

## **Summary of roundtable discussion *Perspectives on the Yemeni Crisis and Prospects for Peace*, Brussels, 8 December 2015**

### **Introduction**

This is a summary of a roundtable discussion organized by Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) in Brussels on 8 December 2015. The event brought together 16 analysts, policymakers and representatives of NGOs engaged in Yemen to reflect on the ongoing war, its underlying causes and repercussions, as well as to discuss meaningful ways to support conflict resolution and stabilisation efforts in the country. Six of the participants were women, ten men.

The event consisted of presentations by three panellists followed by a discussion. The panellists were Abdul-Ghani Al-Iriyani, Ceasefire Design Expert, UNOPS, Bettina Muscheidt, Head of EU Delegation to Yemen, and Antonia Potter Prentice, Senior Manager on Gender, Inclusion and Mediation Support, CMI. The discussion was moderated by C. Andrew Marshall, Senior Advisor on Dialogue and Mediation, CMI.

The views presented in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of CMI.

### **Key domestic and regional actors**

The Yemeni conflict has been largely overlooked by the international media despite the immense destruction the fighting has caused on the ground in a relatively short period of time and its regional implications. Since the sharp escalation of violence in March 2015, airstrikes and ground fighting among several different groups have displaced over 2.5 million people and left over 80% of the population in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. Almost 6,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

The conflict is often portrayed as a confrontation between the Houthis and the government of Hadi or as a manifestation Sunni-Shia tensions. The participants underlined that a more nuanced understanding of the actors and issues involved in the conflict is needed. There are several key actors that are linked to the conflict, yet do not fall neatly into either of the two opposing camps. These entities include the Southern Movement (Hirak), a loose coalition of entities demanding greater autonomy for Southern Yemen (or parts of it), and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

AQAP has benefited from the power vacuum created by the conflict and expanded its presence particularly in the south. In the absence of functioning state institutions, AQAP has been able to attract support in areas it controls through providing certain basic services and guaranteeing a degree of security.

The war has given rise to Sunni-Shia tensions that have previously played a limited role in the Yemeni society (not unlike Syria, as some experts pointed out). The failure of the central state was mentioned as one of the reasons for the increased salience of sectarian identities. The longer the conflict continues, the more entrenched sectarianism is likely to become.

The involvement of external actors has strongly shaped the dynamics of the conflict. The key regional players are backing the opposing sides of the war: Saudi Arabia, together with allied states, has undertaken an extensive military campaign to restore the government of President Hadi. Another stated motivation for Saudi Arabia's military involvement is to prevent the expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

While Iran is reportedly providing support for the Houthis, the extent of its involvement is contested. It was suggested that a widespread perception of Iran as a key player in the Yemeni conflict, regardless of its actual role, may serve Iran's interests by affording it more leverage on the international scene.

Moreover, there are a number of other countries, including the United States and Britain, which play a more indirect role by providing arms and other forms of support to the warring parties.

Many mentioned Oman's constructive role in the conflict resolution efforts. It has served as a mediator in the crisis and provided a safe haven for consultations.

### **Conflict resolution efforts**

Finding a negotiated solution to the conflict seems distant. Despite several efforts to bring the political groups together, the main parties had not, by the time of the event, engaged in direct dialogue in any formal setting during the conflict. At the same time, it has also become increasingly clear that neither side is able to win the war militarily.

There were diverging views on the readiness of the parties to enter a ceasefire agreement. Some participants believed that there is a growing realization among the Houthis and their allies that they are close to reaching the limits of their capacities and, as a result, would like to reach a ceasefire soonest. Islah, an Islamist party backing Hadi, on the other hand, is believed to have less interest in ending the war. It has lost political ground over the past months and is hoping to regain leverage in national decision-making; there is an expectation that the longer the war drags on, the weaker the Houthis will become. Some believed that both sides have the capacities to continue pursuing their goals through fighting and are thus unlikely to compromise without shifts in the situation on the ground.

Even when the political process gets underway, overcoming the deep polarization between the parties is expected to take time and to be highly challenging. The parties are also currently far apart on critical issues to be agreed in the negotiations and the subsequent political transition process. While the government demands security issues to be addressed as part of the negotiations, the Houthis and their allies want to see the political transition to be resumed before discussing the security arrangements. The timing of the elections is also likely to cause controversy, with some parties benefiting from holding the elections in the beginning of the new transition period, others preferring to defer the vote to leave time for gathering support. The high level of antagonism is also likely to complicate political leaders' efforts to acquire the support of their broader constituencies for the negotiated agreements.

To pave the way for an agreement, the groups need to be given assurance that they will not be sidelined from the future political system, nor unduly prosecuted for their war-time positions in the post-conflict period. Ensuring all key groups are included in developing solutions, regardless of their relative power as the fighting ends, is critical for avoiding renewed conflict.

Ensuring inclusiveness of the political process at all levels is essential. The importance of involving armed entities is generally recognized; an opportunity to advance claims through political engagement is widely believed to reduce their tendency to resort to violence. Extending participation beyond entities with access to arms enhances the quality and sustainability of the negotiated outcomes. It was pointed out that inclusion does not necessarily mean that all have to sit around the same table. There are also alternative mechanisms for voices of key groups to be incorporated.

Women are among the segments of the society that are often underrepresented in peace processes. It was emphasized that women need to be taken into account as political actors that have specific perspectives and views not only on women's rights but on a variety of political and economic issues. A lack of coherent voice or political divides between women should not be used as a reason to leave women out from the political process.

In the NDC, women were represented by 30% - a positive but not well-entrenched achievement. Such positive developments on women's participation have been partly reversed since the end of the NDC. The war has led many women to turn away from advocating for political participation and focus on humanitarian issues instead. There was a concern that, given the fragility of the newly won gains, the lack of continued pressure women may lead to women's exclusion from efforts to resolve the current crisis.

It is essential to start building trust and confidence between the various political entities in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Given the high level of polarization, creating an inclusive entity capable of working across the conflict divide might benefit the process. Given that relatively few women have taken up arms during the ongoing conflict, women from different groups could take on such role.

The internal diversity of the political groups needs to be acknowledged in conflict resolution efforts. Within the Houthi movement, individuals with experience from political engagement in the NDC may be easier to negotiate and reach an agreement with than some of the more hardline elements. The Houthis have transformed into a powerful military and political force in a relatively short period following the 2011 uprising. They were actively involved in the NDC, yet have at the same time retained a strong military wing. It remains to be seen whether the movement will eventually evolve into a political, military or social movement or become a combination of the three. Some expressed concern that Saudi Arabia's actions may weaken the moderate wing of the Houthi movement and feed radicalization within the group.

## **Insights and lessons learned from the National Dialogue Conference**

The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) can offer several useful lessons for the new political process. In hindsight, the NDC can be deemed a success in that it managed to build trust between antagonistic groups in an environment characterized by deep divisions, engage a broad spectrum of Yemenis in dialogue, as well as to foster consensus on critical national issues. Also groups that had been previously marginalized from the political system participated. The NDC also gave Yemenis time to breathe after a period of heightened tensions and violence.

The NDC agreements are still regarded as a viable basis for political transition. After the most critical issues for ending the fighting have been addressed, the negotiations are expected to become easier due to the foundation provided by the NDC outcomes. While the final report of the NDC is broadly acceptable to diverse political groups, individual recommendations and decisions must be revisited in order to preserve overall support for the agreements. Some parties have reservations on specific principles incorporated in the NDC outcomes or decisions made after the conclusion of the dialogue. The six-region federal structure is among the most contested.

Several factors gradually undermined support for the NDC and its outcomes. Among the main reasons were serious delays in the dialogue process as well as insufficient attention of the leaders to the problems and grievances voiced by Yemenis during the NDC. One participant noted that this gave the Houthis an excuse to rise against the government in late 2014. It was emphasized that the new political process will need to be guided by a clear, time-bound roadmap. International actors should provide necessary support for the government and exert pressure on national entities as needed to ensure the transition will proceed smoothly. At the same time, actors leading the process need to remain attentive to the risks associated with setting strict deadlines and definite goals.

As regards the role of the GCC during the previous transition period, participants pointed out that the involvement of the Gulf countries in brokering the transition agreement was motivated by a desire to prevent spillover of the unrest rather than willingness to support a democratic transition. The GCC agreement provided an appropriate tool to prevent further destabilization that would have posed a threat to their national interests.

Lack of visible improvements in the daily lives of the broader population during the dialogue deepened discontent with the political process. In the post-NDC period, the inability of the government to move forward with the implementation of the agreements reached in the national dialogue led to the deterioration of the political and security situation. It is essential that the future political process will produce concrete dividends for the population. Tangible improvements, even if small, can help in ensuring a broader buy-in for the political transition. Concrete measures also serve to demonstrate leaders' commitment and ability to undertake critical reforms, which can in turn contribute to the legitimacy of the broader political system. Yemen is faced with a major challenge of establishing state institutions capable of taking the responsibility for the implementation of the outcomes. In the past, the absence of accountable state institutions has constituted the main obstacle for disbursement of outside financial support.

Involvement of local communities in the stabilization efforts is key for creating a foundation for sustainable peace. International actors should seek to strengthen local-level efforts to address tensions and conflicts affecting local populations in parallel to supporting the national talks. Outside support for actors working for peace is particularly salient in the current, highly polarized context. In the long term, local mechanisms can provide a safety net to fall back on if the central government does not function, or help in filling the security and governance gap before functioning security and governance institutions have been established.

Guaranteeing the delivery of basic services must be a key priority for any future government. In order to remain in power, the government will need to be seen as capable of implementing much needed reforms, rebuilding infrastructure as well as maintaining a degree of stability. Many participants also mentioned the link between the inability of the government to meet the basic needs of the population and the growth of AQAP. Should the governance and security vacuum persist, an increased number of people are likely to view AQAP in more favorable terms and join its ranks.