Transcript Q&A

Friends of Yemen: Aid and Accountability

Session 2: The Friends of Yemen

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**Question 1:**

I thank the panel for the positive picture they have painted of what is going on in Yemen, but I revel in playing the devil’s advocate. I’d like to ask two points in this respect. The first one is: what kind of change of attitude have the members of the previous communist government remaining in the national unity government undergone in terms of change? And, whether they are working differently, contrary to what the government was working before. The second point is related to the celebratory appearance of the forced ex-president, celebrating the second anniversary of the revolution, and whether this casts a shadow on the process which you are trying to drive.

**Question 2:**

Can I thank Mr Benomar for mentioning the significance of the southern issue in relation to how the problems in Yemen will be resolved. Whilst I am in support of dialogue being the way to resolve all issues, I think the manner in which the southern issue is discussed or simply dismissed by saying that the southern issue is simply engaged in the national dialogue, without really giving the issue of the south due consideration, is a recipe for disaster. I say this not to sabotage the momentum of the international community toward the national dialogue. I’m sure there will not be any resolution to the southern issue before the resolution and the conclusion of the dialogue. But I wish to put this question to members of the panel: if, as it appears to many southerners, the national dialogue doesn’t yield any meaningful results for southerners, to appease the demands of the southerners, is it likely that in the near future or after the national dialogue concludes – is it possible that the international community can support the right of the southern people to determine for themselves their destiny, in the form of a referendum being held in the south to resolve the issue once and for all?

**Question 3:**

My question is to Minister Qirbi, and if Minister Burt would like to address it that would be good. My question, sir, is: how do you intend to deal with the threat coming from Iran? Repeatedly you claimed that Iran is interfering in Yemen. I wonder if you could shed light on that.

**Claire Spencer:**

Well, it all seems to be politics so far. Minister, would you like to respond?
Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:

Thank you very much for your questions. As you've indicated, it has turned into a political meeting rather than talking about the Friends of Yemen and the future of Yemen. But I suppose journalists always try to take these opportunities and divert us from our major objectives, in which we try to reach consensus rather than divisions.

But anyhow, let me assure my colleague that the government of Yemen works as a team, irrespective of which party they come from, because we know our responsibility now is to the people of Yemen. On the first day the government was established, His Excellency President Hadi said clearly: you have to forget about your political affiliations and remember that you are representing now the Yemeni people. This is how certainly we all behave.

Of course there will be differences, but differences do not mean this is for the worst. Maybe it is for the better, because differences give people the chance to get the right solutions.

As far as President Saleh's recent appearance, I don't think one should be concerned about that. The process is going and as everybody says, nobody is going to derail the process.

As far as the southern issue is concerned, I think one of the really very difficult questions to answer: who will decide what are the substantive results? Because I am sure everybody will define substantive results in his own way. What can be substantive to me may not be substantive to you. Therefore, I think what is important is that people – and I am a believer that the grievance is from all over the country, not only from the southern states. I know the southern states have probably suffered a lot since 1994, but there are grievances in Hudaydah – and I have here the minister of finance from Hudaydah, he knows how Hudaydah is suffering. I am from Al-Bayda and I know how Al-Bayda is suffering as well. I think what we would like to see in this conference of dialogue is a forum for us to find the solutions. Going back to my old profession as a doctor, I think you have to identify the problem and the solution. As you know, even doctors when they deal with a single disease, they may disagree about which drug to prescribe for it, but in the end they will have to agree on the drug that is most appropriate and that will satisfy everybody. It may not satisfy all – there will always be a group who will not be happy with the result of the solution.

But I think in the end, we know that unless we agree on finding a solution that will save the country, do justice to everybody, respond to the needs of the people, alleviate the grievances – most of them, not all of them – and then
there is the road ahead for us to make even further progress and deal with all these challenges.

I will not respond to the Iran issue because I think we made a lot of statements about it. You have to go and read what statements President Hadi and I have made before.

Claire Spencer:
Can I invite questioners to stick to the issues in hand? The title of this meeting is: ‘Friends of Yemen: Aid and Accountability’.

Question 4:
My question to Minister Burt is about outreach. He emphasized the importance of outreach and I wonder if, in your plan on your side, whether you are thinking also about outreach on economic issues. Because as the minister said, to deal with the political issues, it has to be dealt with from multifaceted ways. There are things that need to be improved but there is already a lot of effort. I would join Mr Benomar in congratulating the Yemenis on the things they’ve done. In the previous panel, for example, one of the CSOs – rightly so – mentioned the expansionary budget, but it’s not as expansionary as it seems. The nine per cent we hear is actually exaggerated because the government was wise enough to budget based on a very low oil price, but for example in IMF estimates, when we use the market prices, the budget deficit is much less. The government has become more transparent – more recently, for example, for the first time, they published the concluding statement of our consultation with them. It’s not an annual report or anything but they have taken that step. I invite you all to look at that.

So my question: still there is more needs to be done. There are the issues on subsidies versus targeted transfers, which would be increased. There are the issues of the good steps to increase investments in this year’s budget, but the risk that if there isn’t enough revenue maybe these investments will not be implemented. So these issues need to be addressed and the government maybe needs some support from you to add to its efforts to communicate better and to get feedback from the population.
**Question 5:**

Your Excellency Jamal Benomar mentioned, with the national dialogue, the opportunity for forging a new social contract. I wanted to ask Your Excellency Dr Al-Qirbi about the characteristics, the nature of that social contract, particularly from the perspective of ordinary families in Yemen. What will be the nature of that social contract from the perspective of ordinary Yemenis?

**Question 6:**

My question is about the commission of inquiry. Is there a timeline for that, a time plan for it? If not, if there are further delays, is the idea of having an international commission of inquiry, an international investigation, being brought back into the agenda?

**Alistair Burt:**

On the debate about the south: can I tell you, there is absolutely no lack of commitment or understanding from the international community about the issues facing the south. I think you suggested in your question that this was being dismissed without due consideration – absolutely no, it’s not. There is a real understanding about long-held grievances and difficulties there which we have addressed very directly with the government, in terms of the sort of things that need to be put right and said right at the beginning – like the presidential decrees toward the end of last year – in order to shape the dialogue that will come.

But what I would also say is that there are many different models that are capable of delivering something different in terms of governance to the south. All parts of the region have different models that seem to work for them. I think I would be really interested in how the national dialogue deals with discussing these various models and people really working through them before any conclusion is come to that one or other is not acceptable. It won’t be for the international community, at the end of the day, to dictate how this should work – absolutely not. The dialogue is there to provide the opportunity for Yemenis to decide what territorial structure it’s looking for, how it will shaped. But we think every opportunity is open and there should be some real discussion of what practical possibilities there are in terms of localized governance and the like. We think that provides a really good opportunity, so we’d be very keen to see that explored. But please don’t feel in any way that the international community has minimized these concerns. As Dr Al-Qirbi
said, we recognize that others have their concerns too, which is why we think the dialogue is so well founded.

In terms of economic outreach and support – yes, absolutely. My colleagues in DFID have been very expansive in relation to this. We know that capacity is increasing all the time but more probably needs to be done. We are very concerned to make sure there is an effective unit inside government to translate some of the ideas for economic reform into action and that that will work in conjunction with the efforts coming in from outside on the projects and the like. So yes, economic outreach is very much a part of our programme, as well as the political outreach.

If you will allow me to slip away, I have another foreign minister to see. But thank you very much for listening to me and the interest generated. I will see both my colleagues tomorrow and shall look forward to that. Thank you very much.

Jamal Benomar:

I think many of the questions have been answered already. Let me add just a couple of things about the southern issue.

As the UN, we have no recipe on how this issue is going to be resolved. We have no preconceived ideas. We will not be proposing to anybody whether there should be confederal or federal or any other solutions. The only thing we are going to insist on is two things. One is, this is a matter for the Yemenis to resolve. The solution cannot come from outside, can only come from them. Second, this will only come through dialogue. They may differ among each other on how that dialogue can be organized and when and where and how and so on, but that's normal, we see it in all situations. But it's only through dialogue that this issue can be solved. Then three, we are urging all southern leaders to commit to renouncing and denouncing the use of violence. The only way to solve this issue is through peaceful means. Peaceful means for us in the UN means through face-to-face dialogue among the parties concerned. That's where we stand on this issue.

I think that a lot has happened in recent times. The good news is that there is consensus in Yemen that there is something called the southern issue. Until very recently, that term even wouldn’t have been agreed on among the Yemenis, but this is agreed. Don’t forget that in the transition agreement itself there is a provision for addressing and finding a just solution to the southern
issue, so a consensus has emerged that it's time for these issues to be addressed – and addressed through dialogue and peaceful means.

Second, there is consensus in Yemen that there have been genuine grievances in the south. The good news is that action is being taken to address grievances. I think there is a new decree that went a little bit unnoticed, but one that established a commission to look at the issue of those who were dismissed from the civil service and the armed forces since 1994. There is a commission that's been established that looks at the issue of land and property. These are delicate issues that gave rise to a lot of discontent.

What I'm saying is that the government will need to do more, because for many southerners this is too little, too late. The government will need to do more, and more in terms of addressing these grievances. These are legitimate grievances that people have. But again, to go back to where I started, there is only one way how this issue can be addressed: through dialogue. We are in our outreach and discussions with all southern leaders, those who have modest and moderate agendas as well as the southern leaders that we are talking to and those who have very maximalist agendas – we are telling them only two things: one, through dialogue you can resolve this issue; and please commit and tell your people no to violence. That's where we stand.

**Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:**

I would like to add two things to what my brother Benomar said. I think one is that we are here today in Yemen because we have really agreed that violence and civil war will not resolve the solution, and that we will return eventually to a political solution and dialogue to resolve our conflicts. Therefore anybody who wants to retract on this is going to face a lot of difficulty with the Yemeni people. The Yemeni people are now agreeing that there are many issues they have to settle and that it is only through dialogue that they will be settled, and not through violence or a demonstration of power by any party.

The second point is, what’s really necessary now is how to build confidence. Confidence has been eroded – eroded between political parties, eroded between tribes, eroded between various governorates. This complicates things. But I think once the dialogue starts and people see a demonstration that there is seriousness in dealing with the issues, that confidence-building will start and therefore the road will be smoother.
As far as my colleague’s question about the social contract, I think what people in Yemen aspire to is the aspiration of all people: a social contract between people and their government. They want to see accountability, they want to see equality, they want to see power-sharing, they want to see that they can be able to make the government accountable to them and that wealth is shared by everybody. These are the issues that are of importance. I’m sure these will take also a substantive amount of time in the dialogue process because it becomes part of the building of the new state of Yemen.

**Question 7:**
On the aid executive committee, I’m a little bit sceptical about it because I’m afraid that most of the Arab countries and the Middle East are with a high corruption rate. How can you guarantee that the composition of the aid executive committee is neutral –

**Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:**
Which committee?

**Claire Spencer:**
Aid executive committee.

**Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:**
The Executive Bureau, yes. Executive Bureau for aid.

**Question 7:**
Will we see CSOs be represented, or INGOs be represented inside the aid Executive Bureau? Thank you.

**Question 8:**
I think there’s one issue that is very fundamental to the national dialogue and to the future of Yemen and the Yemeni people – and that’s the issue of water, which hasn’t been mentioned today. I’d like to ask how water is going to be included in the national dialogue, because if we are talking about the possible regionalism or a possible future where the definitions of the administrative
areas of Yemen will change, I think the issue of the aquifers and the watersheds and the whole underground water situation has to be taken into consideration.

The other one was simply about southern representation. Since we’ve had all this talk about the southerners having 50 per cent of the seats and places throughout the national dialogue, I’m wondering how the people in the north – or the ex-north, the ex-YAR – who form 70 per cent of the population, why don’t they demand 70 per cent of the seats?

**Question 9:**
My question concerns the challenges that were raised by Mr Benomar for donors and also for the government of Yemen, in terms of the capacity for absorbing the aid that will be provided. This is something that we come across quite often with fragile states, because they are in great need of support and at the same time that’s why they’re fragile – the capacity is not what is supposed to be. I’m just thinking, could we present alternatives as well for donors, instead of saying the capacity is not there, therefore we cannot provide you with extra support. But rather, thinking in terms of what will be the alternative, will it be possible to fund and provide support through international development organizations working in close collaboration with the government and with the civil society in Yemen? So that there could be alternatives, because building the capacity of the government is very important but it’s going to take time. It never happens overnight. So we have to find alternatives in order to provide to the people what they need right now, not that they have to wait while the capacity of the government is being built. So it’s a comment but at the same time a question, thanks a lot.

**Question 10:**
I am from Aden, Yemen. I grew up there. Over the last 60 years, all I hear is about the Yemen crisis and about aid. I also learned that a lot of this aid has always been going into a black hole. My question is: when will our leadership and the international community give up the begging bowl and start creating programmes for the Yemenis to regain their productive capacity? We had a lot of it.
Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:
Before I give to one of the organizations to answer one of the questions, I will respond to some of the questions raised. One, the issue of water. I think of course this is a major crisis for Yemen – all of Yemen. We bet on two things. Either there will be hopefully a climate change and the rain belt will move toward Yemen, which is far-fetched I suppose but I hope it will happen. The second of course is the sea. This is why we are addressing the issue with utmost urgency. The national dialogue, I am sure it will look at this as part of many of the challenges to face the future government and how the government will deal with it in this respect.

As far as the southern representation and allocating actually not 50 but more than 50 – it cannot be less than 50. There is now, the representation actually is about 56–57 per cent. So it is more than half. The objective of that really is confidence-building, as we have said, that they will not feel that whatever decisions are taken will be dominated by citizens of the north. This is what I call pragmatic democracy. It may not be acceptable on a purely democratic basis but I think what’s important for us in Yemen now is to see that people come and participate and they feel they are part of the decisions for the future of Yemen.

Aid-absorbing capacity and the black hole, the Executive Bureau – if Your Excellency will allow me, I have here the minister of planning and international cooperation, who is the vice-chair of the Executive Bureau. I will ask him to respond to these three questions.

Claire Spencer:
Perhaps during coffee on a bilateral basis, because I think we are running a little bit short on time. But if you have a very brief statement to make –

Mohammed Saeed Al-Saadi:
Tomorrow I will speak at –

Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:
No, but these people should hear you. They will not be there tomorrow.
Claire Spencer:
Do you have one sentence? Do you have a single, just a very brief sentence to answer the question about transparency?

Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi:
Is there any corruption in the Executive Bureau?

Mohammed Saeed Al-Saadi:
It has not started now. It will not be a magic solution. The people will be from Yemen but we will put them under transparency, under accountability. So that’s what we will do. It is not a whole solution, just we are trying to expect the new way of absorption that donors budget.

Claire Spencer:
Thank you very much; we will be looking out for this.

Jamal Benomar:
I think the one thing that we shouldn’t forget is that there has been a very serious process, led by the Yemenis, to first identify what the needs and priorities are. There was a joint assessment exercise supported by the World Bank, the United Nations system, the Islamic Development Bank, the EU. It was a process that helped the government to zero in on a number of limited goals and objectives and priorities. A lot of work has been done to identify priority projects. So we should commend the Yemenis for doing all this work.

Also we should commend them for coming to the conclusion that it’s not going to be business as usual. They decided to innovate and create a new structure to address exactly this issue of delivery. This new structure has been established and I think we should wait and see how it’s going to operate, but I’m very optimistic about its composition. With the support and the professional structure that it will have, I’m sure that will speed up considerably the necessary work that is needed to move to implementation. That was the chronic problem that the government faced in the past.

Also, we always complain in many countries about the lack of absorptive capacity, but this should not lead to donors to do the usual, which is to bypass government and create parallel structures that really undermine government
and undermine building capacity at the end of the day. I will never forget, I was once in Afghanistan, I went to a little town and asked people: three years have passed since the change, what improvements happened in your life? They were able to point to the little bridge that was built, a school that was repaired, quite a few projects that made a difference. Then I asked them, who did that? They said, well, this international NGO, USAID, they don't know who. Then when I asked them, what did the government do? They said: nothing. And in a very bitter way.

Governments in a transitional situation cry for legitimacy, so legitimizing government is very important. It’s very important that despite the problems of lack of absorptive capacity, bureaucratic procedures and so on, the government is not completely bypassed. You have to work with the government to build the capacity so they can absorb and be in the lead, and aid doesn’t become a completely parallel exercise to what government does.

Claire Spencer:

Thank you very much. That's certainly a very good point to finish this particular part of the discussion, with a focus on more discussions tomorrow on aid actually being delivered. I can assure the gentleman at the back will be monitoring the question you raised about the black hole and where things go in future. I think it’s really by keeping a focus on the complexity of developments that things will move forward.

We are going to finish today, since we’ve talked a lot about views from the ground – Support Yemen, which is an advocacy group many of you will know, based in Sana’a, have produced a five-minute video which I do hope you'll stay for and I will invite the panel to stay for. It’s basically a five-minute video with Yemeni citizens, to gauge their views on the various issues we’ve been discussing today. If you like, these are views straight from the ground and I invite you to stay. Otherwise, or indeed after this five-minute video, there will be tea and coffee served upstairs, to which you are all invited. But please join me first in thanking the panel very much indeed.