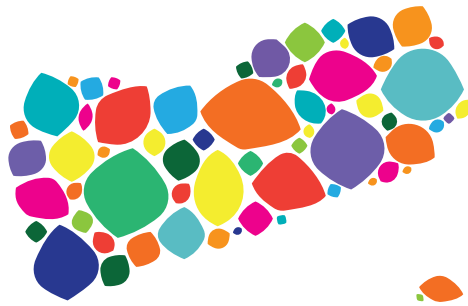




# Not Our War: A Vision for Peace from Yemeni Youth and Civil Society

Tawfeek Al-Ganad





منتدى سلام اليمن  
YEMEN PEACE FORUM

# Not Our War:

## A Vision for Peace from Yemeni Youth and Civil Society

Tawfeek Al-Ganad

December 25, 2021

*Cover Photo : Young men take a photo together after Eid al-Adha prayers in Taiz on July 20, 2021. //Sana'a Center Photo by Ahmed Basha*



The Yemen Peace Forum initiative is a track II youth and civil society platform facilitated by the Sana'a Center and funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This interactive initiative seeks to both invest in building and empowering the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society actors and to engage them in critical national issues. Building on the Sana'a Center's core goal of producing knowledge by local voices, this initiative seeks to develop and invest in young policy analysts and writers across Yemen.

Funded by



Kingdom of the Netherlands



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It has been seven years since the armed Houthi movement took control of Sana'a, leading to a brutal war as a coalition led by Saudi Arabia has sought and failed to restore the internationally recognized Yemeni government to power. Efforts to end the conflict, led by a succession of United Nations envoys, have also failed.

To achieve a sustainable peace, Yemen's youth must be included; most of the population is under the age of 30. Young people have been active in civil society initiatives and volunteering throughout the war; they have also been active fighting on Yemen's frontlines as education and employment opportunities have diminished.

This paper presents the views of young people from 10 governorates, based on 39 focus group discussions. Participants discussed the ongoing war, its root causes, the parties to the conflicts and paths to end the war. The discussions were facilitated by members of the Yemen Peace Forum, a project of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

The following emerged as some key perceptions:

- **Familial and social ties have been damaged.** Fighting and poverty have driven families from their homes. This separates family members, as do obstructions to travel and, at times, family members' support for different warring parties.
- **Education has been disrupted** as travel – internal and international – becomes more difficult, and fewer people have been able to embark on tertiary education. Schools have been destroyed in fighting or have stopped functioning as teachers have left because of unpaid salaries. Many students dropped out of school when their families became displaced.
- **However, many people have been volunteering** and participating in civil society to assist those in need of humanitarian assistance. Civilians are stepping up to help nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) distribute aid.
- **There is a profound skepticism about whether local actors are acting on local imperatives**, with many suggesting they are beholden to external paymasters.
- **A genuine effort should be made to engage Yemeni youth in peace negotiations** to ensure people familiar with on-the-ground factors are heard, and that their interests are considered in post-conflict plans.

This paper looks first at young people’s perceptions of the conflict, the parties involved and the war’s underlying causes, as well as scenarios to end the war. It also examines the economic and social impact of the war, with a special focus on marginalized groups, as well as the rise of volunteerism during the conflict. The paper then explores young people’s perceptions of the peace process and the actors influencing peace, as well as their visions for improving the peace process.

Finally, recommendations are offered to international organizations, including the UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for Yemen, Yemeni civil society organizations, parties and local authorities. They include:

- Prioritizing the economic file alongside the political in any peace talks to stop the deterioration in living conditions of all Yemenis and pressuring the internationally recognized government and the Houthi de facto authorities to unify monetary policies in Yemen;
- enlisting donors to support education in Yemen by supporting local educational institutions and creating academic opportunities outside Yemen for post-secondary students;
- financing projects that are inclusive of displaced people and their host communities, especially economic empowerment programs and psychological support, which will aid in integration and promote a culture of coexistence; and
- designing and supporting programs, including community dialogue forums, to sensitize young people and social media influencers on the importance of diversity, the culture of acceptance of others and the dangers of hate speech.

## INTRODUCTION

In the seven years since the armed Houthi movement took control of Sana'a, it has centralized power in the Yemeni capital and imposed its authority on vast swathes of territory. The internationally recognized government has struggled to establish a presence in non-Houthi areas. Many other groups, including the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) as well as tribal and jihadi factions, have gained traction..

International actors include Saudi Arabia, which intervened in March 2015 with the stated aim of restoring to power the internationally recognized Yemeni government of President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and Iran, which provides weapons and missile components to Houthi forces.<sup>[1]</sup> The United Arab Emirates, which backs the STC, has also created and equipped proxies along the coastline and in Socotra.<sup>[2]</sup>

Hopes for peace, too, are international. They include negotiations led by successive UN envoys, and US-led talks since the beginning of 2021, but so far have failed to quell the fighting or find political resolution. The UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement of 2018, with its limited goals including demilitarization of the port of Hodaydah, has stalled.

This internationalized conflict has displaced more than 3 million people<sup>[3]</sup> and has deepened Yemen's food security crisis. Small wonder, then, that young Yemeni civil society activists and volunteers who participated in a series of focus groups described frustration at how little power they have to bring about peace. "It is the war of major powers," said one participant in a discussion in Hadramawt. "We are just a battlefield for them and our soldiers are merely puppets they control."

And yet, any effort to bring about lasting peace in Yemen must include young people. Those aged under 30 make up an estimated 69 percent of the population.<sup>[4]</sup> Young people spearheaded the 2011 uprising against former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, and

- 1) Dakshinie Ruwanthika, Mourad Sami Baly, Henry Thompson, Marie-Louise Tougas and Wolf-Christian Paes, "Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen," Panel of Experts on Yemen via UN Security Council, New York, January 25, 2021, pp. 12 ,29, 31-34, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S\\_2021\\_79\\_E.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/S_2021_79_E.pdf)
- 2) Gregory D. Johnsen, "Foreign Actors in Yemen: The History, The Politics and The Future," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 31, 2021, [https://sanaacenter.org/files/The\\_History\\_the\\_Politics\\_and\\_the\\_Future\\_en.pdf](https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_History_the_Politics_and_the_Future_en.pdf)
- 3) "The United Nations in Yemen," United Nations Yemen, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://yemen.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>
- 4) "World Population Prospects 2019," United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019), <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>

young men and women are the most active groups within civil society and voluntary initiatives. Such groups have the potential to shape a positive political and social future for Yemen. This age group is also the most likely to be drawn into fighting, especially as employment options dwindle. This paper aims to convey the views of young, socially active Yemenis to all actors involved in devising policies impacting Yemen.



## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on 39 focus group discussions, in which 177 male and 183 female civil society activists and volunteers between the ages of 20 and 35 participated in 10 Yemeni governorates: Sana'a, Aden, Taiz, Hadramawt, Ibb, Marib, Shabwa, Lahj, Socotra, Al-Mahra. The discussions happened between December 2020 and January 2021 and addressed substantive issues related to the ongoing war in Yemen, its underlying causes, parties to the conflict, implications and scenarios for bringing the war to an end. The discussions were facilitated by 33 members of the Yemen Peace Forum (YPF) project that is being implemented by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. YPF members are active in civil society organizations and youth initiatives in the fields of conflict resolution, advocacy, peacebuilding and the humanitarian field, from different parts of the country. Three preparatory sessions were held online prior to the focus group discussions to select the topics for the discussions.

For this paper, the author compiled and encoded the data collected during the group discussions in an extended matrix that tabulated the main points addressed and the views presented in order to carry out a qualitative analysis. The paper was then split into two main themes. The first explores young people's impression of the ongoing conflict: parties involved, underlying causes and consequences thereof. The second theme includes their vision of the opportunities, constraints and mechanisms for the peace process, the efforts made to achieve peace over past years, the actors influencing peace, the role of young men and women, and their relationship with the office of the United Nations envoy in charge of facilitating the dialogue between the parties to the conflict in Yemen.



## SECTION ONE: VIEWS ON THE YEMEN WAR

### Causes

---

In general, young people who participated in the focus group discussions blamed the ongoing war mainly on long-term, systemic problems in Yemeni politics, society and economics. These problems include the corruption which became endemic under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the subsequent concentration of power and money in the hands of a few influential figures. Power and money were also concentrated in Sana'a; participants said the fragile state infrastructure in much of the rest of the country contributed to fragmentation.<sup>[5]</sup> The weakness of the economy was seen as a profound issue with serious consequences including a poorly educated population with limited understanding of the mechanisms of democracy vulnerable to being recruited to join various factions in the conflict.<sup>[6]</sup> Some people identified cultural norms as a problem, citing the absence of a culture of dialogue, or the prevalence of a zero-sum approach to disputes in political parties and tribes alike. Participants also criticized the security forces for their allegiances to individual leaders instead of the country,<sup>[7]</sup> and their links to external actors.<sup>[8]</sup>

Proximate causes were identified as triggers that began the conflict, such as the Houthi takeover of Sana'a and the group's undermining of the March 2013-January 2014 National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Participants criticized Houthi authorities' forced imposition of their religious norms on the areas under their control. In Taiz, some young people suspected the war had been planned since the uprising in 2011, because Saudi Arabia was concerned by the emergence of a strong army in Yemen and intervened to undermine it.

While there were no significant regional disparities in views, there were diverse perspectives reflecting local experiences. For instance, young people in Hadramawt cited what they perceived to be unfair government policies toward the South since the

---

5) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 5, 2021.

6) Focus group discussions, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

7) Focus group discussions, Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

8) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 4, 2021.

1994 civil war as contributing to the current war. They also said sectarian tension had arisen after attempts to impose an ideology by force (by inference, a reference to Houthi religious strictures) and to uphold hate speech. Young people of Shabwa mentioned ideology, regionalism and conflicts of interests, as well as retaliation and vengeance, which had been adopted by some parties with a sense of grievance and with participants referring specifically to the armed Houthi movement and the STC.<sup>[9]</sup>

The continued presence of political parties in Marib seems to have had an impact on the views of its youth, who referred to democracy as a supreme value that has not been assimilated into Yemeni culture. In Aden and Socotra, competition among regional powers and their local allies is more visible, particularly as the UAE recruits local allies and young people there focused on external factors of the war.

## Actors

---

During the discussions, young people expressed deep disappointment and a lack of confidence in political actors. They viewed these forces as serving themselves and their external supporting powers, rather than the interests of Yemen. They also questioned the integrity of any external interference in their country.

Although many young men and women – owing to security concerns — hesitated to identify some of the actors in the war in cases in which the participants lived in areas under their control, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran were identified as direct foreign actors in Yemen. Others were identified as indirect actors: UN Security Council members, particularly the United States, and Gulf countries including Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, as well as Turkey. With the exception of Kuwait and, to a lesser extent, Oman, all of these actors were seen to have negatively impacted the course of the conflict. Some youth in areas under the control of the Yemeni government differentiated the Saudi-UAE led intervention from that of Iran because they perceived the internationally recognized Yemeni government backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a legitimate authority.

Some of these young people said the war in Yemen was no longer in the hands of Yemeni parties, but rather controlled by external powers: “This war is not our war at

---

9) Focus group discussion, Shabwa governorate, January 6-7, 2021.

all. It is the war of major powers. We are just a battlefield for them and our soldiers are merely puppets they control.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Repeated references were made to Yemeni forces being dependent on external powers: “The conflicting parties are dependent on different external actors, solely based on personal interests. These parties are only concerned about their financial interests and that their salaries may be cut off.”<sup>[11]</sup>

They also believed that Yemeni parties had the capacity to restore their decision-making power, with one saying: “If there is genuine willingness, no state can stand in our way. The war’s fate is in our hands, and we, the people, will put an end to it. We pressed Saleh to leave, and we can similarly demand Abdo Rabbu to leave.”<sup>[12]</sup>

Participants spoke of youth, women, children, the poorest, the private sector and civil society as groups wanting an end to conflict. The consensus was that only the Yemeni people truly want peace, while the interests of many external and local actors were in the continuation of the war. Furthermore, political parties and movements, particularly Islamist ones such as Ansar Allah, the Islah party and Salafist groups, were seen as also prolonging the conflict: “There is lack of will among parties to put an end to the war because they are involved. They want this war to persist.”<sup>[13]</sup>

## Scenarios to End the War

---

There was a considerable polarity of opinions even within discussion groups with regard to the role of international bodies and nations in ending the war. Some people rejected external intervention and insisted Yemeni parties be left to manage the situation as a prelude to establishing peace. Some argued that the existence of external guarantees and foreign pressure on the parties to the conflict was a necessary precondition for ending the war. Nonetheless, there was a general consensus toward dialogue and negotiations and the need for all parties to make concessions for the sake of peace.

---

10) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, January 3, 2021.

11) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Sana’a, January 6, 2021.

12) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Taiz, December 27, 2020.

13) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Taiz, December 27, 2020.

The following are some of the scenarios young people outlined that could bring about an end to the conflict:

- Yemeni parties could act in the best interest of the country, participate in negotiations and reach agreements without intervention by external actors.<sup>[14]</sup>
- One side might triumph militarily over the other and rule the country, with the internationally recognized government being most likely to do this.<sup>[15]</sup>
- Young people could actively intervene, since they are the fuel for the war, and “they are the ones who can extinguish it.”<sup>[16]</sup> This would require awareness among young people, their independence from political parties, their refraining from joining factions, and the establishment of united youth forces that could organize negotiations and resolve the situation within the country.
- UN resolutions, the Riyadh Agreement and the outcomes of the NDC<sup>[17]</sup> could be implemented.
- Hadi could return to Aden with his Cabinet, engage in direct negotiations with authorities in Sana’a, and agree on power-sharing, without foreign interference. “In this way, they can protect the homeland and they can share power and Cabinets,” one said. “In the absence of foreign interventions, we would be able to reconcile and agree, God willing.”<sup>[18]</sup>

---

14) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, January 3, 2021.

15) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, January 3, 2021.

16) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Hadramawt, January 3, 2021.

17) Focus group discussion, Shabwa governorate, January 6-7, 2021.

18) Male participant in a focus group discussion held in Marib, December 22-23, 2020.

## Impacts of War

---

Focus group participants considered the impacts of war separately in a variety of spheres, although they are intertwined: the economy, social behavior, education, marginalized and vulnerable communities and community volunteerism.

### *The Economic Impact*

Economically, the war has seen a decline in per capita income, a collapse of the national currency, a decline in production of oil products and a suspension of oil exports, which were the main source of hard currency. Two-thirds of Yemen's population is in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>[19]</sup>

As the Yemeni rial declined in value, basic necessities became more expensive. In addition, government salaries have not been paid, development projects have been interrupted,<sup>[20]</sup> and public services have been disrupted. There have been shortages of basic necessities, such as domestic gas and food.<sup>[21]</sup>

Access to appropriate housing has declined in Hadramawt because landlords increasingly demand rents be paid in Saudi currency due to the instability of the Yemeni rial. Some investment projects have been suspended after the owners lost their capital.<sup>[22]</sup> Employment in the government sector has been suspended, limiting job opportunities for young people. "In 2014, we were promised job opportunities in Marib upon graduating," one participant said. "Since that day, the government has not been able to implement this decision. It cannot pay salaries and the conditions of citizens have deteriorated dramatically."<sup>[23]</sup> Investors have shifted to easier projects, such as shopping malls and currency exchange bureaus, rather than investing in factories or large-scale projects that could create more jobs. Economic engagement between areas under the internationally recognized government and Houthi-controlled areas is difficult because

---

19) "Ten Facts About Yemen: Conflict, Famine and Lives at Stake," UN News, February 27, 2021, <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2021/02/1071582>

20) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

21) Focus group discussion, Lahj governorate, January 2, 2021.

22) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

23) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Marib, December 22-23, 2020.

the Houthis impose additional customs charges,<sup>[24]</sup> and many rural traders have lost their businesses and become dependent on food aid from humanitarian organizations.<sup>[25]</sup>

Sometimes young people become fighters to earn money when other sources of income are cut off. Some women have been sexually exploited as a result of the need for money, and some young people have resorted to joining extremist groups or drug trafficking.

A rare reference to a positive economic impact was mentioned by youth in Aden who said there were more job opportunities with humanitarian organizations, which particularly encourage women's employment.

### ***Social Behavior***

Participants perceived links between the social and economic impacts of the war, observing that intensified poverty had changed social behavior. Aden appeared most affected by new social phenomena, including a rise in the spread of weapons, drugs and gangs, perhaps due to the transformations experienced as a result of the war. In Ibb and Sana'a, participants mentioned divisions at the household level as a result of war, with family conflicts arising from different family members supporting or joining different political or military groups. Many fighters for both parties to the conflict come from these two governorates. Despite its remoteness from direct military confrontations, Hadramawt was also impacted socially, perhaps as a result of political inducements and intense polarizations given the economic and geographical significance of the governorate for the conflicting parties. Participants from Hadramawt said the arrival of people displaced from other parts of Yemen had led to social changes, including women working in trade as well as increases in qat chewing, violence and begging.

The impact of the war on Al-Mahra has been limited to problems of displacement. It is a governorate vast in area, sparsely populated and far from the centers of conflict, but because of its small population, the influx of new populations of displaced people can quickly alter the demography of the governorate. Indeed, participants said that large-scale displacement had led to social and demographic changes, and had created new social phenomena in host communities, including begging, the carrying of weapons

---

24) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 4, 2021.

25) Focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

and an increase in child marriage.<sup>[26]</sup> Displacement has led to the dissolution of social ties, made mobility and communication within Yemen more difficult, and instilled hostility at household level, due to different political or military affiliations within families.<sup>[27]</sup> In some cases, displacement occurs because a family, or a family member, opposes the dominant party in the area, putting the family at risk. Displacement has contributed to a rise in social problems and familial pressures,<sup>[28]</sup> weakened societal cohesion and increased the prevalence of sexual harassment, as well as high crime and robbery rates.<sup>[29]</sup>

Working for longer hours also has limited social connections. “I started working all the time, in the morning, afternoon and night to earn a living,” said one participant, “and my social relationships with family, relatives and friends were adversely impacted. A social estrangement developed with an absence of leisure time resulting from this life of work and struggle.”<sup>[30]</sup>

The rising number of war victims has also impacted families,<sup>[31]</sup> especially those who lost breadwinners or whose members ended up with a disability. Divorce was perceived to have spiked as a result of psychological pressures, displacement and economic conditions.<sup>[32]</sup> Participants perceived that social values, principles and morality have been affected negatively by the prevalence of chaos and violence, for example, through the spread of weapons and drugs.<sup>[33]</sup> There was also a re-emergence of the phenomenon of blood feuds and extrajudicial killings as well as tribal, partisan, religious and regional intolerance.<sup>[34]</sup> Some families lost their homes: “Our house was completely destroyed by a missile and the state has not yet provided any compensation, causing our family to disintegrate with members having to move from one house to another,” a participant said. “So far we’ve moved into about seven rental homes. Rent is expensive and [we have just] one breadwinner. We had a stable life, but now we live in loss and dislocation.”<sup>[35]</sup>

---

26) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

27) Focus group discussion, Sana'a, January 6, 2021.

28) Focus group discussion, Ibb governorate, January 7, 2021.

29) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

30) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Hadramawt, December 27-28, 2020.

31) Focus group discussion, Shabwa governorate, January 6-7, 2021.

32) Focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

33) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 3, 2021.

34) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

35) A female participant in a focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 5, 2021.

## Education

In terms of education, the war has affected students' behaviour and performance, with parents less able to help with their children's education.<sup>[36]</sup> A survey of displaced children in Sana'a in the early months of the war found 79 percent of them were reporting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); of those, 72 percent reported sleep disorders.<sup>[37]</sup> The number of children out of school in Yemen has increased during the war to roughly 2 million, while an estimated two-thirds of Yemen's teachers have not received regular salaries since 2016.<sup>[38]</sup> The suspension of public-sector salaries since September 2016, followed by irregular payments of 50 percent of salaries every few months in Houthi-controlled areas, has led teachers to seek other work.

Often, families who can afford it now pay for private education, and only the poorest remain in public schools. With the collapse of the currency, the rise in travel costs and the closure of most airports, few students can afford to study abroad. Some who were doing so returned home.<sup>[39]</sup> Others could no longer travel within Yemen to study: "I was planning to pursue education in Sana'a," one said, "however my parents refused to relocate me to Sana'a due to the situation."<sup>[40]</sup> Children from displaced families who left behind their school documents were unable to complete their education as some schools refused to admit them.<sup>[41]</sup> The absence or ineffectiveness of government institutions during the war has exacerbated the situation, and it has been difficult to secure government scholarships to study abroad. "I was preparing to pursue a PhD in Sudan. However, due to the war, my application stalled and I was at a loss not knowing where to go," a focus group participant in Socotra said.<sup>[42]</sup>

In general, education in all regions of Yemen, even those far from battlefields, has been impacted by the collapse of the currency and the restriction of mobility. Some schools

---

36) Mahmoud Al Azizi and Baqeel Merit, "The Impact of Wars and Armed Conflicts on Educational Achievement of Students of the Primary Level of Sana'a City from the Teachers' Point of View," *Al-Andalus Journal for Humanities and Social Sciences*, Issue (17) Volume (16), January-March 2018, p. 66.

37) Fawzia Al-Ammar, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among Yemeni children as a consequence of the ongoing war," CARPO, March 20, 2018, [https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/10\\_carpo\\_brief\\_final.pdf](https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/10_carpo_brief_final.pdf)

38) "Education disrupted: Impact of the conflict on children's education in Yemen," UNICEF, July 5, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/yemen/media/5546/file/EDUCATION%20DISRUPTED%20Report.pdf>

39) Focus group discussion in Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

40) A female participant in a focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

41) Focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

42) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Socotra governorate, December 20 and 30, 2020.



in combat zones have been destroyed or ceased functioning. More people now live far from a school, due to the destruction of nearby schools or their use as shelters for displaced people.<sup>[43]</sup>

Students are disinclined to complete their education, given these difficulties and uncertainty about the future.<sup>[44]</sup> Parents' inability to provide learning materials and daily necessities has led many children to drop out of school and start working: "If a person's previous salary was equivalent to US\$300, now it's below US\$100," an Aden participant said. "This has led many people to work intensively and has made it necessary for every member of the household to be employed, to the point that some have forced their children to drop out of school in order to work and help support the family."<sup>[45]</sup>

The money earned by fighters also undermines the motivation to study: "When I encourage my son to pursue education, he responds that my salary as a member of the teaching staff is not sufficient to meet his needs or the family needs, while he can, via fighting, earn a salary of approximately 1,500 Saudi riyals,"<sup>[46]</sup> said one participant. Others spoke of students who dropped out of university and went to fight on the frontlines, especially on the border with Saudi Arabia.<sup>[47]</sup>

### ***Marginalized and Vulnerable Groups***

War affects the most vulnerable groups in a society. In tribal communities, marginalized groups can be more vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse, according to focus group participants. Their ability to claim their rights or even to receive humanitarian assistance is undermined, as observed by young people in Marib and Hadramawt.

Participants said some marginalized and impoverished social groups were particularly impacted by the war. The number of poor people grew, and they became unable to maintain their most basic rights because of the diminishing role of the state and the halting of social security payments provided to the poorest Yemenis. Some suffered from hunger and displacement and lost medical care that had been provided before the war.<sup>[48]</sup>

---

43) Focus group discussion in Lahj governorate, January 2, 2021.

44) Group discussion in Al-Mahra, December 28, 2020.

45) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 4, 2021.

46) Male participant in a focus group discussion in Hadramawt, December 27-28, 2020.

47) Focus group discussion in Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

48) Focus group discussion in Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

Some people with disabilities had their community centers destroyed. “People with special needs have been among the victimized groups during the war,” a participant in Taiz said. “They were entitled to special benefits before the war, when any person with a disability had a health insurance card to access free hospital treatment. However, their current situation is very tragic.”<sup>[49]</sup> Another participant in Ibb said that some corporations that used to support people with disabilities have discontinued their programs, even though the number of people with disabilities has increased during the war.<sup>[50]</sup>

To earn money, many joined non-state armed groups which paid salaries in Saudi currency,<sup>[51]</sup> while others joined gangs.<sup>[52]</sup> There was a perceived increase in early marriage among the poorest families, and although humanitarian organizations have provided assistance to them, it was deemed insufficient, with aid organizations’ access to combat zones restricted. Occasionally, expired food items are distributed or destroyed in warehouses unused as a result of the lengthy procedures for distributing them.<sup>[53]</sup> Some participants in Hajjah spoke of individuals having sold their organs to earn money.<sup>[54]</sup>

In Marib alone, there was a polarity of opinions among young people with regard to identifying the most vulnerable groups, while some felt the war had a positive impact on some of these groups. Some distinguished between the poorest and the marginalized, and believed the poorest were the most impacted by the war.<sup>[55]</sup> Some were of the view that marginalized groups were better off than before the war: “They have become significant beneficiaries of the war as most organizations tend to focus on these (marginalized) groups, providing shelter, food and health assistance. These groups are better placed compared to the other groups that used to have better standards of living before the war.”<sup>[56]</sup> This view may be due to the fact that some marginalized groups were internally displaced and thus were entitled to more help as displaced people than as a marginalized group.

---

49) Focus group discussion in Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

50) Focus group discussion, Ibb governorate, January 7, 2021.

51) Focus group discussion in Hadramawt governorate, January 3-4, 2021.

52) Focus group discussion in Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

53) Focus group discussion in Hajjah governorate, January 5-6, 2021.

54) Ibid.

55) Female participant in a focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

56) Female participant in a focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

A young man from Socotra said simply, “the poorest have died.”<sup>[57]</sup> Some did not have access to aid, as they had lost their identification documents during displacement. Some were prohibited from moving out of their areas of displacement; in Aden and other areas controlled by the Southern Transitional Council, people displaced from northern Yemen were prohibited from moving between districts without showing ID documents, which in many cases had been lost. This pushed them to beg or engage in hard labor and low-paying work, such as collecting empty plastic bottles to sell. Some were forced to survive on leftover food picked from garbage. Some were harassed and raped, especially children and women in camps for displaced people.<sup>[58]</sup>

### ***War and Volunteerism***

The war exposed the shortcomings of a weak state, and society found itself compelled to address them. In most regions, there are communal and individual initiatives that have provided food aid, along with money to teachers whose salaries have been cut off, as well as initiatives such as road rehabilitation and maintenance. These efforts vary from region to region.

Participants in the discussions said volunteerism played a significant role in lifting morale during the war, especially during relief operations, distribution of assistance, and awareness campaigns during epidemics. Communal initiatives were strengthened and many services were provided. Some volunteers received training that granted them better employment opportunities.<sup>[59]</sup>

The nature of volunteering changed once international and local organizations turned to volunteers to carry out their activities, such as data-gathering, in exchange for small sums of money. These jobs helped many young men and women who were unemployed, and volunteerism became more organized and coordinated as it transitioned in some cases into compensated work.<sup>[60]</sup>

In Marib, there was a view that more people were volunteering, although some participants questioned the integrity of volunteers distributing assistance. Others

---

57) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Socotra governorate, December 20 and 30, 2020.

58) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, December 29, 2020.

59) Focus group discussion in Hadramawt, January 3-4, 2021

60) Focus group discussion in Hajjah, January 5-6, 2021

believed there was a decline in volunteerism amid security constraints prompted by concerns about “infiltration by adversaries” within volunteer teams. Volunteers themselves have safety concerns when moving from one region to another,<sup>[61]</sup> and volunteerism has become subject to restrictions from the Houthi authorities in Sana’a. These restrictions have included a prohibition on the intermingling of men and women and requests from the Houthi authorities for licenses and other requirements that are difficult to obtain. On the other hand, youth initiatives have been facilitated in Marib and Taiz in coordination with the relevant government authorities.<sup>[62]</sup>

---

61) Focus group discussion, Marib Governorate; December 22-23, 2020.

62) Focus group discussion held via Zoom, Sana’a, January 7, 2021.

## SECTION TWO: YOUNG PEOPLE'S VISIONS FOR PEACE

Since the beginning of the war, international efforts have worked toward ending hostilities and resuming political dialogue. Mediation efforts have been led by a succession of UN special envoys to Yemen. Among these, Ismael Ould Cheikh and Martin Griffiths engaged in intensive discussions that succeeded in bringing together parties to the conflict for dialogues in Kuwait, Switzerland and Sweden. However, no real breakthrough has yet been achieved.

The majority of young people in the discussions were distrustful and suspicious of the intentions of the international community as sponsors of peace negotiations in Yemen. Many believe the work is just a publicity stunt that has contributed to prolonging the war and weakening the Yemeni state. With the exception of the release of detainees, the outcomes were generally seen as disappointing for Yemenis. Local mediations managed to address more important issues than UN-led negotiations, participants in Taiz said, achieving, for example, the re-opening of Dhalea road, a key road connecting northern and southern governorates that had been closed due to clashes.<sup>[63]</sup>

The ineffectiveness of international efforts was variously attributed to the lack of a “genuine willingness for peace by those in power,”<sup>[64]</sup> the negotiating parties having “neglected citizens and young people in the process” and alienated women,<sup>[65]</sup> and having excluded some factions and not discussed certain topics, including the issue of the South.<sup>[66]</sup> Regarding settlement efforts among factions under the umbrella of the internationally recognized government, even if only nominally, youths in Taiz and Hadramawt said the foundering Riyadh Agreement of late 2019 could be somewhat successful, if implemented. That deal attempted to diffuse tension among anti-Houthi factions through a series of military and political steps designed to increase power-sharing.

---

63) Focus group discussion in Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

64) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Ibb governorate, January 7, 2021.

65) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

66) Focus group discussion in Hadramawt, December 29, 2020.

In Sana'a, participants said the reasons for the failure of peace negotiations thus far included the influence of regional and international actors as well as Yemeni parties abroad who were not experiencing the situation of war. They also blamed a lack of pressure by the UN on the parties to the conflict, and criticized the fact that the mechanisms for dialogue bases for selecting interlocutors were not made public. They also alleged foreign manipulation of interlocutors, a gap between the decision makers and Yemeni society and the lack of a road map to peace.<sup>[67]</sup>

## *Most Prominent Actors in the Peace Process*

---

The participants identified the most prominent non-Yemeni actors based on their ability to have an impact, and not on the basis of their current role or genuine willingness to work for peace.

- Regional actors were identified as the Arab coalition (led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Iran, Kuwait, Oman, and Egypt.
- International actors were identified as the UN, the US and the European Union (EU). Some participants included permanent members of the Security Council, or “international powers” without specifically naming any country/party.

Local actors were identified on two grounds. First, by their participation in the primary conflict or in secondary conflicts such as the internal fighting among parties that are allied against the Houthis (for example the fighting in Taiz between Salafists and the Islah party or in Aden between government and STC forces). Second, actors were identified as ‘local’ by being civil forces or social groups with the right to participate in charting Yemen’s future course.

- Local actors included the internationally recognized government and the Houthi authorities. In the southern governorates, the STC was also included, alongside the General People’s Congress (GPC) and Al-Islah Party in the north. In northern governorates, participants referred to the Southern HIRAK rather than the STC, perhaps reflecting that some northerners consider the older and broader Southern HIRAK as the representative for the south, rather than the newer STC, which emerged during the conflict and has adopted hostile policies toward northerners, such as

---

67) Focus group discussion in Sana'a, January 6, 2021.

expelling them from Aden. In Taiz, participants referred to political parties without specifying which ones, adding the private sector and civil society as well as tribal and community organizations, religious leaders, women and youth.

## *Weighing the Potential for Existing Peace Mechanisms to Succeed*

---

Many focus group participants said that current peace mechanisms could lead to success even under the current complex circumstances — with certain conditions.

These included negotiators putting the general interests of the country over individual interests. Participants also called for concessions that would guarantee citizens' rights and security, and the development of radical solutions to conflict.<sup>[68]</sup> For young people, addressing the root causes of conflict is critical to achieving sustainable peace. Some participants believed that prolonged conflict and exhaustion of the factions would ultimately lead to peace, but only if no faction retained enough control to impede peace.<sup>[69]</sup>

Others stipulated the elimination of foreign interference as a precondition for peace.<sup>[70]</sup> They wanted well-thought-out goals, strategic post-conflict plans and clearly identified means to achieve them, as well as impartial oversight committees under the UN.<sup>[71]</sup> They also wanted to see a genuine willingness among the actors for young people to be involved,<sup>[72]</sup> the implementation of UN resolutions,<sup>[73]</sup> and the inclusion of civil society based on the outcomes of the NDC and UN Security Council Resolution 1325.<sup>[74]</sup> Some criticized the ambiguity in UN mechanisms and secrecy among negotiators, and suggested UN resolutions should be amended based on developments on the ground.

However, some young people said they saw no opportunity for current peace mechanisms to succeed and that they needed to be changed, either because of flaws or because they could not be applied in light of the intransigence of the various actors.

---

68) Focus group discussion in Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

69) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

70) Focus group discussion, Ibb governorate, January 7, 2021.

71) Focus group discussion, Lahj governorate, January 2, 2021.

72) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

73) Focus group discussion, Shabwa governorate; January 6-7, 2021.

74) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate; December 29, 2020.

Some said any peace negotiations should be held inside Yemen because solutions should come from within. However, this could be a daunting task given the domestic investment in the war, shifting allegiances, dependence on foreign actors,<sup>[75]</sup> the existence of foreign agendas that fuel the conflict, and escalating confrontations in areas far from the frontlines, such as in Al-Mahra and Socotra. With the intersection of multilateral interests everywhere, it is difficult to establish peace even at local levels, as local forces are still vulnerable. As a participant in Taiz said: “Peace mechanisms cannot succeed as long as we have weak powers from within.”<sup>[76]</sup>

And, once again, participants said there were parties blocking peace because their interests lay in the continuation of war.<sup>[77]</sup> Some alleged that these parties included aid organizations, citing the failure to begin reconstruction as a reason for their skepticism.

## *Proposed Improvements to the Peace Process*

---

Some participants said civil society was not evolving in such a way as to enable it to press for peace and be a partner for determining peace process priorities. Others pointed out that entrenched political problems in Yemen existed long before the Saudi-led intervention, including disputes over the outcomes of the NDC.<sup>[78]</sup> These, they said, needed to be addressed separately from the conflict. Some also saw regional variations; where participants in Aden spoke of seeing a path for peace in the south, if youth, women and civil society were actively engaged, they viewed the situation in the North as more complicated.<sup>[79]</sup>

Suggested mechanisms for the success of the peace process included: launching good-faith initiatives, such as a ceasefire and an opportunity to negotiate; lifting the blockade; opening all the country’s entry/exit points; halting the supply of arms; engaging national mediators and countries acceptable to the warring parties; and imposing the rule of law on all actors. Some said a UN team needed to be present on the ground in areas of conflict, reaching out to potential local interlocutors.<sup>[80]</sup>

75) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

76) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

77) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

78) Focus group discussion in Sana’a, January 6, 2021.

79) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 5, 2021.

80) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.



Participants said monitoring and sanctions mechanisms were needed for parties that obstructed peace. They said government officials of all kinds should be selected based on their competence<sup>[81]</sup> rather than through nepotism; this would increase societal trust in the government. In addition, competent officials would be better able to work toward peace, while those hired through personal connections might fear losing their roles should peace be achieved. Participants also said negotiations should be more transparent and emphasize intra-Yemen dialogue over international dialogue, to encourage reconciliation among Yemeni parties.<sup>[82]</sup> This should be achieved with secure channels for dialogue and guarantees for all sides, participants said. Some suggested the intervention of a third party as a facilitator,<sup>[83]</sup> although there was disagreement as to whether this should be a Yemeni party or an external one.

Some suggested the formation of a party representing youth in the negotiations<sup>[84]</sup> and the revitalization of research centers to provide realistic analyses of the nature of the conflict and practical solutions. Negotiators representing each party could also have broader mandates and decision-making powers, rather than needing to confer with their parties over all details; this could expedite the process of reaching an agreement and reduce external influences on negotiators.

Although some wanted to reduce the role of non-Yemeni actors, others said there should be an international peacekeeping mission in Yemen. They called for the engagement of new powers, such as the EU instead of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the exclusion of all leaders who participated in the war or had interests in its continuation.<sup>[85]</sup>

Participants' priorities for the outcome of negotiations focused on community justice and rule of law. They wanted to restore the state and rebuild its institutions. They wanted young people to be supported, education to be improved<sup>[86]</sup> and for there to be job opportunities and compensation for those affected by the war, as well as post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>[87]</sup>

---

81) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

82) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

83) Focus group discussion, Sana'a governorate, January 6, 2021.

84) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

85) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

86) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

87) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

Some participants said they wanted detainees released and for Yemen to be removed from the list of Chapter VII (of the UN charter) interventions. They called for military camps to be removed from cities, for the NDC to be implemented, for government salaries<sup>[88]</sup> to be paid, roads reopened and armed groups disarmed. They spoke of the need for violence against women to end, for psychological support for citizens to be provided, for the roles of women and youth in society to be promoted and for community conflicts<sup>[89]</sup> to be resolved.

There was broad consensus on these priorities, while freedom of opinion and expression was identified as a priority only for participants in Sana'a.<sup>[90]</sup>

## Local Peacebuilding

---

Some participants proposed activities that could contribute to conflict resolution at a local level. Artistic and cultural activities were generally of interest and participants agreed on their importance in disseminating the values of peace and coexistence. Participants also suggested the launch of local dialogue forums,<sup>[91]</sup> the formation of committees that would engage with and train all warring parties on conflict resolution mechanisms,<sup>[92]</sup> the involvement of influential social figures in community initiatives and the communication of messages of coexistence in schools, mosques and cultural institutions.<sup>[93]</sup>

They proposed taking advantage of successful local initiatives, including having women lawyers working within neighborhoods, which has contributed to resolving family problems,<sup>[94]</sup> and leveraging tribal influence to mediate in local conflicts.<sup>[95]</sup> They also recommended launching sports clubs, which could strengthen social cohesion, and using qat-chewing gatherings where people of various affiliations often sit together to spread awareness about the importance of coexistence and peace.<sup>[96]</sup>

88) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

89) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

90) Focus group discussion, Sana'a governorate, January 8, 2021.

91) Focus group discussion, Al-Mahra governorate, December 28, 2020.

92) Focus group discussion, Lahj governorate, January 2, 2021.

93) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 29, 2020.

94) Focus group discussion, Hadramawt governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

95) Focus group discussion, Marib governorate, December 22-23, 2020.

96) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 5, 2021.

Some suggested the formation of volunteer groups that could act as ambassadors of peace and as internal pressure groups on decision-makers.<sup>[97]</sup> They identified ways of mitigating local conflict, including the restitution of usurped rights, support for marginalized minorities,<sup>[98]</sup> and drawing upon tribal elders and aqils (neighborhood representatives) to resolve conflicts.<sup>[99]</sup>

## *Seeking Better UN Engagement with Women and Youths*

---

Participants agreed that the inclusion of youth and women in any peace effort is imperative. It ensures the process is implemented equitably and allows for perspectives beyond Yemen's traditional political frameworks. People said women and young people could influence society to reduce violence, and they perceived them to be less fanatical and more capable of discussing social issues explicitly.<sup>[100]</sup> Women and youth were considered less tangled up in the roots of conflict.<sup>[101]</sup> They are "the mouthpiece of the streets,"<sup>[102]</sup> as one participant put it, and their presence would reduce the gap between society and decision-makers and minimize the general sense of marginalization.<sup>[103]</sup> Some participants perceived women and youths as more willing to work in the public interest without coveting power, unlike politicians.<sup>[104]</sup>

However, participants perceived a very weak relationship between the UN special envoy's office and women and young people, with consideration reserved almost exclusively for members of the Yemeni Women's Pact for Peace and Security. During discussions about the UN envoy, the youths appeared to have little knowledge of the mandates of his office or his role. As one person said, "the mandate of the UN special envoy is merely to express concern."<sup>[105]</sup>

---

97) Focus group discussion, Sana'a via Zoom, January 7, 2021.

98) Focus group discussion, Sana'a governorate, January 6, 2021.

99) Focus group discussion, Ibb governorate, January 7, 2021.

100) Focus group discussion, Taiz governorate, December 27-28, 2020.

101) Focus group discussion, Shabwa governorate, January 6-7, 2021.

102) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Socotra governorate, December 20 and 30, 2020.

103) Focus group discussion, Sana'a governorate, January 3-4, 2021.

104) Focus group discussion, Aden governorate, January 4, 2021.

105) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Socotra governorate, December 20 and 30, 2020.

Some participants proposed the establishment of an entity that would represent women and young people, to share insights and perspectives with the special envoy's office. Others suggested launching a communication platform on social media, or drawing on the Ministry of Youth to reframe and organize their efforts. They also suggested asking international organizations to help communicate their voices to the envoy or the appointment of youth representatives in the envoy's office or the recruitment of a liaison officer. Some suggested opening branches of the envoy's office within Yemen at the governorate level, and launching mini-forums there, or conducting large-scale surveys. Others suggested setting up a youth advisory unit in the envoy's office.



## CONCLUSION

In discussions across Yemen, young people perceived long-term systemic problems as the root causes of the country's ongoing war, and said that efforts to resolve the conflict must address these issues for any peace to last. They expressed disappointment in Yemeni political and military actors and frustration at foreign interference, while remaining confident that the Yemeni people could reassert their authority as they had in 2011, when they pushed the late president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, to leave office.

Young people narrated the economic and social impacts of a war that has fractured communities, with participants reporting rises in begging, drug use and weapons-carrying. They also described how the conflict has seeped into families, many of which have split apart due to displacement or been driven apart by political and military differences between family members.

Most participants distrusted international efforts to bring peace to Yemen, which some said had prolonged the war. Throughout the discussions, many ideas were shared to improve prospects for peace, alongside frustration that the voices of Yemen's youth were rarely heard in peace negotiations, which broadly fail to consider their interests. Overwhelmingly, young people viewed the conflict as a war in vain, with one young man saying: "The (local) parties to the conflict must realize that there are no winners in this war, meaning this is a senseless war. It's pointless."<sup>[106]</sup>

---

106) Male participant in a focus group discussion, Taiz, December 27-28, 2020.



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

Fourteen participants in the Yemen Peace Forum who had participated in the various focus group discussions took part in an October 10, 2021, session in Amman, Jordan, to consider the results as a whole and formulate recommendations. They are detailed below.

### *To the International Community and the UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen:*

- Include the economic file in any peace talks and prioritize it alongside the political file to stop the deterioration in the living conditions of Yemenis;
- pressure the internationally recognized government and the de facto authorities to unify central bank policies. Toward that end, assist in the formation of a committee of technocrats who would:
  - Seek to mobilize resources for paying all civil servant salaries in Yemen and design a mechanism for the disbursement of such;
  - consult with leading business and financial actors regarding de-escalation of the economic war and the formulation of common fiscal and monetary policies; and
  - revitalize the role of civil society organizations in monitoring the implementation of economic policies.
- Invest more in clarifying the role of the UN special envoy in the peace process, which would make it possible to leverage the voices and influence of youth and women to make progress in the peace process;
- enhance transparency surrounding issues and positions taken during any peace negotiations to gain the support and confidence of Yemeni society, especially youth and women;
- establish a monitoring mechanism for the negotiation process, overseen by youth and women unaffiliated with any warring party and designed in cooperation with civil society organizations in consultation with the UN special envoy's office; and

- prioritize education through donor-state support for local institutions and the creation of academic opportunities outside Yemen for post-secondary graduates. Access to these opportunities will require transparent, well-defined procedures so places are awarded based on demonstrated competency to ensure equal opportunities for young men and women.

### ***To Yemeni Civil Society Organizations:***

- Raise awareness in society and among actors on all levels of the dangers of war at the economic level by conducting research, producing multimedia materials and implementing programs to monitor the politicization of economic issues in ways that negatively impact citizens
- Support the UN special envoy's office by ensuring it is kept apprised of Yemeni experts in various fields who are available to fill the gaps and correct flaws in the international community's limited understanding of the dynamics of the local conflict.

### ***To the International Community and Yemeni Local Authorities:***

- Finance projects and programs that will promote a culture of coexistence by integrating displaced persons into host communities. Toward that end,
  - prioritize economic empowerment and psychological support;
  - ensure humanitarian assistance includes both displaced persons and host communities and is based on field studies and research that clarifies the impact of displacement on both communities.
- Design and support programs, including community dialogue forums, to sensitize young people and social media influencers on the importance of diversity, the culture of acceptance of others and the dangers of hate speech.

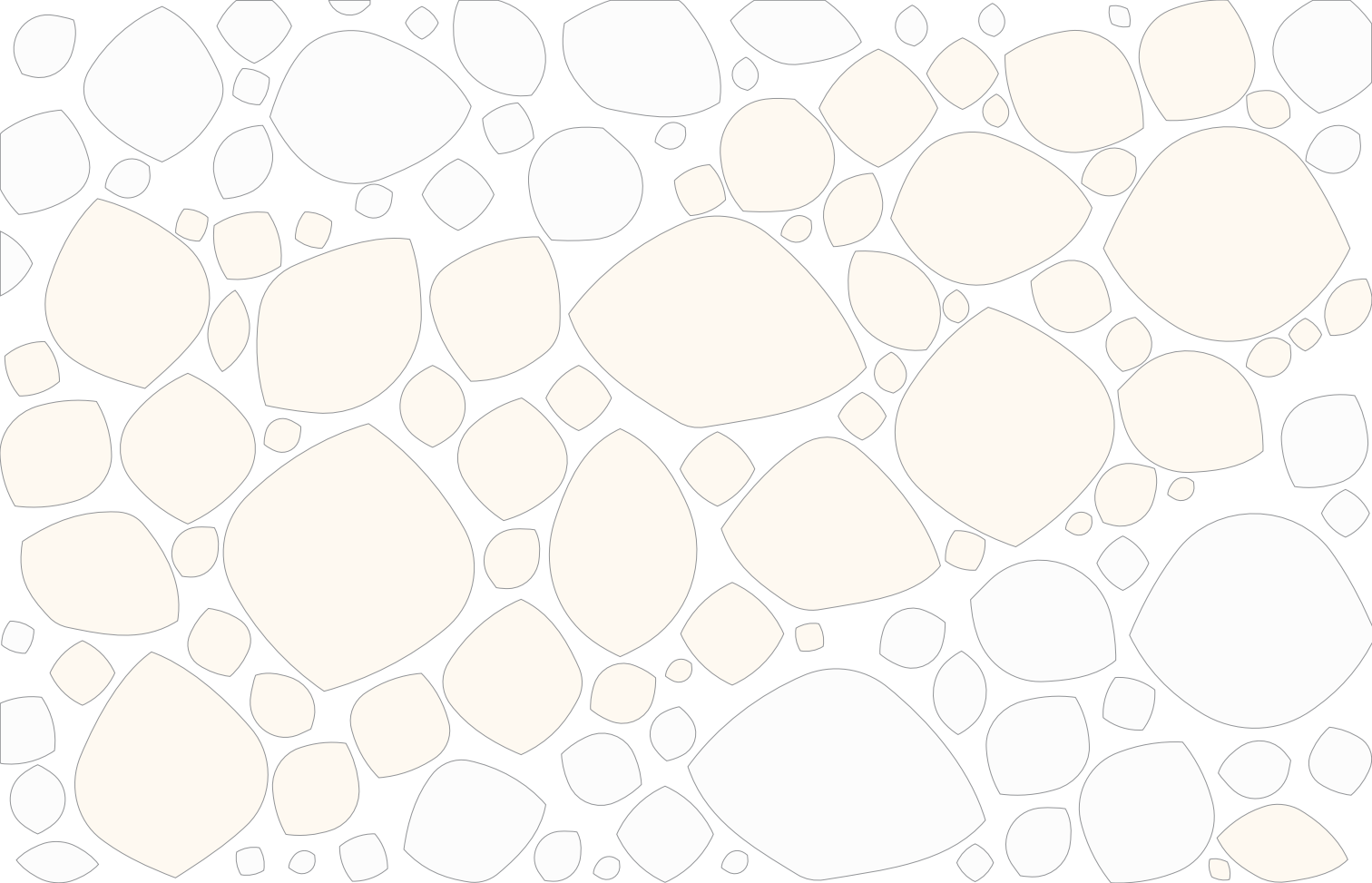
***To Yemeni Decision-Makers (at the Local Level):***

- Grant special dispensation to displaced persons who have lost their personal or educational documents, such as temporarily accepting copies of documents or issuing alternative documents, especially to students.
- Allow community and youth initiatives as well as volunteer work aimed at spreading a culture of peace to function without restrictions or interference.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Tawfeek Al-Ganad** is the Arabic editor for the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies as well as a researcher and writer on Yemen's political history.



THE SANA'A CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES IS AN  
INDEPENDENT THINK-TANK THAT SEEKS TO FOSTER CHANGE  
THROUGH KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION WITH A FOCUS ON  
YEMEN AND THE SURROUNDING REGION

[sanaacenter.org](http://sanaacenter.org)