



Ten Takeaways from YIF III



YEMEN
INTERNATIONAL FORUM
منتدى اليمن الدولي

As the curtains closed on the third Yemen International Forum (YIF III), the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies reflected on the key takeaways and collective insights of Yemenis and the international community on the country's current trajectory and path to peace and stability.



More than 300 participants gathered in Amman from February 16-19 to attend the highly anticipated third Yemen International Forum, the largest annual gathering focused on peace-building in Yemen. Over the course of three days, Yemeni political leaders, tribal figures, women, minorities, youth, and civil society activists, alongside regional and international actors, UN representatives, and experts, engaged in candid and, at times, difficult discussions aimed at restoring peace and stability in Yemen and preventing further escalation of conflict.

The optimism for a peace settlement that characterized the first two YIF forums, held in Stockholm (2022) and the Hague (2023), had been tempered by the Red Sea crisis and Yemen's involvement in wider regional conflict. The Forum provided the first opportunity for Yemenis and the international community to collectively take stock of the dramatic developments in the region that have transpired since the Gaza war and to consider the challenges and opportunities ahead.

"The security of the region is contingent on the security of Yemen," said Yemen's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Shayea al-Zindani, at the Forum's opening session, where he urged for greater regional cooperation and engagement to end Yemen's war. Hans Grundberg, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, reminded participants that the risk of military escalation in Yemen is increasing, threatening to deepen civilian suffering and set back efforts toward peace. "The humanitarian crisis is severe, and political divisions persist," he said in a somber address. "Yet this forum has demonstrated that there is both the expertise and determination to confront these challenges."

The Forum included 29 sessions—a mixture of public plenaries, roundtables, workshops, and closed-door discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. On the domestic front, political cohesion, transitional justice, inclusion and civic space, economic recovery, and environmental sustainability – the cornerstones of YIF – remained central in discussions aimed at pursuing a just, inclusive, and sustainable peace. This year, the **agenda** also reflected Yemen's changed political landscape by expanding its scope to include geopolitical concerns and the need for intentional and strategic regional engagement.

Ahead of a comprehensive report on the YIF III, here are some key takeaways and trends that policymakers should monitor in the upcoming year, as conveyed by the Forum's participants:



1. Stability in Yemen, Stability in the Region

Conflict and political upheaval following the Gaza war have fundamentally altered the security landscape in Yemen and the wider region highlighting the interconnectedness of warfare and, by extension, opportunities for peace. As the YIF commenced, a central message emerged – Yemen’s war can no longer be considered a wholly internal problem. Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have shattered any illusion that Yemen’s conflict could remain isolated and underscored its global repercussions. “Stability in Yemen means stability in the GCC, in Bab al-Mandab, in the Red Sea, for international navigation, for the Suez Canal. Stability in Yemen is stability for all of us,” said Gabriel Munuera Viñals, EU Ambassador to [Yemen](#).

Yemeni experts cautioned, however, that **viewing Yemen solely through a regional lens risks treating it merely as a regional security issue**. This approach risks internationalizing the conflict, overshadowing domestic instability, and prioritizing military action over the UN-led peace process. “Peace has become a bargaining chip,” observed Farea al-Muslimi, a research fellow at Chatham House and former chairperson of the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, describing the current approach to Yemen. “If you want to restart the peace process in Yemen, well, first end the Red Sea attacks.” **Securing stability in the region also hinges on obtaining peace and prosperity for Yemenis**. With a Red Sea coastline and a young population shaped by a decade of war, policymakers would do well to heed these words.

2. Long-Term Thinking

One of the strongest messages delivered at YIF III was the call for more long-term thinking on Yemen. The international response to the Red Sea crisis has been ineffective, and the struggling peace process has stalled, with both efforts “characterized by short-sighted responses and limited strategies, and a focus on crisis management over long-term strategy,” said Yasmeen al-Eryani, the Executive Director for Knowledge Production at the Sana’a Center. Quick fixes are not the solution, she warned, noting that **“Yemen needs a comprehensive solution that is inclusive and holistic.”** As the appetite for peace in Yemen is seemingly waning, and security concerns are taking greater precedence internationally, the consensus among YIF attendees was that a more considered, multi-pronged approach would stand a better chance of securing peace. In practice, this means uniting international efforts to support economic stability and good governance, expanding diplomatic and regional coordination, protecting Yemen’s active civil society, addressing the Yemeni people’s demands for justice, and ensuring that Yemenis are included in decision-making about their future.

3. Political Reform

Rebuilding Yemenis' trust in the government underpinned nearly every discussion at the YIF aimed at charting a path forward. More than three years after its formation, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) remains fraught with division, structural shortcomings, and competing political agendas. The absence of a functioning government has failed to counter the Houthi threat and created fertile ground for non-state armed actors to gain influence. While opinions varied on how to best address the PLC's challenges, **attendees agreed that radical reform of the PLC is necessary to transform it into a functioning governing body with well-defined roles, accountability, and merit-based appointments.**



Three Years Since the Formation of the Presidential Leadership Council: What Has Changed and What Needs to Be Done? February 16, 2025 // Sana'a Center photo.

“A major challenge facing the PLC is the lack of commitment from individuals and institutions to return to Aden and operate from there,” said Abdelrazzaq Al-Hijri, the acting Secretary-General of the Islah party and advisor to the President of Yemen, highlighting the irony of a government almost entirely operating from the capitals of neighboring states. Given the insecurity in Aden and the presence of competing armed forces in government-controlled areas, he added that effective military coordination and the operationalization of the military committee to better coordinate these groups would strengthen state legitimacy. Maysaa Shuja al-Deen, Senior Researcher at the Sana'a Center, remarked that the PLC was formed “not from national or local will but from foreign regional powers.” **Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue was deemed vital to bolster the PLC's standing among the Yemeni people, counteract its dependence on regional powers, and cultivate reconciliation.** The importance of the Southern Cause was also brought into focus, with participants emphasizing its centrality in any broad national conversation on the future of Yemen and underscoring the need to move from Southern-Southern dialogues to a Southern-National dialogue.

4. Economic Revival

This year, Yemen's decimated oil and gas sector was brought into sharp focus. Oil and gas exports – vital for the government's access to revenues and functioning – have come to a halt as a result of economic warfare and the Houthi targeting of export terminals. Participants agreed the road ahead would not be easy, with the resumption of oil and gas reliant on diplomatic efforts, security improvements, foreign investment, and infrastructure repairs. Participants stressed that **support for economic revival hinges on rebuilding international trust in the Yemeni government, regional support, improving transparency and compliance, and revising legal frameworks.**

Concern about the substantial impact of the US redesignation of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) on Yemen's banking and private sectors, and the ramifications for international and local organizations working in Yemen, was another key topic of conversation at the Forum. Avenues explored included examining the experiences of other countries dealing with similar constraints, supporting the capacity-building of local banks and the Central Bank of Yemen (CBY) to mitigate the impact of the FTO designation, and engaging international financial institutions to establish clear guidelines for sanctions-compliant transactions with Yemeni businesses, particularly those operating in Houthi-controlled areas.

5. Humanitarian Aid

Cuts to global humanitarian assistance and dwindling government resources underscored that **the stakes have never been higher for Yemen's civilian population.** "We absolutely have to move away from humanitarian assistance toward reform... but a large part of the population—17 million people—don't have enough food to eat," stated Charles Harper, the British Head of Mission in Yemen. Foreign aid in Yemen is dwindling as challenges in the local operating environment persist and donors redirect their focus to other regional crises. Longstanding debates on transitioning from short-term relief work to development and recovery sought solutions to balance immediate needs and sustainable **interventions.**

The resounding message from attendees was that now is not the time to turn away from Yemen. The risk of escalation is increasing, the FTO designation will likely have massive economic repercussions, and the humanitarian crisis remains severe. **Withdrawing support at this critical time could have serious consequences,** including new barriers to the aid and remittance flows that sustain millions, job losses in the humanitarian sector and civil society, and a potential exodus from northern regions by those seeking employment. Julien Harneis, the UN Resident Coordinator, acknowledged the lack of Yemeni representation in humanitarian decision-making. "For far too long, it has been donors rather than Yemenis dictating the agenda," he noted, emphasizing the UN's commitment to increased representation moving forward.

6. The Erosion of Civil Society

The mood was somber on the last day of the YIF as news spread that a Yemeni mother seeking medical treatment in Amman died without seeing her detained daughter in Sana'a. The ongoing detention of civil society actors and aid workers in Houthi-controlled areas cast a long shadow over the Forum. "I have been involved in Yemeni civil society for over 20 years, but I have never witnessed pressure of this magnitude," said Maged al-Madhaji, the Sana'a Center Chairperson.

Attendees emphasized the **urgent need for the international community to support Yemen's civil society and to advocate strongly for the release of detainees**. While government-controlled areas have less severe restrictions, government officials at the YIF were called upon to **renew collaboration with civil society organizations (CSOs) and reform legislation restricting their activities**. As women's rights continue to deteriorate, Sawsan al-Refai, an expert in public policy, encouraged the international community to support Yemeni women: **"Trust women on the ground when they propose an idea. Against all odds, these women are trying their very best to push their cause. We need to support them."**

7. The Path to Transitional Justice

Not since the National Dialogue Conference in 2013-2014 has the notion of transitional justice in Yemen gained such traction. Leaps have been made since the concept was reintroduced at the first YIF forum in 2022. **Resistance and skepticism are now countered by a stronger determination for justice from victims and increased political engagement**. Given the cycles of violence endured by Yemenis, "has the time not come to rebuild our country?" asked Rana Ghanem, a member government's of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission and Deputy Head of the Transitional Justice and Reconciliation [Commission](#).

Seven of the forum's 29 sessions were dedicated to the topic, with much of the discussions on transitional justice more focused on the "how" rather than the "why." Among other issues participants discussed the path forward for judicial reform, examined how Yemeni customary and tribal law could support a transitional justice system, addressed inclusion mechanisms for victims in transitional justice and reconciliation processes, and explored the role of memorialization in raising public awareness of transitional justice. **Conversations this year progressed from initial explorations to laying the foundation for a Yemeni roadmap for transitional justice**. Yemenis will still need to agree on what this means in a domestic context, but significant breakthroughs were made: For the first time, prominent political leaders and parties openly discussed the path to transitional justice, and plans are being considered for training and sensitizing Yemeni judges on international laws and standards.

8. The Environmental Threat

Ranked as the sixth most vulnerable country to climate change and one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, Yemen's fraught environmental situation attracted increased attention from YIF participants. The weaponization of water, its rapid depletion, and the lack of legal enforcement could intensify a conflict in which water plays a significant role, according to local experts. With increased support, including developing Yemen's capacity to access and utilize the Green Climate Fund, viable solutions might be found. **Financial assistance could support the revival of ancient local techniques, such as rain harvesting, which have fallen out of practice.**

Environmental discussions addressed the transition to renewable energy and introduced the notion of green transitional justice. "Yemeni leaders, international actors, and organizations involved in the peace process must **consider environmental harms and seek to redress them through transitional justice mechanisms** in a manner that reflects the depth of the relationship between the land and its people," said Sarah Knuckey, director of the Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic. Discussions at the forum inspired the potential **establishment of an Environmental Watch** dedicated to documenting and monitoring environmental harms.

9. Redefining Regional Engagement

This year saw the increased presence of Gulf actors at the YIF as attendees discussed a much-needed shift to more positive regional intervention. Three core messages emerged from the discussions. First, **regional actors must support the UN-led peace process**, not as mediators but as crucial partners in Yemen's path to peace. Second, **knowledge transfer and collaboration between the GCC and Yemen** could lead to constructive outcomes, not least in energy transition and water resource management, where Gulf countries share similar challenges. Third, viewing Yemen as a potential economic partner and **moving beyond the securitized approach that has characterized the GCC's engagement** could lead to more sustainable security in the region.



The opening day of YIF III, February 16, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo

“To effectively address security issues, we must also consider social and economic factors,” said Dr. Abdulaziz Alghashian, a Saudi researcher focusing on the kingdom’s foreign policy strategies and Director of Research with ORF Middle East. Examples of opportunities for economic integration included expanding pilot projects like the Al-Mazyuna Free Zone between Oman and Yemen, encouraging dialogue between Yemeni and Gulf business leaders, and reviving targeted programs that prepare young Yemenis with the requisite skills for Gulf job markets.

10. The Road to Peace

Despite the current political climate, support for the stalled peace process was strong among regional and international actors. Yousuf al-Balushi, Chairman of the Muscat Policy Council, stated, “I don’t think we have reached a point where OSESGY’s roadmap to peace is no longer implementable; it’s still feasible.” With little appetite from the international community for a military solution to the conflict, **bringing Yemeni parties to the table to chart a path forward remains the only viable option.** Yemen experts and participants noted the dwindling support for peace in Yemen and limited progress on the current roadmap but remained steadfast in asserting that inclusive peace is the only path to a durable political settlement. **“There is no alternative to peace, and there is no alternative to peace that is not fully supported and constructed by the people of Yemen,”** said Jeanette Seppen, the Dutch Ambassador to Yemen. Emphasizing the importance of keeping dialogue alive in platforms such as the YIF, Osamah al-Rawhani, Executive Director for Policy and Partnerships at the Sana’a Center, said, “Dialogue is a bridge between Yemenis and the international community. But the constructive actions that follow this conference are more important than the sessions themselves.”