Transcript

Friends of Yemen: Aid and Accountability

Session 2: The Friends of Yemen

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Claire Spencer:
My name is Claire Spencer, I’m head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here. As you are probably aware, we’ve been running the Yemen Forum here over the past three years – so before the events and the uprisings of 2011. We take great pride in keeping a focus going in the UK and actually partnering, as you’ll see from the programme, with organizations both in the UK and in Yemen who are interested – as I can see you all are – in keeping the issue of Yemen on the map. So this meeting obviously coincides with the Friends of Yemen high-level meeting on pledges and developments in the national dialogue tomorrow, but I would say that at Chatham House we are continuing to keep a focus and will continue to do so on Yemen and Yemenis, particularly given the presence – very diverse and very active presence – of Yemenis in the UK.

So without more about Chatham House, it gives me great pleasure to introduce our panel of speakers, who will be addressing precisely the issues to be discussed tomorrow. I don’t think they need much introduction from me. We will start with His Excellency Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi, foreign minister, who I think needs no introduction. He will be followed by United Nations Special Adviser on Yemen Jamal Benomar. Then followed by the secretary of state for foreign affairs, Alistair Burt.

Alistair Burt:
If only. Not to give people a false impression – minister for the Middle East will do just fine.

Claire Spencer:
Sorry, sorry. This is on the record – get the titles right! I will hand over straightaway to the foreign minister, thank you.

Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:
Thank you very much for your introduction. Let me first of all express Yemen’s and my own appreciation for Chatham House’s continuous interest in Yemen. I am glad to see many old faces but, more important, new faces, because this demonstrates that Yemen still gets the necessary attention from not only the British – I see a lot of different shades of colour, and therefore it represents really interest internationally. That interest is shown by the interest
in the region and in Europe, in the United Nations as well. I am glad to see some of our British-Yemeni Friendship Association members here, who have always supported the cause of Yemen. I welcome you all and I thank you all for your interest in Yemen.

I think this morning you had a very important session – I had a chance to sit in on part of that session – about the challenges of poverty and humanitarian assistance for Yemen. I cannot but say this is an important responsibility of the Friends of Yemen – cannot be separated from it. As an ex-physician, I remember two things about poverty. One is a saying by Imam Ali, who says: if poverty were a man, I would have killed him. This shows the gravity of poverty on human beings. The second is the story of an ex-director general of the Swedish – of the WHO, who was working in Sweden and making a lot of money as a physician there. He had a patient coming to him, and he would write him a prescription for his medication and ask him to return back in a month’s time. He will come and see him – his condition gets worse. So he writes another prescription, and a third and a fourth, and every time his patient comes back in worse condition. Eventually he asks him: what’s happening? Are you taking the medications? He says no. Why not? Because I don’t have the money to buy it. I think this is an important lesson for those who are always good in giving advice, to think that your advice has to be supplemented by real action and real support.

Having said that, let me go now to the Friends of Yemen. This is its fifth meeting. The first one was held here in January 2011, in London, at the call of the then-British prime minister, Mr Brown. As I recall, it was before actually the spring revolution in the Arab world. Unfortunately, the events that followed probably put a stop or suspension on the activities of the Friends of Yemen. But recently it has been revived, and thanks also to the support of the British government, now a Conservative government. This shows that at least Labour and the Conservatives agree on something – that’s Yemen. Secondly, thanks to the Saudi government, who have been not only an important partner in this group but a very important donor to Yemen, as far as aid is concerned.

The challenges faced by Yemen are many. I don’t want to dwell on these because I’m sure you have read a lot about them. You have the political issue, the economic issue and the security issue. If you try to see which is more important, it becomes very difficult to decide, because you cannot really separate and say we can start with the economic issue and everything will settle down, because we know that the economic issues cannot improve without security. We know that security cannot really improve without the
political issue being settled. Therefore, we have to work in parallel on these three issues.

We have to work in parallel, and this is why I think it is important that our friends – donors or participants in the various activities – actually take hand with the Yemenis, understanding that their support for Yemen stems from probably three elements. One I think is the responsibility of the international community towards any country that is in the position of Yemen. I think we have to agree on that: that the international community and the world cannot tolerate fragile states and weak states, and therefore they have to take their responsibility and address their needs, and find the funds to support their needs. Because in the long term, if they don’t, they will pay a higher cost for it.

The second reason, of course, is because of Yemen's position – geographic, geostrategic, in a very important part of the world. It controls one of the most important trade routes. It is very close to very rich countries, on whose resources and oil the rest of the world depends. Therefore instability in Yemen, with 25 million plus, is going to be a threat to the stability of the region as a whole, and to the economy and the world as a whole.

The third, I think, is that it’s now portrayed that Al-Qaeda and terrorist groups have taken home in Yemen. This is probably an over-exaggeration but there are elements of course of Al-Qaeda and terrorist groups in Yemen, as there are in the region as a whole, as there are in Europe as well. We always complain in Yemen that some of the terrorists come to Yemen from Europe and not vice versa. Therefore, this makes stability and fighting terrorism an extremely important issue for all of us, to address it in a new way and new fashion, in a new approach. Because we know that force in itself will not resolve this challenge.

I will stop here. Thank you very much.

Jamal Benomar:

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me to be with you, in this wonderful company I have here. With the minister introducing us to this session, I’m just going to focus on some very few points.

Point number one: I think what we see in Yemen is an extraordinary experiment of peaceful transition. Only a few months ago, Yemen was very much positioned to be in a situation that would not be that far from where Syria is now. The country was heading towards civil war. Believe me, had the
Yemenis decided to go that path, it would have been much more bloodier than what we see in Syria. The country is awash with arms. But still, the remarkable thing that we need to remember is that Yemenis decided on a peaceful path to change and transition.

Here, first I want to commend the youth – we should not forget that it was thanks to their vision, their efforts, their perseverance in occupying squares throughout the country that we see the beginning of the change that we see now. Also you have to commend the leaders, the political leaders, who made difficult decisions at a time when the political spectrum was very polarized and, as I said, they could have headed toward a much more bloody path. Still they decided, the political leaders of Yemen – all of them – to step back and think of a peaceful transition. They made that deal that opened the path for the youth to progressively find the processes that will realize their aspirations, that mobilized them in the streets for so many months.

So it is largely on track but we stand now at a serious, serious crossroads in this transition. In terms of time, we are half through. But it is really in this second year that the most delicate, sensitive, important tasks are still yet to be accomplished. This is the national dialogue process that should go on for six months. For Yemenis to make a deal about a new constitution, make a deal about a new social contract, is not an easy thing. Also preparing, depending on what political system they will choose, then general elections should follow, according to the timeline of the agreement, in February 2014. So this is no easy time in Yemen – it’s a decision time. Some time has been wasted but still I do believe that if the political will is there, they can make it according to the timeline that was agreed when they signed the November agreement.

But all this is happening against a backdrop of a worsening humanitarian situation, a fragile economy, an army that is still divided. There is a plan to reform the armed forces but at this stage it is still a plan. We will see what will happen with implementation. Al-Qaeda was driven out of the cities that they occupied for several months, and a whole province that they occupied, but they were not defeated in the battlefield. They dispersed and they are still a very little threat to Yemen, to the region and to the world. Many armed groups still exist and occupy territory, and are states within a state. This is still the reality of today in Yemen.

Then throughout this transition, it hasn’t been easy. There have been lots of ups and downs, a lot of obstruction. That’s what led the Security Council to adopt Security Council Resolution 2051. It recognized the challenges of
obstruction and that the transition could be derailed, and that’s what pushed also the Security Council – what compelled the Security Council – to adopt the recent presidential statement of February 2013, naming some individuals. This is a recognition that the road has not been smooth, it’s been very bumpy and it could get bumpier. That’s why, in a preventive way, the Security Council thought they needed to take action and they are still ready to take more action.

Also what we have seen in terms of challenges is the unrest that developed in the south. This is a reminder to everybody that there have been longstanding grievances and that confidence-building measures to address these grievances – some initiatives have been taken but there is more, in my view, there needs to be a much more comprehensive programme to address these longstanding grievances. The Herak when it started in 2007, it started as a right-based movement with a number of demands that revolved around those who were dismissed from the army, from the civil service, but they were met with repression. They were met with empty promises – that was the response. This movement became radicalized and much more maximalist. That’s why the difficulties that we see, we have seen also in recent times.

Let me talk also about some of the good news. The good news here is there is a new politics in Yemen. I observed, I lived through the long meetings of the preparatory committee for the national dialogue. Good news first: it’s a very inclusive process. For the first time in Yemen’s history you have a committee that has all the political parties: you have Houthis, you have representatives from the south, you have the youth, you have the women, you have civil society – and all of them working together, trying to develop a vision on how to organize and manage this national dialogue process. They did develop a common vision. They did develop a structure and organization for this conference. The truth is that from everything that we studied and we have seen, all the national dialogues that we supported around the world, I must tell you that what we have seen now – in terms of a plan – in Yemen is the best that I have seen so far. Let’s see how it will unfold. Let’s see how it will be put in practice. But in terms of how it is conceived, how it is going to be organized, it is really the best plan for a national dialogue that we have seen in any country.

There are some other issues also that I feel still unresolved. Transitional justice – the law is not going anywhere. It’s still languishing in parliament. I do believe that some consensus drafts could be developed but again, here it all depends on political will. Also the one opportunity that we have for these issues that do not go away if they are not addressed – one opportunity that
we have is the fact that for the national dialogue, this issue is high on the agenda. There is a working group that will address this issue. Let’s hope there is progress on this, but so far it’s been disappointing to see that no progress was made – as well as on the issue of establishing the commission of inquiry into the events of 2011. The government adopted the idea – it came from the government in the first place, when it proposed this to the Human Rights Council instead of an international inquiry. But the commission has not been established. There has been no progress so far. Let’s hope that this will happen soon because it is through these steps – some first transitional justice law, the establishment of a commission of inquiry – that we can see and open a new page and a new path toward national reconciliation.

The one thing that we see also in Yemen, and I don’t want to be long, is a partnership between the Yemenis (in the lead) and the international community. I think this partnership has been remarkable. We have regional organizations, the GCC, the United Nations, the Friends of Yemen who are going to be meeting tomorrow – all working together in support of this transition and the recovery of Yemen. So it is really an opportunity for the Yemenis, that they have the world in support of them. The money that’s been raised or pledged for Yemen exceeded our expectations: almost $8 billion. Half of this amount or more comes from the neighbours. The challenge now is for the donors to deliver on their promises. They have been slow and very little money has trickled. The second challenge for the Yemenis is for them to develop the capacities to absorb what is out there in terms of support and that they don’t repeat the mistakes of 2006, where a lot of money was pledged and there was also no capacity to absorb all the aid that is available.

But again, going back to where I started, I’m very hopeful about the future of Yemen. I think it’s only a few months ago where the country was facing serious conflict and prospects for more violence. With all its ups and downs, the country is undergoing a transition – a remarkable, peaceful transition. All this thanks to the foresight of the Yemenis who decided on a different path, one that is very different from the Syria scenario. If there is anybody who needs to be congratulated, it is the Yemenis themselves, despite all the difficulties that they face. Thank you.

Claire Spencer:

Now it gives me great pleasure to pass the floor over to the parliamentary under-secretary of state at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Mr Alistair Burt.
Alistair Burt:

Thank you, Claire. I preferred the previous title. I was looking forward to making my first speech as foreign secretary to you here at Chatham House, but there we are. Reality has intervened, but there we are. Just to make sure the message gets through: I have no wish to usurp the present, excellent foreign secretary, and wouldn't wish him to feel a threat coming from over the Lancashire border towards him.

I will be very brief so we have as much time as possible for questions, bearing in mind the two excellent colleagues that I am sharing a platform with this morning. I welcome this opportunity, the gathering of civil activists, the day before the Friends of Yemen conference tomorrow, which will be chaired by my good friend, Foreign Minister Dr Al-Qirbi, and by William Hague and Saudi Minister Dr Madani.

I won’t repeat too much of the history that both Abu Bakr and Jamal have been able to talk about. Friends of Yemen was established in London following the serious security challenge that came to a head on 26 December 2009. It recognized that Yemen faced a threat from counterterrorism that required the support of the international community but also required a new approach, one which worked in partnership with the Yemeni government as they implemented political, economic and security reforms. And yes, I’m rather proud that seamlessly this was something that was picked up from the previous government by the present government. I hope it helps to demonstrate that in terms of international relationships, our sense of what we believe to be the right path not just for the United Kingdom but for others is commonly shared amongst colleagues in the United Kingdom. Our system does produce great rivalry and fierce arguments, sometimes more within the coalition than between ourselves and the Labour Party, but it works through dialogue and it works through a strong sense that after the speaking is done we work together in what we believe is the best interest both of others and ourselves. Little demonstrates it better than this process.

I would share His Excellency the Special Envoy’s praise of the Yemeni people for following the course which they have. Events over the last couple of years will only have emphasized the risks if another course is taken. If people would like to see tragedy in action, if people want to know what it’s like to take a path away from dialogue, however different, they don’t have to look far for an object example. Every sinew must be strained to make sure that that does not happen. That the Yemeni people were sufficiently foresighted to spot this coming and work on something different is a matter of great credit to every single actor that’s been involved. It’s taken compromises from everyone but
the alternative is stark and appalling. So I share the tribute both to the Yemeni people and to actors like the UN, GCC and international colleagues, for working with people in Yemen to reach the position we are now.

Tomorrow will see us hosting the fifth Friends of Yemen meeting, and the third since political transition started in Yemen. This meeting is to be about implementation. As both colleagues have said, we need to ensure that the commitments made last year by the Yemeni government and the international community on political, economic and security reforms are delivered. In particular, this meeting will be focused on the national dialogue, on election preparations, and ensuring that the $7.8 billion worth of pledges that have already been made to Yemen are delivered and will make a real difference to the lives of everyday Yemenis.

I also welcome the recommendations the NGO Forum have produced in advance of the meeting. I will ensure that a copy of these recommendations will be on the desk of all the ministers at tomorrow’s meeting. I agree with all the recommendations. The United Kingdom strongly supports the national dialogue process and we have made clear the need for the widest participation, in particular women and youth. But like the rest of you, I recognize that the national dialogue conference will need to reach out beyond the conference centre, across Yemen, to spark a national debate about the future Yemenis want to see for their country. We welcome ideas of how we can support the Yemeni government in an outreach programme.

I would say again, in relation to this dialogue, our experience over the years is that there are a hundred different ways to say no. If people want to stop the process, that's not difficult. That's very easy to do. It’s much harder to make it work. Everybody will have to have some form of compromise. Everybody will have baggage. Everybody will have a good reason to say we cannot proceed until this injustice has been corrected, that injustice has been corrected. If everybody does that, there will be no progress and nothing will happen. It's very easy to take the baggage and you will always find an audience of partisan people who will cheer you to the echo in saying no, no progress will be made. Everybody will have to give something.

All we can do is urge that process is followed through and that everyone recognizes the need to give somewhere. Again, we cannot be too stark about the alternatives that are out there facing those who cannot make a process like this work.

Away from that side of it, we also agree that the humanitarian crisis remains deeply troubling and one that we believe does not get enough attention here
in the United Kingdom. Over half the population of Yemen do not get enough food to eat every day. We need to ensure that the United Nations humanitarian appeal is urgently funded.

You will know of the interest across the United Kingdom government in this. You will know of the passionate commitment of my colleague Alan Duncan and DFID to Yemen and the Yemeni people, and all the efforts that he has made. We are committed to spend a further £70 million on humanitarian causes over the next two years in Yemen.

I know also that the foreign secretary will be focused on holding all friends accountable for ensuring that the pledges made by the international community are honoured. We all remember lessons of the past, where money committed was not delivered. Now this requires both the international community to come forward but also the Yemeni government to establish the right mechanisms for aid to be spent effectively and transparently. It's all got to be spent against Yemeni priorities, but the mechanisms must be there from both sides to ensure that this work is done. Accordingly, we do welcome the announcement by His Excellency President Hadi of the establishment of an executive unit for aid delivery in the Yemeni government, and we will be keen to work and support that.

That’s all I wish to say at this stage. I know we’ve got time for questions, I look forward to those. Thank you, I think the interest shown by all of you this morning – I hope you feel it is reflected and mirrored in the interest shown by the international community who wish to work together in providing possibly a unique solution. Everything over the last couple of years has indicated whatever symptoms may be common of change, each state is identifiably different and each state has an individual way of dealing with the issues before it. I agree very much with His Excellency the Special Envoy: Yemen presents an extraordinary opportunity in a difficult region to demonstrate how things can be done. You will not be short of international support and commitment to help you in this process. Thank you very much.