



Social Fragmentation and Restoration in Taiz

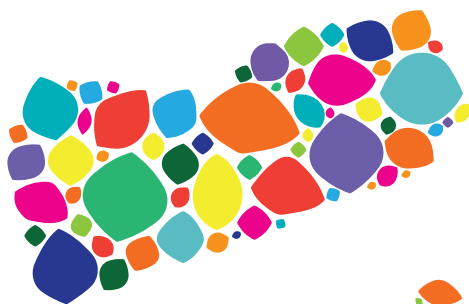
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Cover Photo : A man and his son walk down a mountain road near Aden-Daimah village, overlooking Taiz city, on June 20, 2021. // Sana'a Center Photo by Ahmed Al Basha.



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.

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INTRODUCTION

Already suffering from myriad crises propelled by the war – including economic degeneration, fuel shortages, insecurity and the collapse of healthcare and livelihoods – Yemenis have also had to contend with intra-communal, and even intra-familial, fractures. Tribal, sectarian and regional affiliations are routinely used by both the armed Houthi movement and the internationally recognized government to gain territorial advantage, further stressing local social relations.

This paper will examine the phenomena of increased social disintegration in one particular governorate, which has become a microcosm of the war in Yemen: Taiz. It will also present proposals on how to avoid further fragmentation through serious attempts to heal rifts, including initiatives from within communities that could be adopted by local organizations.



METHODOLOGY

This paper follows the descriptive analytical method. Interviews were conducted with members of local community organizations that are directly engaged with people harmed by social disputes. Representatives discussed the obstacles they faced during interventions to resolve conflicts. Interviews were also conducted with community members to understand the extent of the harm they have endured and the factors that have impeded resolution of intra-family disputes. The paper also highlights social initiatives that have succeeded in settling a number of social conflicts.

ARMED GROUPS IN TAIZ GOVERNORATE

Taiz governorate in central Yemen is often seen as a bridge connecting the country's north and south. Taiz and the neighboring governorate of Ibb form the Al-Ganad region, one of Yemen's most fertile and productive areas. Despite its small size – around 10,008 km²^[1] – Taiz is home to one-fifth of Yemen's population, making it the most populous governorate in the country.^[2]

The situation in Taiz is complicated by the entrenched positions of participants in the conflict in and around the governorate. The Houthi movement, which controls the north of Taiz city and the governorate's three main roads, has maintained a partial siege since 2015, restricting the movement of people and goods. They also control the industrial zone north of the city, which provides them with hundreds of millions of Yemeni rial (YR) each year through taxes imposed on factory owners.^[3]

The combustible security situation in the governorate is not limited to the broader war between Houthi and pro-government forces. It also extends to divisions within the anti-Houthi camp and infighting over power and personal gain.^[4] Such disputes, often related to the Islah party's significant influence in the governorate, have stood in the way of efforts by the government and its allies to break the Houthis' siege of Taiz city.^[5] Non-Houthi territory in the governorate is controlled by different groups, even inside Taiz city itself. The city has been cut off from its suburbs, and rural areas have been cut off from one another.

Most pro-government groups in the governorate were integrated into the Yemeni army's Taiz Military Axis, which controls the south of Taiz, in 2016 and 2017. UAE-backed forces led by Tareq Saleh, the nephew of late former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, have

[1] "An Introduction to Taiz Governorate [AR]," National Information Center, 2014, <https://yemen-nic.info/gover/taiz/brife/>

[2] "Taiz, six years of killing and siege [AR]," 2020 Violations Monitoring Report, Human Rights Information and Training Center, January 25, 2011, <https://hritc.co/21906>

[3] Maged al-Madhaji, "Taiz at the Intersection of the Yemen War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, March 26, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/9450>

[4] Mustafa Naji, "The City of Taiz in Yemen: A Martyr and Forgotten [AR]," Orientxxi, March 14, 2019, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/article3095>

[5] Brett Scott, "The road to peace runs through Taiz," Deep Root, June 2020, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/df2b40_7576360d6eaf42bbb5de8db4079442b3.pdf

been stationed along the West Coast. Militias affiliated with Hammoud al-Mekhlafi are present in Wadi Bani Khawlan in the Jabal Habashi district. Al-Mekhlafi's fighters are assembled in a camp south of the city, in an area controlled by the 17th Brigade, most of whose members are affiliated with the Islah party.

Three Salafi militias have also emerged as key players in the fight against the Houthis. ^[6]Salafis affiliated with the Islah party mostly fought alongside the 22nd Mechanized Brigade, which was incorporated into the Taiz Military Axis in 2017. The UAE-backed Abu al-Abbas militia was a prominent actor in Taiz city before it was forced out by Taiz Military Axis forces in 2019. The militia currently has a symbolic presence in Al-Kadha area, in the west of the governorate. A third Salafi militia, the UAE-backed Hasmi Brigade – whose leader Adnan Ruzayq is originally from Shabwa – has taken over the faculty of medicine building of Taiz University in Taiz city. The 35th Armored Brigade, previously dominated by pro-Nasserist and socialist fighters but now controlled by Islah and incorporated into the Taiz Military Axis, controls the strategic Al-Hujariah area that stretches into the southern and southeastern countryside.

In 2015, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula also increased its presence in Taiz. However, since mid-2018 the militant group has appeared to have largely pulled out of the city. ^[7]

[6] Bushra al-Maqtari, "The Evolution of Militant Salafism in Taiz," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, September 29, 2017, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/4843>

[7] "Taiz, City Profile," UN Habitat, January 2021, https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/11/taiz_city_profile.pdf

ABUSE OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION

In government-held areas, anti-Houthi factions have targeted Hashemite families, who attribute their lineage to the Prophet Mohammed, displacing those with family members known to have supported the Houthis. On March 26, 2016, armed forces affiliated with the national army and the local popular resistance stormed the Al-Sarari area and killed a number of civilians from the Al-Juneid and Al-Sururi Hashemite families. Pro-government forces destroyed the Jamaledine al-Juneid Mosque, burned the Sufi library and looted properties. Armed residents and those with ties to the Houthis were forced to flee Al-Sarari due to constant shelling.^[8]

Houthi forces have also committed abuses. In early January 2021, the Houthis stormed Al-Haymah, an area under their control in the governorate's northeast, after accusing residents of providing the government with the coordinates of their forces. Clashes erupted between Houthi fighters and local residents, resulting in casualties on both sides. Local reports said the Houthis also carried out kidnappings and orchestrated the widespread destruction of private property.^[9]

According to a report released in January 2021 by the Human Rights Information and Training Center, a Yemeni non-governmental organization, 211 civilians, including 42 children and 29 women, were killed in Taiz in 2020.^[10] The report's findings indicate that the Houthis were responsible for 38 percent of the civilians killed, while unaffiliated armed factions killed 37 percent. Individuals affiliated with the government's army or other partisan factions killed 13 percent, and unknown gunmen killed 12 percent.

[8] Abdulaziz Saleh bin Habtour, "Al-Sarari Village in Taiz, a Wound Reopens and a Failed Attempt to Fuel Sectarianism [AR]," Rai Alyoum, July 31, 2016, <https://www.raialyout.com/ال-قرية-الصراري-في-تعز-جرح-جديد-يفتح-في-ال>

[9] "Al-Haima Holocaust of Yemen," Violations Monitoring Report for January 2021, Human Rights Information and Training Center, February 17, 2021, <https://hritc.co/21992?lang=en>

[10] "Taiz: Six Years of Killing and Siege [AR]," 2020 Violations Monitoring Report, Human Rights Information and Training Center, January 25, 2021, <https://hritc.co/21906>

DIVISION AND RESOLUTION

In light of such insecurity, political instability, partisan affiliation and intolerance, many Taiz residents have turned to violence instead of dialogue and negotiation. Some believe that the only solution to disputes is through the use of force, especially with the absence of accountability from local authorities and government apparatuses. But Yemeni civilians are the main victims of this violence, as the interviews in this report demonstrate.

In 2018, local anti-Houthi forces attacked Mohammed S.^[11] on his way home, despite his stated position of being unaffiliated with any party. The 48-year-old said he was targeted because he had communicated with relatives who fought alongside the Houthis. Mohammed's own family has suffered fragmentation due to the rival affiliations of its members. In 2017, Ahmad H.,^[12] a 35-year-old man with no political affiliations, was targeted in Houthi-controlled Hawban, following a dispute between his pro-government cousins and other family members affiliated with the Houthis. After his pro-Houthi cousins alleged he was a member of the Islamic State group, Ahmad H. was detained by the Houthis. He was released as part of a 2019 prisoner exchange but has not been able to return to his work in Sana'a due to the siege imposed on Taiz and out of fear of getting kidnapped again.

The conflict between community members may also involve vendettas and revenge killings. M. M., a government supporter, says that after sleeper cells affiliated with the Houthis disclosed the whereabouts of pro-government fighters in 2019 – resulting in many being killed – families of pro-government fighters killed two alleged members of the sleeper cells in retaliation. M. M.^[13] believes those who have supported the Houthis and caused the death of civilians must be punished, but that the best way to achieve this is through a strong state that provides security and stability, rather than the cyclical violence of vendettas.

[11] Author's interview with Mohammed S., identified only by his first name for security reasons, June, 2021.

[12] Author's interview with Ahmad H., identified only by his first name for security reasons, June 7, 2021.

[13] Author's interview with M. M., identified only by his initials for security reasons, June 9, 2021.

THE RISING IMPORTANCE OF CSOS

Since the beginning of the war in Yemen, civil society organizations (CSOs) have become an important tool in managing local affairs, particularly amid the weakness of local councils and the lack of government services. They work to bridge the rifts that have torn the social fabric by providing solutions to local disputes, intervening to contain these and developing a sense of common identity among Yemenis.

CSOs use specific mechanisms to settle disputes in Taiz governorate, the most important of which are dialogues managed by a qualified arbitrator. The Democratic Reformation Studies Center,^[14] for instance, has a set of conditions for its mediators, according to Ibtihal Fadl, an employee at the organization. Mediators are expected to be impartial and independent during the arbitration process, have a clean record of conduct, provide a safe environment for the opposing parties to discuss their issues in complete privacy, and help them understand one another's points of view. Mediators must also be able to determine the points of disagreement and focus on resolving them, in addition to being knowledgeable about the civil rights laid out in the Yemeni constitution.

After an appropriate mediator is selected, they listen to each party separately at an introductory session before bringing the sides to a joint session. During the introductory sessions, which include training and role-playing, each party learns to talk directly with the other in order to reach a solution that is satisfactory to both.

However, there are a number of obstacles that hinder reconciliation processes and the work of CSOs. Below, some of the most important of these barriers are discussed.

Lack of Funding

Abdullah Hammoud,^[15] a local mediator, believes that one of the most important reasons for the failed resolution of social disputes is the lack of funding to treat wounded fighters or pay the diya (blood money). Additionally, organizations do not have enough funding to carry out development projects that could help end or prevent disputes and rebuild community spirit.

[14] Author's interview with Ibtihal Fadl, employee at the Democratic Reformation Studies Center, June 19, 2021.

[15] Author's interview with mediator Abdullah Hammoud, June 7, 2021.

The Rejection of Dialogue

In addition to the belief that arms and the use of force are the only way to address grievances, the rejection of dialogue initiatives may come from a lack of awareness regarding the importance of coexistence and social stability. It is therefore vital that disputing sides accept the idea of reconciliation.

Abdullah al-Suhaibi, a local mediator, argues that the relevant parties must reach the conclusion that a conflict needs to be resolved, especially if it has resulted in deaths. Participation in an initiative to resolve a dispute indicates that the parties may be convinced of the need for reconciliation.

H. D.,^[16] who was displaced to Sana'a after being accused of being a member of the Houthi movement, said he believes it is important that CSOs contribute to resolving such disputes. He added that if civil society organizations could not intervene to help internally displaced people whose homes and property had been seized, then they must at least develop social reconciliation initiatives that could bring conflicting parties together to mitigate the severity of divisions.

Absence of Efficient State Institutions

The absence of judicial authorities has led to an unwillingness to utilize normal legal processes, which are widely seen as ineffectual given the current conditions in Taiz. Marcelia al-Aasali, an employee at the Improve Your Society Organization, a Yemeni non-governmental organization focused on peacebuilding,^[17] said her group had established a series of mechanisms to manage and settle social disputes. These include direct interventions through a neutral local mediator, who was acceptable to all parties and had experience in mediation and conflict resolution, and indirect mechanisms that included development work that lessened the severity of social divisions, such as the construction of infrastructure. However, Al-Aasali said that the absence of a controlling authority hinders the organization's work in settling disputes, while the lack of funding holds up financial compensation and the execution of development projects.

[16] Author's interview with H. D., identified by his initials for security reasons, June 8, 2021.

[17] Author's interview with Marcelia al-Aasali, an NGO employee at Improve Your Society Organization, June 5, 2021.

Security Risks

CSOs have endured repression and rights violations, including detention of staff, disinformation campaigns and the confiscation of property. Consequently, a number of organizations have avoided working on sensitive issues, such as promoting peace and security. CSOs that are not directly under threat still suffer from a lack of security and restrictions on movement. The large number of checkpoints makes it very difficult and time-consuming to reach local communities.^[18]

Vendettas

Vendettas are one of Yemeni society's most heinous and dangerous practices. They threaten security, social peace, impede development and result in the death of innocent people, which can lead to tribal warfare and further killings.

Aida Abdulghani, an employee at the feminist Al-Wafaa Association,^[19] said that when disputes result in murder, a series of vendettas usually ensues. To counter this spiral of violence, the state has to hold perpetrators accountable and bear the cost of the diya to prevent further fighting. In the absence of the state, such debts remain unpaid and are difficult for social organizations to take on due to a lack of funding.

[18] Abdulkarim Qassim, et al., "The Role of Civil Society in Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO, May 2020, https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/carpo_brief_18_04-05-20_AR.pdf

[19] Author's interview with Aida Abdulghani, an employee at the Al-Wafaa Association, June 8, 2021.

CASE STUDIES

The section below details two disputes that the Al-Wed Development Foundation (WDF) intervened in to resolve and presents the mechanisms implemented by the foundation^[20].

A Road Dispute

In 2017, a dispute arose over the construction of a 1,500 meter road between the residents of Al-Hajma, affiliated with pro-government forces, and the Houthi-backed sheikhs of Zul-Barah, a sub-district of the Sabr al-Mawadim district.

Al-Hajma, a village in the Al-Misrakh district, is located around 650 meters below the western face of Jabal Sabr, one of the highest mountains in Yemen. The village was completely isolated and only reachable on foot along a rough, narrow path. Al-Hajma's residents, estimated at 500 in number, lacked basic services and easy access to medical treatment. Everything, including essentials, was brought in on foot. Even livestock needed to be transported, with young animals carried in by villagers, as their lighter weight made them easier to carry than when fully grown.

It was therefore a priority for residents to build a road to their village. This would need to connect to the nearest road in Zul-Barah, which is in turn linked to Al-Misrakh. To make this connection, however, 50 meters of the road would have to pass through an area owned by Ibrahim Ahmed, a Zul-Barah resident.

However, Ahmed vehemently rejected the plan, despite the villagers' attempts to convince him and offer financial compensation. The landowner sought out a sheikh loyal to the Houthis, who insisted that the road must not be built, in a move widely seen as retaliation for Al-Hajma's youths joining the fight against the movement.

The dispute escalated into armed clashes when Al-Hajma residents blocked the road leading to Zul-Barah with boulders. The road remained closed until local leaders intervened and reopened it, and negotiations subsequently resumed. Many parties were eager to mediate a solution, with some offering to finance the construction of

[20] Full disclosure: the author is the deputy executive director of the Al-Wed Development Foundation.

the road. These included the Hayel Saeed Anam group, Yemen's largest business conglomerate. However, influential figures affiliated with the Houthis obstructed these efforts. Attempts to resolve the issue by a number of sheikhs, lawmakers, directors of the Al-Misrakh and Sabr al-Mawadem districts, dignitaries and merchants all failed. Ahmed went on to build a commercial shop on the land needed for the road and planted an area behind it with qat to prevent the project going forward.

However, a resolution to the dispute became possible when the Houthis retreated from Sabr al-Mawadim following clashes with pro-government forces. WDF then intervened using the following mechanisms, which resulted in a settlement and the construction of the road:

- Local mediators were selected from the community according to certain criteria, such as neutrality, past experience in social mediation and acceptance by all parties.
- This committee of local mediators examined the conflict, its environment and previous efforts to address the dispute.
- The team visited the disputing parties and, with the help of influential local figures, redirected the parties into becoming active and positive actors in the resolution process.
- The disputing parties and their representatives were invited to meet and engage in dialogue.
- The team searched for supporters to offer compensation for using part of the land to build the road. A philanthropist compensated the owner of the land for the area where the road would pass, while residents contributed to its construction. In addition, support was provided by a community peacebuilding project implemented by Al-Wed and funded by the British Foreign Office.
- The parties were brought together to sign a document formalizing the final settlement.

A Water Dispute

A 2017 dispute over a water project in the village of Shebbat in Al-Maafer district nearly led to an armed confrontation between villagers and the administration formerly in charge of the project.

The dispute began when the drinking water project, which had benefited over 2,200 families, ceased operation. Some Shebbat residents, backed by government supporters, protested against the project's previous administration, which was supported by sheikhs loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) party. In the midst of an ineffective intervention by local authorities, both sides mobilized armed youths, fearing a potential confrontation.

The dispute was resolved when WDF intervened using the following mechanisms:

- A peace committee was selected, made up of figures who were accepted by the community and had experience in mediation and conflict resolution.
- The committee then conducted an analysis of the dispute.
- A representative of the Shebbat residents and a representative of the project's administration were invited to meet.
- Numerous visits to the disputing parties were undertaken, to exchange opinions and engage in dialogue.
- A group of women from Shebbat was invited to play a prominent role in the negotiations. Women were the most affected by the suspension of the project, as they had become responsible for locating water for their households. During the negotiations, they called on the opposing parties to place partisan interests aside and support one another.
- Proposals for a solution were exchanged and an agreement was reached, and ultimately all parties signed a final document that facilitated the resumption of the project.
- Supporters were recruited to complete and maintain the project, and YR30 million was collected in donations to resume operations and provide water to all beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

Finding solutions to the intra-communal disputes that threaten the social fabric of Taiz is an uphill battle in the absence of strong state institutions.

CSOs have, however, borne their responsibility well. They have carried out their role in bridging rifts and spreading a sense of calm and belonging among residents while trying to raise public awareness of the importance of dialogue and resolution. The drive to heal communities cannot rest on civil society organizations alone; it requires state and international institutions to play a larger role.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for promoting social cohesion in Taiz governorate.

To Civil Society Organizations:

In the Short Term:

- Spread the values of peace and tolerance amongst the people of Taiz through awareness programs and seminars on the importance of maintaining social ties as a way to promote unity and end the war.
- Provide the youth with opportunities for vocational training and skills development, in order to help young residents secure a living income.

In the Medium Term:

- Provide victims of the war in Taiz with psychological support. Make available opportunities for people to access the psychological care they need.

In the Long Term:

- Invest in education, especially given the difficulties many children face due to the destruction of schools and lack of qualified teachers. If not addressed, this could create a new generation of marginalized youths who risk being dragged into violence and recruited into armed groups.

To Donors and International Institutions:

In the Short Term:

- Diversify programming to make it more comprehensive. Programs should address education and the building of schools, hospitals, roads and water projects.
- Increase funding to CSOs, so that they may intervene to resolve the most complex disputes. These can require significant resources to cover costs, such as paying the diya and compensation for damages – funds to which the disputing sides may not have access.

In the Medium Term:

- Build capabilities within CSOs by developing the skills of employees through training courses that enable them to analyze and understand contexts and attain tangible results.

To the Local Authorities:

In the Short Term:

- Local councils should seek to maintain stability and put aside internal and external disputes.
- Local authorities should enhance their level of cooperation with CSOs.

In the Medium Term:

- Local authorities should enhance the participation of citizens by listening to their opinions and integrating them into political life.

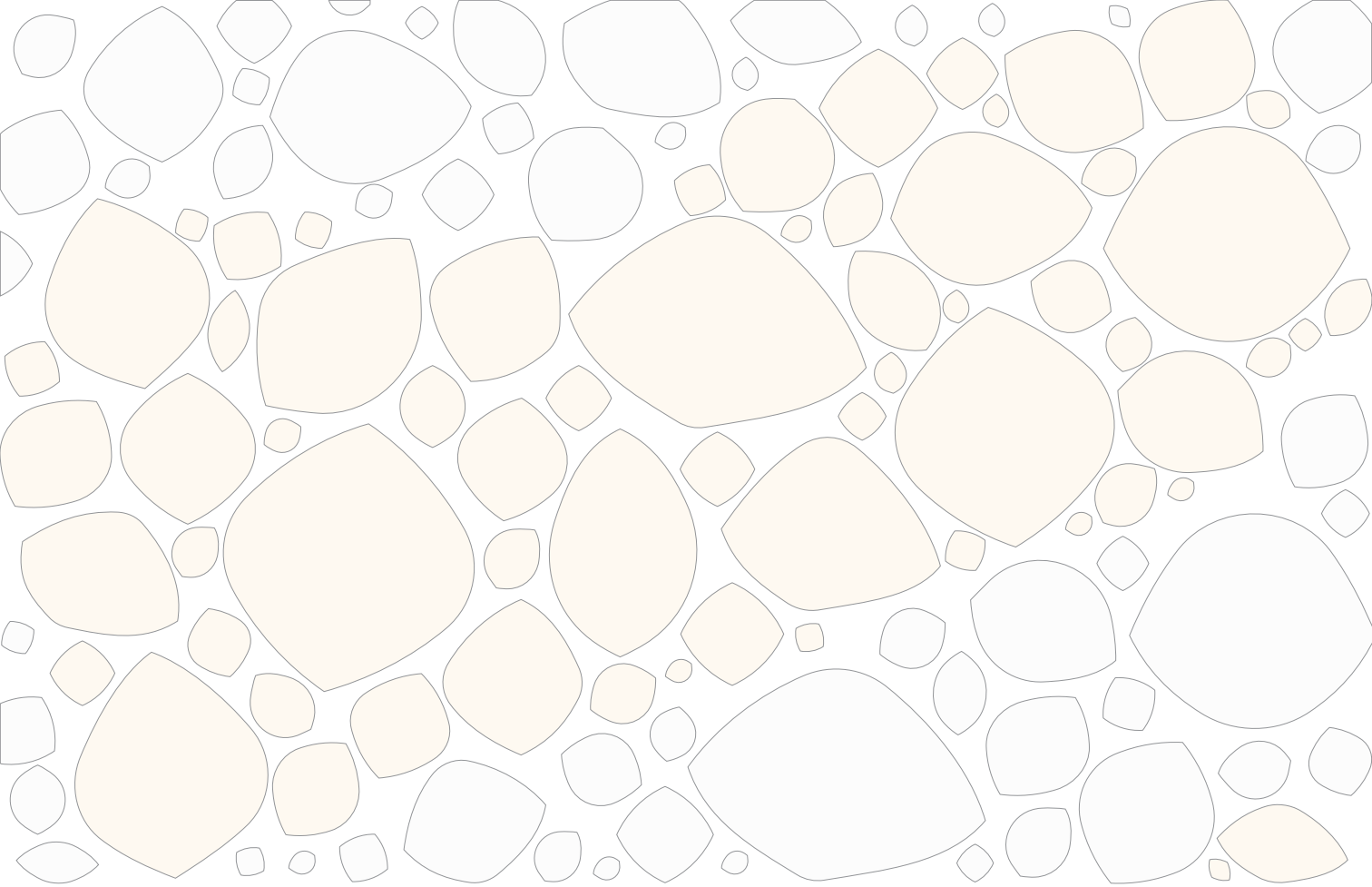
In the Long Term:

- In order for citizens to view government entities as just and reliable, local authorities need to reform their structures and systems of governance at every level, and encourage people to seek redress from the state, rather than by resorting to arms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abdullah Alhaj is the deputy executive director of Al-Wed Development Foundation. He holds a bachelor's degree in Law.

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