aid agencies to operate but also on remittances.
- If factors such as local grievances and disputes, security and the provision of basic services are not factored into a political settlement to end the war, the outbreak of renewed conflict will be highly likely.

The workshop is part of a broader programme of Chatham House research and will inform a forthcoming paper on the fault lines in the Yemen war. What follows below is a summary of the discussions that took place.

Day 1

Session 1 – Conflict overview: mapping the key actors

Overview

The civil war in Yemen is a multipolar conflict (with regional and local components) rather than a clear-cut fight between two sides. Above all, it is the result of an increasingly corrupt central state that became incapable of enforcing the rule of law and unwilling to incorporate various actors. The conflict has been portrayed as a proxy war, pitting an Iran-backed side against Saudi-backed adversaries. But in reality, the Houthi–Saleh bloc – which is the strongest military component inside the country – and the anti-Houthi bloc are both internally diverse and harbour competing interests and priorities. Participants agreed that in practice, there is little loyalty to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi among the anti-Houthi bloc. Many on the pro-Houthi side are more anti-Saudi than pro-Houthi.

Key players

The Houthi–Saleh alliance

The Houthi–Saleh alliance is a military–tribal marriage of convenience between former foes, with its origins in a shared interpretation of the 2012–14 transition as inimical to their interests. Cooperation began in 2011, when the military and tribes felt that they were losing power and Islah, Yemen's main Sunni Islamist party, emerged as the main winner. The Houthis are naturally suspicious of Ali Abdullah Saleh, the former president deposed in 2011, and his political party, the General People's Congress (GPC), with which they fought six wars between 2004 and 2010. In Sana'a the narrative of the war is one of 'defending the nation against an external threat'.

Pro-Houthi external actors

Iran has historically had a small amount of influence in Yemen – in both the south and the north of the country. Ideologically, the Houthis' founder, Hussain al-Houthi, was inspired by the Iranian Revolution but envisioned having his own Islamic revolution based on Zaydi principles. Some Houthis do follow Twelver Shi'ism but do not form a monolithic movement. Russia, for its part, has aligned itself – at least as far as diplomacy is concerned – with the Houthi–Saleh side in a continuation of regional dynamics that pit Russia and Iran against Saudi Arabia.

The anti-Houthi bloc

The various groups fighting the Houthis have often competing visions of Yemen's political future. This hugely diverse bloc has a common enemy today, but once the Houthi threat has been eliminated, there is unlikely to be a clear and united view of how the country can move forward. The bloc has three main pillars:

- *Southern separatists, also known as Herak or the Southern resistance:* Even within this group there are differences over when and how separation should take place and how President Hadi and his government are perceived. Its priority is eventual independence for South Yemen, which was a separate country until 1990.
- *Sunni Islamists:* The most important member of this group is Islah, is a political party with ambitions to govern Yemen. It perceives the war as a coup attempt driven by Iran and as revenge exacted by Saleh against the Sunnis through any means – including allying with the Houthis.
- *Fighters with tribal or regional motivations:* Primarily in Mareb and, to a lesser extent, in Al Jawf, Taiz and some southern governorates, these fighters see themselves as defending their territory.

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State

Al Qaeda and the emergent Yemeni branch of ISIS have both positioned themselves as 'anti-Houthi' but are not part of the semiformal apparatus of the anti-Houthi bloc. AQAP, the virulent local Al Qaeda branch, is widely seen as being one of the big winners from the war, having seized the southeastern port town of Mukalla days into the Saudi-led bombing campaign. The group has since cemented its control over the port and has begun to expand westward towards Aden. AQAP sees the war as an opportunity to brand itself as the only group capable of defending Yemen's Sunnis, and of providing - as it has been doing in Mukalla - security and basic governance including the provision of water, electricity and jurisprudence. ISIS has thus far limited itself to attacks on Houthi-affiliated buildings including mosques in Sana'a, and on government officials in Aden.

Other external actors

When the Houthis signed the Peace and National Partnership Agreement on 21 September 2014 after seizing Sana'a, Saudi Arabia was willing to accept an imposed power-sharing agreement. But as the Houthis pushed south, many Arab countries – and Saudi Arabia, in particular – came to view their expansion as an Iran-led 'attack on Arab identity', linked to a broader regional struggle for power, and decided to intervene.

Yemen's anti-Houthi bloc is highly dependent on external military backing – Saudi Arabia being the most important of the external actors in the war, followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The stated aim of the Saudi-led coalition is to roll back Houthi–Saleh advances. But many (though not all) the workshop participants agreed that intervention by the coalition has less to do with internal Yemeni politics than with regional competition.

The Saudi-led intervention came shortly after the death of King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud in January 2015; today, the Yemen war has become a legacy issue for Abdullah's half-brother and successor, King Salman bin Abdel-Aziz Al Saud. The war has significantly shored up nationalism in both the UAE and Saudi Arabia as citizens rally round the flag to an extent not seen previously. Abu Dhabi shares Saudi's concern about the Iranian threat, although the two have differing concerns and risk assessments inside Yemen. Abu Dhabi harbours fewer concerns about the Houthi–Saleh axis than does Saudi, while it is more concerned about Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood party, Islah.

The US and UK position is one of support for a regional ally, Saudi Arabia, but there is increasing discomfort over the course of the war, especially the gains made by ISIS and AQAP as a result of the conflict.

Participants agreed that Yemen had been headed towards war since 2012. Saudi Arabia's intervention had not started the conflict, but the role of external powers could complicate attempts to resolve it.

Session 2 – Analysis: the south

In southern Yemen, there are now three power centres: Hadi, the secessionists and the Saudi-led coalition. These groups are loosely coordinated and subject to internal rivalries. Additionally, other key players have played a role in fighting in the south.

Hadi

Support for President Hadi on the ground is negligible, it was said. He has been supporting resistance groups he believes he can control, and these groups subsequently present themselves as the 'official' resistance. Hadi, the speaker argued, portrays these groups as the real resistance. Similarly, a participant

said, Hadi has appointed individuals who are generally loyal to him but do not have a support base above the local government level. Funding from the UAE and Saudi Arabia goes through those individuals, but the money is funnelled through various figures who allegedly siphon off significant sums. This has contributed to a lack of security in Aden. There are several thousand men under arms. Integrating them into a police force in Aden and giving them salaries would help resolve the security issue. Indeed, if the new force were structured as a professional security one, Hadi's ability to exert direct control over such groups is reduced.

There was a consensus among participants that Hadi has lost too much credibility to lead in the south. Some argued Vice-President and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah could play a more unifying role, including bringing the military leadership under his leadership. However, the perceived rivalry between the two was likely to mean that he would not be able to do so as long as Hadi remained in office.

Secessionists ('Herak'/the Southern Resistance)

For years, there has been a lack of political leadership in the south. Civil-society groups have avoided playing a role in politics out of fear of repercussions, including assassinations. This has left the south without real grassroots political leadership and with deep tensions between Herak leaders, activists and military leaders.

The concept of separation in the Yemen context is not well defined but remains a rallying cry in the south. Saleh failed to counter the rise of the secessionist movement. Initially, he used a mix of patronage and coercion to control the south. One speaker noted that later he had resorted to killing security officers and that, more recently, he had tried to kill off security and military leaders who were pro-Hadi or pro-Herak.

It was agreed that the first step towards stabilizing the south should be to unite all the fragmented Herak groups into one entity or merge them into the state – for example, by admitting separatist fighters into the military or police. A two-state solution, or federal system, would be an option that would give southerners more autonomy. Not all southerners want a simple north-south split: one participant noted that in Mukalla, talk has shifted from secession to a three-state solution that would comprise north, south and Hadramawt.

Saudi-led coalition

Saudi Arabia has made some tactical alliances with pro-secession groups, but the latter have different strategic goals from the former. Southerners feel they have had no protection from the international community, particularly the UN and the UK. Several participants argued that the UK has a moral obligation towards Aden and the south owing to its colonial history.

Other key players

In terms of other key anti-Houthi players in the south, a network of Salafist fighters played a vital role in forcing the Houthis out of the south. Some are strongly opposed to southern secession, but they did join with separatists to fight the Houthis in Aden. Since the liberation of Aden, they have assumed administrative functions, in particular taking charge of prisoners, in the absence of the state.

In 2010 AQAP fought southern militias, many of them pro-secession, after Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) had captured large parts of Abyan and Shabwa. In the current conflict, Al-Qaeda militants have exploited anti-Houthi resentment to band together with local tribesmen.

In terms of the Houthi–Saleh alliance, one speaker argued that there has been ample room in the south for people linked to Saleh to carry out assassinations. Saleh, the speaker said, has been using Islamist

groups to serve his own ends. The same speaker went on to link the former president to numerous attacks, including the bombings on a hotel being used by the internationally recognized government in Aden on 6 October 2015 that ISIS claimed to have carried out.

Session 3 – Analysis: Taiz

Taiz is Yemen's most populous governorate and, historically, has provided much of Sana'a's workforce. Today it accounts for the majority of the state's income from taxation. However, there is a feeling of disenfranchisement among Taizis, who see their only representation as bureaucrats who have no say in the affairs of the state.

Current conflict

When the Saudis launched their intervention, they had few allies in Taiz – military camps in the governorate were filled mostly with pro-Saleh northerners. The Saudis had not built relationships with local sheikhs or social figures and relied solely on Islah. By contrast, the UAE did not want to assist Islah – which is a coalition of Islamists including the Muslim Brotherhood – as they view them as a threat.

Unlike in Aden, there was a historical Zaydi presence in Taiz before the conflict. A significant proportion of Taizis, including non-Zaydis, were anti-Islah too. They witnessed Islah becoming the dominant force from 2011 onwards and welcomed the counterbalancing effect of the Houthis before the takeover of Sana'a.

Since the conflict began in 2015 there have been five different phases in the city of Taiz. *First*, in March 2015 the Houthis arrived and installed their military camps, which led to local protests. The *second* phase began in April following escalating violence against demonstrators and coalition airstrikes. Local protest morphed into a stronger, armed resistance – an attempt to fight back against the Houthis' arrival and what was seen as the return of Saleh. There was little change in this situation until late June.

The *third* phase, in early July, saw the resistance reinvigorated by the arrival of coalition forces in Aden. Pro-Houthi forces were pushed out of large parts of the city and the resistance seemed to have gained the upper hand. But when expected materiel and reinforcements from the coalition troops did not materialize, pro-Houthi forces were able to reassert themselves.

The *fourth* phase, which began in August, saw pro-Houthi forces step up their assault and impose a blockade on Taiz. During this period, Islamist and Salafist fighters arrived from Aden; and in some areas they began introducing their own version of the rule of law. As the presence of the Salafis increased, the resistance became increasingly fragmented.

The *fifth and latest* phase, beginning in November, witnessed a strong push by the coalition in a bid to enter through the south, west and east towards the city, although gains were limited.

The conflict has caused a deep fracturing of society in Taiz as families are divided by the conflict. Relatives and neighbours have turned on one another. The war is now a very personal fight for many.

Siege of Taiz

There is also a division among the civilian population of Taiz as regards who can escape from the city. The poorest, who have no money to pay rent elsewhere, have stayed. Others are reluctant to leave for fear of looting or their homes being taken over; still others are afraid to leave the city for political reasons and the

risk of being caught at Houthi checkpoints. The health care system collapsed over the course of 2015 as medical supplies ran out and fighting spread around health facilities.

Prospects for peace – Taiz as a testing ground

In mid-2015 a deal was brokered to end fighting in the city, which the Houthis signed. But the entry of coalition troops into Aden in July ruptured the potential for a truce. The question was raised of whether similar agreements at the local level could be reached across Yemen to create a more comprehensive ceasefire and mediation process. One speaker argued that Saudi Arabia was unable to tolerate a continued Houthi presence in Taiz. Thus, according to this account, Saudi had pushed Islah to fight even though, initially, Islah had wanted to reach an agreement with the Houthis.

Owing to the divisions between the anti-Houthi bloc and its external sponsors, it has become increasingly difficult to repeat such an agreement. The Emiratis are unwilling to negotiate with Islamists, including Islah, while the Saudis are willing to deal with them. But the coalition cannot move on Taiz without the UAE's expertise and logistical base in Aden. The ensuing vacuum is being filled by the Salafis, the only well-trained and well-funded group. This raises the prospect of a conflict between the Salafis and the other factions once the war against the Houthis is over.

Session 4 – Analysis: Mareb

Mareb produces 100 per cent of Yemen's gas and much of its oil, while the governorate's power plant generates 40 per cent of the country's electricity, almost all of which goes to Sana'a. Mareb is marginalized, underdeveloped and poor, lacking in basic services such as water, electricity, schools and health services as well as transport infrastructure. Communities close to oil installations are particularly poor, which creates huge resentment among the local population that wealth extracted from their governorate goes to the elite in Sana'a. This is one of the main historical drivers of conflict in Mareb.

Noted for their tribal rather than state loyalty, the tribesmen of Mareb do not fight unless compelled to. Longstanding Marebi demands include functioning courts, police and security as well as a portion of oil and gas revenues for the much-needed development of infrastructure.

Some Marebi tribes welcomed the Houthis when they entered the governorate in early 2015, but their attitude changed when the Houthis moved into their territory. As a consequence, some tribes are fighting on both sides of the conflict. According to the perception in Mareb, the battle is, for all parties, about control of oil.

The conflict has also been framed as a revolt against more than 1,000 years of perceived oppression by the northern highland Zaydi tribes and Sana'a elite. People are fighting in Mareb along tribal rather than party lines or over religious differences. But the war has created inter-tribal conflict and driven sectarian tensions. Funds that Riyadh sends to the resistance fighters have created further tensions over the allocation of resources. Salafists, too, have played a significant role in the fighting in Mareb; for its part, AQAP has tried to couple itself to their efforts.

Session 5 – Analysis: the northwest

Panellists agreed that in the northwest of Yemen there is a tribal structure parallel to the state. Many have learned that it is more efficient to go through the tribal system than the dysfunctional and corrupt state. During his 33 years in power, Saleh built a patronage system that brought senior tribal figures to the capital and of which he was the central figure. At the same time, he ensured that 80 per cent of military

officers in key units came from three northwestern governorates. In the early 2000s it became clear that Saleh wanted to create parallel military and security forces that would cement his family's control over the state. Those efforts created tensions with Islah, which until that point had been a cooperative partner in the regime.

Islah is a major force in the northwest. Although it also has a large base in Taiz and significant support in Mareb, it lacks support in the south. Despite having a big constituency in the north, it is not clear if these Islah supporters are willing to fight in the northwest, where tribes are pragmatic. They are not willing to enter a war if they know they are going to lose, and they are likely to support whoever wins the battle.

From 2004 onwards the Houthis emerged as an ideological, Zaydi revivalist group. Saleh believed that he had enough military power, reinforced by local tribes, to simply crush the Houthis when they became a threat to the regime. But the Saleh-Islah coalition was unable to defeat them. The Houthis' emergence as a meaningful military force is widely attributed to the six wars the group fought with the Saleh regime between 2004 and 2010, with the conflict effectively sparked by the extrajudicial killing of the Houthis' founder and namesake Hussain al-Houthi. The state's overreaction was counterproductive and generally added to the anti-government grievances in the wider Sa'dah region, leading some tribes to join the Houthis' fight against the regime despite misgivings over the group's ideology.

Even after Saleh had been removed in 2011, his networks remained in place. He was able to manipulate and co-opt the Houthis, along with important tribal figures in Amran – the gateway to Sana'a, a stronghold of the Al-Ahmar clan, which had pushed for Saleh's ouster in 2011. One participant viewed the pact between Saleh and the Houthis as a political one that had been dictated by the situation at the time, rather than a military one. Trust between the two parties has become very weak, the participant also noted.

Another speaker argued that the Saleh-Houthi side wanted a political settlement that recognized it as the dominant force. Militarily, its strategy appears to be escalating attacks across the Saudi border. With regard to the future of the Houthi-Saleh alliance, yet another participant highlighted how the relationship developed owing to common interests rather than long-term strategic goals. As Saleh looks for a deal or a way out of the military confrontations, he is likely to detach himself from the Houthis. However, on the ground Saleh fighting groups are merging with the Houthis, meaning the combined force could well be the main hard power force on the ground for some years to come.

Asked about Islah's network, one speaker said that Islah has strength in numbers in Sana'a but that in Amran (in the north), its strong tribal alliances have been weakened; in Taiz, meanwhile, they have a broader presence. When the Houthis took Amran and then Sana'a last year, Islah came to fear outright elimination in the north – the first time they had experienced such a threat.

Day 2

Session 6 – AQAP and ISIS

Global perspective

ISIS has fundamentally challenged Al-Qaeda for the leadership of the global jihadist movement. Al-Qaeda and ISIS have the same long-term objective, but there are crucial differences in how they want to achieve their goals. ISIS's goal is to conquer territory, consolidate it and build a state, while Al-Qaeda has a very different concept of how the caliphate will be formed; much of the latter's strategy is based on bringing the population with it.

ISIS in Yemen vs AQAP

As in the case of Iraq, ISIS is seeking to stoke sectarianism in Yemen. To this end, it has been killing civilians (e.g. the mosque bombings in Yemen). By contrast, AQAP has not killed as many civilians and frames its battle as a fight between the people and the government.

But all this is changing. The Yemeni military is broken and soldiers are not actively fighting Al-Qaeda. AQAP recognizes an opportunity and has taken lessons from the conflict in Syria in trying to co-opt the opposition.

AQAP tactics in the current conflict

AQAP's key tactic in 2015 was cooperation, most notably with tribes and criminal gangs. The aim of those alliances, whose contours have been deliberately obscured, is to create a seamless merger between AQAP and tribal groups in an effort to build a united Sunni front against the Houthis. The longer the conflict goes on, the more entrenched and irreversible these relationships will become.

When the Yemeni military collapsed, AQAP presented itself as the last line of defence against Houthi expansion, while stoking sectarianism. AQAP was able to offer its ability to coordinate militarily, train fighters and protect territory. AQAP has not only taken into account tribal sensitivities; it has also gained support for having paid attention to local grievances and the need for basic services among the civilian population as well as among those fighting.

In 2015 the deaths by drone strikes of several of AQAP's senior leaders, who had led the rhetorical battle against ISIS, were significant: AQAP was left vulnerable to ISIS's ascendant ideology.

The turn towards ISIS

ISIS's tactics are significantly more brutal than those of AQAP and are not in keeping with Yemeni tribal culture. But tribal norms are being eroded by both the current conflict and the nature of the fighting.

AQAP has much more support than does ISIS. But one speaker noted the importance of differentiating between AQAP and Ansar al-Sharia (AAS). AAS members are not required to swear allegiance to AQAP. Fighters on the ground are usually members of AAS, who can change sides, rather than full-blown AQAP members. But this raises the question of how much of a threat they pose and to whom.

ISIS appears to have a command structure that is much more rigorously enforced, particularly in the south. The group's senior leadership comprises largely experienced foreigners who have been brought in from Syria and Iraq. Although ISIS in Yemen has yet to reach critical mass, the group appears strongest in Aden and the neighbouring Lahij governorate.

In Aden the Houthi pretext for entering the city was to fight ISIS. That pretext became self-fulfilling. The conflict pushed youth into the arms of ISIS as fighting and violence became the norm in a particularly destructive four-month battle for control. Meanwhile, many AQAP and AAS members ‘graduated’ from AQAP to ISIS.

Weapons proliferation due to the conflict boosts the capabilities of both groups. In addition, the increasing demand for arms and the added burden of costs associated with a growing membership has underlined the importance of controlling profitable smuggling routes. Rivalry for control of smuggling and transport routes, particularly in Hadramawt, has emerged.

Participants raised the issue of the continued failure of Hadi’s government to integrate resistance fighters into a salaried state security force. As a result of that failure the situation in Aden is ripe for exploitation by AQAP and ISIS.

One speaker highlighted the importance of understanding AQAP and ISIS’s place within the wider power struggle. No significant armed group operates in Yemen without ties to or support from the country’s influential power players. Neither AQAP nor ISIS should be viewed in isolation from the political power struggle any more than should tribes or other armed groups. Several participants were sceptical about the timing of ISIS’s emergence in Yemen, arguing that the rise of ISIS in Aden – whether through assassinations or larger attacks – serves the purposes of Saleh and the pro-Houthi bloc.

In this context, another speaker raised the possibility of mediation with AQAP and a negotiated ceasefire rather than taking on AQAP militarily. Attacking AQAP, the speaker argued, would destabilise the south of Yemen, the only part of the country currently under the control of the legitimate government. Widespread violence in the south would undermine confidence in the government, playing into the hands of President Hadi’s rivals both in the north and within his own camp.

Session 7 – The humanitarian situation

Ongoing violence and the de facto blockade are the main causes of Yemen’s current humanitarian crisis. The blockade has deprived the country of critical supplies, primarily of food, fuel and medical supplies. Yemen is now a Level 3 emergency – the highest level on the emergency scale of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The conflict has spread to 20 of Yemen’s 22 governorates. More than 21 million people now require some form of humanitarian assistance, compared with 12 million in 2013.

People’s needs can be divided into four categories: protection, access to essential services, basic survival and dealing with the effects of displacement. All parties to the conflict have shown an abject disrespect for international humanitarian law. The official numbers of those recorded killed and injured are a fraction of the real toll. It is not just direct violence that affects the population; the remnants of state authority and institutions are in free fall. Meanwhile, concern about food security, in particular, is mounting.

Displacement poses a major challenge to the coping mechanisms of the population: the host communities are stretched to capacity. The immediate impact of displacement is people looking for somewhere to live. Today in Yemen, some 300 schools are being used to house internally displaced peoples (IDPs).

Furthermore, the impact of those factors that previously contributed to vulnerability – years of poverty, underdevelopment, lack of good governance, intermittent conflict and environmental decline – has been significantly exacerbated since the start of the conflict.

The blockade

UN-monitored inflows of food and fuel into Yemen since the start of the conflict show that just 1 per cent of fuel needs were imported in September 2015. In October that figure rose to 12 per cent. Before the war, 70 per cent of fuel was imported. The blockade has resulted in hospitals and health facilities closing down because they do not have fuel to run generators or because of a lack of resources to pay for drugs and wages. The blockade has also led to a severe shortage of drugs for chronic diseases. Aid agencies are unable to act as a substitute for the service sector.

In response to the crisis in Yemen, aid agencies have requested \$1.6 billion in funding, of which \$800 million has been received so far.

Limitations and challenges

The fragmentation of territorial control has made it extremely difficult to provide assistance, particularly in the south of the country, where the state is unable to assert itself and offer security guarantees for humanitarian activists. Aid agency premises have been looted in Aden, where criminal gangs operate with impunity and severely impact the ability of aid organizations to operate. Pro-Houthi forces are refusing access to contested areas, most notably in Taiz (see above on p. 5-6).

All movements by humanitarian organizations have to be deconflicted – for example, clearance must be obtained from the coalition to ensure movements are safe from airstrikes. This system has proved unreliable even at fixed locations: health facilities have been hit by airstrikes, despite the coalition having been notified. As a result, food cannot be distributed in a large number of areas or to any IDP camps.

The politicization of aid

A major issue is the politicization of aid: accusations of bias among aid agencies have been made by all parties to the conflict. It is crucial that humanitarian aid organizations are both independent and impartial. But one speaker argued that some parties to the conflict in Yemen are too closely involved in humanitarian operations, leading to accusations that they are using aid as a political tool, and meaning that their presence in some parts of the country might not be welcome in the future.

Despite the distinction within the UN between political and humanitarian tracks, the two are often conflated. The Houthis, for example, approach humanitarian aid workers when they have political grievances because there are no other international interlocutors on the ground.

One speaker noted the limited utility of ‘humanitarian pauses’, adding that if ceasefires or pauses are used as a confidence-building measure for the political process while aid agencies are trying to build confidence on the ground, there is a risk of inadvertently politicizing humanitarian aid.

Moving money

Several participants highlighted the problems in the banking sector – particularly when it comes to moving money in and out of the country. Banks outside Yemen are refusing to process transfers to the country, which means that if a major Yemeni trading company wants to import food, the banks will not allow them to make transfer payments. At the same time, aid agencies are facing difficulties paying staff as a result of this practice.

A lot of people are relying on loans from relatives and handouts from humanitarian organizations to mitigate the impact of rising costs: for example, there has been a more than 100 per cent increase in the price of rice, wheat and other grains since the war began.

Long-term effects

The long-term effects of the conflict on Yemeni society were noted. Families under pressure are more likely to marry off their younger daughters, while men are more vulnerable to being drawn to ideological extremism. Many who have skill sets that are urgently needed in Yemen have left the country, undermining future capacity. The war is having a major impact on children, too, leaving frightening numbers malnourished and traumatized, which will create serious problems for the next generation.

It was widely agreed that lifting the blockade was essential to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. But one participant pointed out that the damage to infrastructure, such as ports, caused by airstrikes would limit imports even without the blockade. Many shipping companies are reluctant to enter Yemeni waters because of the risks, while extensive and costly delays to unloading at the ports is another disincentive to deliver supplies.

The UN is trying to establish a verification and inspection mechanism at Yemen's ports, but there are issues related to its funding. If implemented, the mechanism would take away the burden of inspecting and providing clearance for ships that currently falls to the coalition.

Session 8 – Governance and lessons learned from the transition

Decades of poor governance led to widespread grievances against the Sana'a regime and the dominance of its small, corrupt elite. Yet those grievances did not ease after Saleh had stepped down in 2012.

The transition saw unprecedented involvement of the international community. One speaker argued that it would be irresponsible for the international community not to acknowledge its contribution to the problems that arose during the transition and have led to the current conflict, as well as the need to restore an inclusive process.

As one speaker noted, the GCC initiative attempted the impossible by trying to meet the demands of stakeholders who were fed up with the corruption and mismanagement that had characterized Saleh's rule while preserving the status quo and keeping most of the main players of the regime in power. Another speaker commented that this deeply contradictory approach proved to be one of the major mistakes of the process as a whole.

Participants saw the immunity deal for Saleh, coupled with his being allowed to remain in the country and keep his network intact, as a particularly bad mistake. Several argued that the international community prioritized countering the AQAP threat through Saleh allies over meeting the demands of the Yemeni people. Sanctions imposed on Saleh in 2014 were seen as being 'too little, too late'.

During the transition, political decisions taken by the main players were driven by personal rivalries: the desire of Saleh and the Houthis for revenge, the Houthis' marginalization from the power-sharing agreement and the personal ambitions of the Al-Ahmars, Islah and Ali Mohsin.

It was widely agreed that a key problem – and a main takeaway for any future political process – was the exclusion of key players from the original GCC deal and power-sharing process. The most important among those excluded were southern separatists and the Houthis, while Saleh was allowed to remain as head of the GPC.

Although the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which was just one component of the transition included the Houthis, it did not tackle the major issues of Sa'da or the southern question, nor did it tackle

the division of federal regions. The discussion highlighted the widespread perception that the decision to split Yemen into six regions was, in effect, made unilaterally by President Hadi and, for this reason, undermined the supposedly democratic nature of the transition. With regard to the Constitution Drafting Committee, it was thought that the delays had been deliberate and the drafting process too rushed. When Hadi tried to push the constitutional draft providing for the new regional divisions, the crisis intensified.

One speaker noted that the broader, regional campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood had opened the door for further discord where the Houthis became a tool for those hoping to weaken Islah and for Saleh to settle scores with his former allies and build a path back to power.

The Commission for Military Affairs failed in its duties, one speaker argued. Over 18 months Hadi replaced some of the names at the top. However, reshuffling and renaming military units, rather than, crucially, altering the basic power structure of the armed forces, left second-tier officers and the wider loyalty of the troops unchanged.

Hadi may have had more chance of success if he and his government had been able to improve basic living conditions. That was unobtainable owing to the incompetent and corrupt government, ‘spoilers’ and a lack of financial support (the international community had promised funds but largely failed to deliver them).

There was consensus among participants that while many reasons could be found for the failure of the transition, much of the blame lies with the members of the political elite, regardless of affiliation, who refused to make compromises over their political ambitions.

One speaker detailed what the conditions had been like for the Yemeni population during the transition period from 2012 onwards until the outbreak of civil war in 2015. There had been an increase in armed groups and armed men in the streets, combined with a huge increase in the number of attacks against government buildings, assassination attempts, acts of sabotage, kidnappings and other politically motivated violence. The state was weakening, and many viewed the government as being more interested in taking care of its political interests in Sana’a than looking after citizens and enforcing the law.

One participant noted that the tactic of political assassinations had damaged Hadi’s ability to gain control, particularly in the south. Some 200 people, including military and intelligence officers as well as civil-society figures, had been killed across Yemen over the course of the transition, leaving Hadi unable to develop a support base. Growing insecurity, together with inflation and power shortages, had decimated an already moribund economy.

[A dwindling state](#)

One speaker highlighted the post-2011 collapse of the judiciary as an example of the weakening broader state. Judicial bodies play a crucial role in the rule of law – police, prisons and citizens must all have confidence in them for the law-based state to function and many simply did not have that trust after the events of 2011 and the weak control of the transitional government. When the judiciary collapsed during and after the uprising of 2011, it was in line with a wider trend across government institutions.

[Impact of Saleh’s removal and the GCC deal](#)

The political crisis of 2011 and the GCC deal that removed Saleh from office had the effect of decapitating the patronage system that had regulated political, economic, legal and social issues for decades. The weak and divided placeholder government could not fill the vacuum left at the top of the hierarchy. Decision-making on even basic issues ground to a halt and allowed officials and civil servants to prioritize personal

interests. At the same time, the power-sharing formula of the GCC deal created a zero-sum game between Islah and the GPC. The resulting infighting hobbled any productivity.

Local groups, often backed by national-level actors, resorted to staging acts of violence – from kidnapping to sabotaging pipelines and electricity supply lines. These had always been fairly common tactics of Yemeni political bargaining, but they increased in the transition period. Another tactic deployed by the central authorities was to withhold salaries and local funding as a means of coercion.

Most political activity was centered round strategic political dialogue, specifically the National Dialogue Conference. But the political framework, preoccupied with this formal political process, did not promote non-political activity such as economic and social development. The result was deteriorating conditions on the ground at a time when Yemen desperately needed work to be done on many fronts; and those conditions helped pave the way to renewed conflict and resulted in tremendous suffering. Participants were generally agreed that the 2011 deal and transition process had excluded key parties – most notably southern secessionists and the Houthis – and included spoilers.

Participants also discussed Hadi's role in making political appointments and removing opponents, especially Herak leaders, thereby violating the spirit of the NDC. Those actions had gone unchecked by the international community, which had sponsored the process. The Peace and National Partnership Agreement of September 2014 came too late. By this stage the power vacuum was such that there was nothing to stop the Houthis, whom Saleh offered further opportunities.

Looking ahead

Those developments raised concerns among participants about similar issues arising in the event of a peace deal and about the ability of a post-war government to address widespread grievances and living standards. Many participants argued that beyond his broadly defined 'legitimacy' as President, Hadi's position was not tenable in the longer term given a succession of failures as national leader. Others argued that he was not in fact legitimate at all, given that he had originally been voted into office for a two-year term in the 2012 one-man ballot and had resigned his post in January 2015. His resistance to stepping down was acknowledged as a likely obstacle to any political negotiations for a future peace deal.

Session 9 – Prospects for peace talks

The final session discussed what the objectives, foundations and agenda for peace talks should be, bearing in mind that the format and structure of talks are often a subject for contestation and negotiation in themselves. In particular, the participant asked whether such talks should include contentious issues like federalism, southern independence and future security arrangements.

In addition, questions were raised over who should be included and who should be responsible for mediation and over what type of peace should be sought - negotiated or imposed. It was also asked if there should be immunity rather than accountability, what the role of the NDC outcomes should be and who would be responsible for keeping the peace.

One participant noted that the Yemeni tribal system grants immunity, accompanied by an apology, to end conflict; this might be a way of resolving some of the multiple local conflicts, the participant suggested. Another proposal was that truth and reconciliation be referred to the tribal judicial system, while others proposed a South Africa-style 'truth commission', where crimes are recognized and acknowledged but no criminal action is taken.

There was general agreement that although a national political deal was necessary, local settlements were essential for a comprehensive, lasting peace.

One participant highlighted the flaws of UN Security Council Resolution 2216 – on which current negotiations are, in effect, based. Because it establishes a narrow framework within which the Houthis and Saleh are on one side and the Hadi government on the other, the voices of those in control on the ground are not included. It was agreed that talks need to be expanded to encompass more voices and establish legitimacy.

In addition, the participants acknowledged that certain individuals needed to permanently leave the country in order to ease political pressure and allow for the external bargaining that is required to reach such agreements.

It was also argued that people, including members of tribes, are open to an imposed plan as long as it maintains peace and benefits the majority. Other issues raised included the difficulty of finding the right monitor – whether external, internal or local – for any ceasefire.

Role of regional powers

Finally, the role of regional powers – including integrating GCC regional security concerns into any Yemeni peace deal – was raised, while others questioned whether a deal could be successful if Saudi Arabia and Iran played no part in the talks. The longer the conflict went on for, a participant argued, the greater the risk that Yemen's future would be determined by external powers, as was now happening to Syria. This was something that should spur all Yemeni factions to find an agreement among themselves. Commitment of resources would be needed from the GCC for long-term development in order to establish post-conflict stability.

Broadly, participants expressed a deep pessimism that a political settlement or even a lasting ceasefire was likely in the near future, given the mismatch in narratives, political and hard power agendas and the mounting polarization of Yemeni society. Even if a ceasefire could be brokered, it was agreed, fighting between current allies was a possibility if not a likelihood, with the prospects of a north–south war, AQAP insurgency or a Houthi–Saleh split meaning that Yemen, even in the context of an end to the current war, is likely to remain highly unstable for years if not decades.

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