

The Impact of War on Youth Activism in Yemen



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Executive Summary

Youth form a distinct social group in Yemeni political culture. After experiencing marginalization and manipulation during the era of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the 2011 revolution gave hope for a new era of inclusion in which political parties would take Yemeni youth seriously as stakeholders and decision-makers on senior committees. Young activists were later integrated as a specific category of political actors in the National Dialogue Conference, and specific roles and quotas were defined for youth in the country's political future as part of the Conference's outcomes. However, the war that erupted following the Houthi takeover of Sana'a in 2014 erased gains made by youth during the transition period and led to divisions between youth activists inside and outside Yemen. Currently, organizations active in the human rights and humanitarian sphere, where youth have tried to play a constructive role during the war, are facing myriad challenges. Meanwhile, the scope for youth integration into political life has contracted in both government and Houthi-held parts of the country.

Despite these trying circumstances, this policy brief proposes practical measures for Yemeni youth leaders and activists to better advocate for their inclusion and priorities. Recommendations focus on:

- Enhancing cooperation between disparate youth platforms and communication between youth abroad and in Yemen;
- Increasing capacity building on skills related to political and civil society work for the youth organizations on the ground in Yemen; and
- Advocating more youth participation in platforms and institutions involved in peacebuilding work in Yemen.

Introduction

Youth played a vital role in the 2011 uprising against the government of long-serving former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, demanding their civil rights and changing their political reality. Youth articulated their demands through social media and media outlets, and as protests escalated, staged an increasing number of demonstrations and sit-ins. This street pressure led to significant political change in Yemen, including Saleh's resignation in early 2012.^[1] Many important events took place during this period within the framework of youth activism, including the emergence of new youth-led entities and coalitions^[2] such as the Coordination Council for Yemeni Revolutionary Youth and the Al-Watan (Homeland) Party.^[3] Local and international

[1] Ginny Hill, Peter Salisbury, Léonie Northedge, and Jane Kinninmont, "Yemen: Corruption, Capital Flight and Global Drivers of Conflict," Chatham House, September 2013, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/0913r_yemen_es.pdf

[2] Silvana Toska, "The rise and fall and necessity of Yemen's youth activism," Project on Middle East Democracy, January 2018, <https://pomeps.org/the-rise-and-fall-and-necessity-of-yemens-youth-movements>

[3] Atiaf Alwazir, "Yemen's enduring resistance: Youth between politics and informal mobilization," *Mediterranean Politics*, 2005, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2015.1081446

actors involved in Yemen's transition also shifted resources toward enhancing the role of youth in political life.^[4] Many young people subsequently had opportunities to build political capacity through participating in local and international conferences and seminars. In the face of this youth activism, the government and political parties found themselves forced to include youth leaders^[5] in the National Dialogue Conference of 2013-14, which sought to promote national reconciliation and chart a new course for political life in Yemen.^[6]

The worsening political crisis in 2014 and the beginning of a new war in 2015 marked a turning point for youth activism. Some young people subsequently joined armed groups, and many others left the country altogether, negatively impacting youth political participation inside Yemen. The conflict has forced new approaches to activism, including mechanisms to connect youth inside Yemen and abroad. Activists have managed to work together on advocacy campaigns that have, for example, called for an end to the war or the opening of roads to ease burdens imposed on civilians.^[7] Still, youth activism in Yemen faces several challenges, including the limited experience of young people and the dangerous security situation that makes organizing on the ground difficult.

This policy brief explores forms of youth activism that have emerged during the war in Yemen and the challenges that hinder coordination between Yemeni youth inside Yemen and abroad. It proposes measures for domestic and international stakeholders to support Yemeni youth as a socio-political component of Yemeni society with its unique characteristics and needs, particularly in civil society since they can be influential players in that less physically threatening space.

Methodology

This research relies on primary data collected from interviews and focus group discussions, as well as reports and sociological literature focused on Yemeni youth. Between December 2021 and March 2022, 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 young men and 10 young women between 18 and 40 years old, a range that roughly conforms to the sociological group referred to in Arabic as shabab (youth). The interviews were conducted in person, over the phone, or via Zoom. Participants included political and community activists, researchers, journalists, and youth active with civil society organizations. The domestic respondents came from five governorates: Taiz (six); Sana'a (four); Aden (six); Hadramawt (one); and Shabwa (one). These governorates represent the main urban areas in the north and south. These interviewees are active in peace-related activities and have influence due to their proximity to civil society organizations and decision-makers in their

^[4] Graeme Simpson, "The missing peace: independent progress study on youth and peace and security," UNFPA and UN Peacebuilding Support Office, October 5, 2018, <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/missing-peace-independent-progress-study-youth-and-peace-and-security>

^[5] Atiaf Alwazir, "Youth Inclusion in Yemen: A Necessary Element for Success of Political Transition," Arab Reform Initiative, December 2012, https://www.academia.edu/7740165/_Youth_Inclusion_in_Yemen_a_Necessary_Element_for_Success_of_political_transition

^[6] Faisal Hassan Mohammed Mahboub, "Political Empowerment of Youth in the Republic of Yemen: A Study of Legislation and Policies," Arab Council for Social Sciences.

^[7] For example, the "Enough war" hashtag campaign: #كفاية_حرب

respective areas. Interviewees abroad were based in Egypt (two), the Netherlands (one), Malaysia (one), and Canada (one). The focus group discussion, conducted via Zoom, included representatives from the following groups involved in youth initiatives and peacebuilding activities: the Youth Pact for Peace and Security; Granddaughters of Belqees; the Sameh Initiative; the Youth Mediation Support Team, the Aden Youth Consultations; the My Contribution is Development Network, and the Youth Leadership Network.

A primary constraint of this study was the security situation inside Yemen, which created difficulties in conducting in-person interviews with the respondents. When conducting interviews via Zoom, some participants expressed fear of recriminations from political parties, armed groups or governing authorities. Weak and intermittent internet access was also a complication.

Youth and Government Pre-2011

Article 24 of the Yemeni constitution stipulates that the state must ensure equal political opportunities for all citizens without discrimination. Despite that, young people in Yemen face difficulties in attaining positions of influence. Yemeni law prohibits under-40s from holding the positions of president, prime minister, or governor.^[8] Many countries have similar rules, but in Yemen, this reflects a political culture that is particularly restrictive when it comes to the segment of the population categorized as “youth”.

Youth representation in past Yemeni governments was poor. Political parties that dominated political life before 2011 were generally centered around certain personalities and their followers and did not generally involve youth in decision-making.^[9] Young people who were members of parliament or local councils achieved their positions through nepotism in most cases; children of deceased officials would follow in their fathers’ footsteps as the family representative. There is even a common saying in Yemen: “We elected him for his father.”^[10] A rare strategy focused on enhancing youth participation in political, social, and economic life, the National Strategy for Childhood and Youth, was developed in 2005 as part of a global effort to localize UN Millennium Development Goals.^[11]

[8] Faisal Hassan, “Political Empowerment of Youth in the Republic of Yemen: A Study of Legislation and Policies,” Arab Council for Social Sciences, December 2020, http://www.theacss.org/uploads/cke_documents/Final-Paper--Faisal-Mahboub-4.pdf

[9] Alaa Qassem, “Five barriers to youth engagement, decision-making, and leadership in Yemen’s political parties,” December 2013, Resonate! Yemen, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/176063/five-barriers-to-youth-engagement.pdf>

[10] Interview with youth activist Yazeed al-Jeddawi, December 21, 2021.

[11] Yazeed al-Jeddawi, “The Impact of the Yemen War on the Priorities and Needs of Youth,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, January 12, 2022, https://sanaacenter.org/files/The_Impact_of_the_Yemen_War_on_the_Priorities_and_Needs_of_Youth_en.pdf

Yemen's Golden Age of the Youth Activism

The uprising of 2011 sent ripples through the stagnant waters of Yemeni politics for many groups, including youth. Many of the young people interviewed considered the revolution the beginning of their participation in political life. The protest squares allowed the youth to discuss their political demands openly, strengthening their inclination to have a voice in future governance and decision-making.^[12] During this revolutionary period, young people were able to establish their right to political participation and gain society's admiration for their efforts in this regard.^[13] At the same time, local and international organizations and development agencies became much more open toward youth, and many young people had opportunities to participate in international conferences and political empowerment programs. Some organizations focused on youth empowerment were formed with international support such as the Yemeni Youth Parliament, backed by the US-based National Endowment for Democracy.^[14]

Although there was no specific role for young people articulated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative that negotiated Saleh's departure from power and arrangements for a political transition, it stressed the importance of youth participation in the process. The National Dialogue Conference (NDC) of 2013-14 subsequently invited young people to participate as a recognized, marginalized segment of Yemeni society. As part of the NDC outcomes, Youth won approval for an independent Higher Council for Youth that would play a role in public policy and oversight, as well as a 20 percent quota in government bodies.^[15]

War's Impact on Youth Activism

The outbreak of the war in Yemen in 2015 halted Yemen's political transition, and the NDC's outcomes, including those related to youth, were abandoned. Youth activists subsequently divided into two camps. One chose to migrate abroad, in particular young journalists, community leaders, and activists involved in political and civic activities were often forced to leave Yemen for safety reasons.^[16] These individuals have been described by the youth who remained in Yemen as 'the elites they lost.' Indeed, their migration outside of Yemen led to a decrease in the number of qualified youth activists on the ground.^[17] The second camp consisted of the youth who remained in Yemen. Some refocused their work on civic and humanitarian activities, finding it safer for themselves and their families. Others headed to the frontlines due to various motivations, including political and ideological affiliations

^[12] Focus group discussion, December 22, 2022.

^[13] Ibid; Silvana Toska, "The rise and fall and necessity of Yemen's youth activism," Project on Middle East Democracy, January 2018, <https://pomeps.org/the-rise-and-fall-and-necessity-of-yemens-youth-movements>

^[14] "Yemeni Youth Parliament elects a president and two deputies to develop youth political participation [AR]," Marib Press, January 26, 2010, <https://marebpress.org/nprint.php?lng=arabic&sid=21871>

^[15] "Constitutional Guidelines on Youth in Yemen as per NDC Outcomes Document," Women and Youth Forum, 2014, https://osesgyunmissions.org/sites/default/files/4-youth_constituional_guidlines_en.pdf

^[16] Ibid.

^[17] interview with youth activist Ola al-Saqqaf, December 19, 2021.

and economic and material conditions.^[18] Unfortunately, this division led to a decline in youth political participation and the disappearance of many youth groups, founded during the revolutionary period, that were known for their independent work and engagement with local communities.

Crackdowns on Youth Groups

Yemeni youth, both inside Yemen and abroad, face several challenges in actively participating in community and political activities. Inside Yemen, youth cite systemic exclusionary policies enacted by warring parties.^[19] Some are afraid and hesitant to participate in political activities due to insecurity. In northern areas, youth face threats from Houthi security services. In Taiz, youth activists have faced accusations of treason by both government and Houthi authorities, adding to their reluctance to participate in political activities. Youth working in civil society organizations in particular have faced harassment and threats by security agencies across the country. Some groups have even been pressured to change their organization's name if it hints at work on peacebuilding or political participation. This overall insecurity has negatively impacted freedom of expression and the political participation of youth.^[20]

Yemeni youth abroad face other challenges related to political participation. Some have attempted to establish groups to resume youth activism, but these groups have at times been threatened or faced targeted smear campaigns.^[21] Cliques have also become more widespread within youth groups^[22] – opportunities for youth to participate in workshops and conferences are often limited to the same individuals while others are marginalized.^[23] Meanwhile, youth abroad who have a history of political activism also fear being harassed, interrogated, detained, or even killed if they return to Yemen.

Restricted Space for Political Participation

During the war, Yemen has suffered from a decline in political and party activities. Violations of the right to freedom of expression and political participation are visible in the widespread repression of young journalists and activists, the shuttering of public places in Sana'a, and efforts to prevent youth mobilization.

Youth generally expressed feeling neglected in the ongoing peace process and that their voices were not included in the negotiations by the warring parties. There is also a lack of funding for political and civic activities in Yemen, which has led some youth groups to shift to relief or humanitarian activities. Meanwhile, youth

^[18] Ibid; Focus group discussion, December 22, 2022.

^[19] Interviews with youth activists, 2021-2022.

^[20] Interview with youth activist Abdullah al-Kharaz, December 18, 2022.

^[21] Noha Aboueldahab, "Reclaiming Yemen: The role of the Yemeni professional diaspora," The Brookings Institution, April 24, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/reclaiming-yemen-the-role-of-the-yemeni-professional-diaspora/>

^[22] Interview with youth activist Saif al-Hadi, February 13, 2022.

^[23] Interview with youth activist Rasha Kafi, March 1, 2022.

abroad have been more present at international conferences and meetings with world leaders to discuss the situation and needs in Yemen. This has allowed them to present a clear picture of critical social and economic issues in Yemen to the international community and lead advocacy campaigns.^[24]

A Shift Online

Despite the marginalization and oppression that Yemeni youth and youth groups have faced, there are still efforts to continue youth activism.

Young people cite the internet as a crucial medium for communication and mobilization on political and social issues after Houthi security agencies in Sana'a closed public spaces and clamped down on public gatherings in 2015. The internet also allows Yemeni youth inside and outside of Yemen to connect with each other. Prominent online initiatives launched by Yemeni youth include the Shabab House Platform^[25] and the Kefaya War campaign.^[26]

Civil society organizations have also employed online platforms to coordinate with youth abroad and launch advocacy campaigns through their online platforms.^[27] The Internet also provides youth opportunities to develop skills through virtual trainings held by civil society organizations. Virtual forums have also allowed young people from a variety of backgrounds and locations to connect with international stakeholders on Yemen, as happened in December 2021 when UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths met with Yemeni youth to discuss strategies to promote their inclusion in the peace process.^[28]

Local Mediation and Peacebuilding

Youth believe that the war, and its resulting challenges, has made their role in mediation, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution more crucial. As a result, youth have coordinated joint initiatives that bring together youth both inside and outside Yemen. An example of such an initiative was the Jaish Shanab initiative, which aimed to provide assistance to the families who had been affected by the armed clashes between supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and Houthi forces in Sana'a in 2017.^[29]

Over the past three years, youth organizations have tried to resume activities in youth projects focused on political empowerment and peacebuilding. These projects have led to the formation of new youth groups that could help resume activities in

^[24] Ibid; Noha Aboueldahab, "Reclaiming Yemen: The role of the Yemeni professional diaspora," The Brookings Institution, April 26, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/reclaiming-yemen-the-role-of-the-yemeni-professional-diaspora/>

^[25] Hadil al-Mowafak, "Yemeni Youth are Ready for a Ceasefire, But Struggling to Find a Role," Yemen Policy Center, January 2022, <https://www.yemenpolicy.org/yemeni-youth-are-ready-for-a-ceasefire-but-struggling-to-find-a-role/>

^[26] Interview with youth activist Afraa al-Habouri, February 13, 2022.

^[27] Interview with a youth activist based in Sana'a, February 12, 2022.

^[28] "At the Conclusion of the 2021 Yemen Youth Conference, Yemen's Young Men and Women Say They Must be Included in Decision-Making," Youth Leadership Development Foundation, December 18, 2021, <https://www.yldf.org/news.php?id=5>

^[29] "Jaish Shanab is a Facebook group that conducts humanitarian initiatives [AR]," Al-Mushahid, December 1, 2020, <https://almushahid.net/68185/>

youth activism, with some of them bringing together youth from inside Yemen and abroad, such as the Youth Mediation Support Team (YMST). The YMST works on local mediation and community conflict resolution with support from local and international organizations. However, capacity-building support for youth seeking to participate in such efforts has been weak, hindering youth activism and its ability to make tangible achievements in peacebuilding and local mediation.

Coordination Challenges for Youth Inside and Outside Yemen

Despite these attempts by youth to restart their political activities, they are still dealing with barriers to communication and organization, and fragmentation between the priorities of youth inside Yemen and those abroad.

Communications Gaps

The communication gap between youth inside Yemen and those abroad is caused by two main factors. The first is the fragile internet service infrastructure in Yemen, making it difficult for youth to conduct virtual meetings, which have become almost the only method for them to meet due to the repression of youth gatherings. The restriction of the freedom to travel to and from Yemen, especially for women, also factors into this communication gap.^[30]

Interviewees said another reason for the communication gap is a lack of confidence. In addition, some youth inside Yemen tend to view those abroad negatively for having left them under challenging conditions for an 'easier' life abroad.^[31] Meanwhile, youth abroad can find it difficult to gain the trust of those on the inside, especially when giving opinions or outlining approaches that seem to have been learned while living or studying abroad.^[32]

In addition, security concerns are constant. Due to the potential risks, some might suspect certain youth have political biases or other motivations. This can make some youth hesitant to express opinions with those they do not know well out of concern for their safety and the safety of their families, a reality that applies to those both inside and outside Yemen.^[33]

These resentments and suspicions could have a negative impact on the ability of young people to create a unified entity to represent them.^[34] There should be steps taken to overcome this mistrust and support communication between youth inside and outside Yemen so that they can achieve their joint aspirations and promote a collective vision for the future.

^[30] "Ansar Allah (Houthi) Group Practices Gravely Undermine Women's Rights," Mwatana for Human Rights, March 8, 2022, <https://www.mwatana.org/posts-en/undermine-women>

^[31] Interviews with youth activists, 2022.

^[32] Ibid.

^[33] Ibid.

^[34] Ibid.

Lack of a Shared Vision

Youth, both in Yemen and abroad, suffer from a lack of a unified vision that addresses both shared and more narrowly focused priorities. This is partly due to the difference in their present living conditions and political context.^[35] For example, youth in Sana'a seem to prioritize freedom of expression as it has been increasingly repressed by Houthi authorities. Youth in Aden focus on security after years of violent conflict, assassinations, and crime plaguing the city. Youth in Taiz stress the importance of opening roads to facilitate their education and travel to meetings inside and outside Yemen.^[36] Meanwhile, youth outside Yemen are often perceived domestically, fairly or unfairly, as being driven more by political and party affiliation.^[37] Despite the attempts of some civil society organizations to bring people inside and outside Yemen together under one umbrella such as the Youth Support Group, which brought together several youth coalitions with the goal of unifying efforts related to peacebuilding activities,^[38] problems of political control by some groups and fears for personal security as a result have a way of spoiling the initiatives.^[39]

Idealistic Thinking

The view that the international community has of Yemeni youth is, from the point of view of the youth themselves, romantic and unrealistic. The significant challenges that youth face in light of the war, repression, violence, and barriers to travel are ignored. Sufficient support and protection for youth to exercise their political rights are not provided.^[40]

Young people contacted during this research expressed discontent with the projects provided by the international community over the past few years. These projects were described generally as fragmented and unorganized efforts. Some youth entities were marginalized immediately upon projects ending, leading to competition and division among entities and programs.^[41] Therefore, the international community should devote more support and financing to youth projects and ensure that they are organized and effective and help support young people's capacity to participate effectively in social and political life.

Attempts to Organize Youth Activism Inside and Outside Yemen

After the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2250 on youth, peace, and security in 2015, attention to organizing and coordinating youth activism inside and outside Yemen increased. Several youth coalitions were formed by local and international civil society organizations, as well as by groups that the youth themselves formed. Despite this, these groups face a problem in reaching the international community and getting opportunities to participate in the ongoing peacebuilding process.

^[35] Interview with Waleed Abdulhafidh, an expert on the youth, peace, and security peacebuilding agenda, December 25, 2021.

^[36] Ibid.

^[37] Interview with youth activist Issam al-Shamiri, February 13, 2022.

^[38] Ibid; Interview with youth activist Yazeed al-Jeddawi, December 21, 2021.

^[39] Interview with a youth activist, December 25, 2021.

^[40] Ibid; Interview with youth activist Yazeed al-Jeddawi, December 21, 2021.

^[41] Ibid; Interview with youth activist Ameen Muhammad, December 21, 2022.

The Youth Pact for Peace and Security, an initiative bringing together 30 young men and women by UN Women and the UNPF, is one of these groups.^[42] Despite the inclusion of youth inside and outside Yemen, coordination among them faces many challenges that hinder meetings and workshops. Members of the Pact have not been able to have an in-person meeting that brings together those inside and outside Yemen since its formation in 2020. Relying on virtual meetings causes inherent challenges to strengthening relationships, reaching a convergence of views, and exchanging experiences, especially given the poor internet service for those inside Yemen.

Members of the Pact have also expressed disappointment with the role played by local and international civil society organizations and development agencies. They say these organizations have not provided real backing for youth participation in peacebuilding and have limited their interventions to theorizing about youth's role without supporting practical steps.

Recommendations

1. For promoting cooperation between youth platforms:

- Identify Yemeni youth platforms and communicate with them to identify priorities and needs.
- Organize workshops and meetings for the youth platforms to exchange expertise and knowledge, and facilitate dialogue to help build unified positions.
- Establish a joint digital platform to facilitate communication and information exchange between the youth platforms.

2. For promoting communication between youth groups inside and outside Yemen:

- Establish communication networks and platforms for youth groups in different countries.
- Provide training and technical support for youth groups to create partnerships and improve international communication;
- Encourage youth groups to participate in international conferences and events to exchange knowledge and experience.

3. For building the capacity of the current youth groups:

- Evaluate the needs of current youth groups and identify the areas that need capacity development.
- Provide training and specialized workshops to improve the technical and leadership abilities of the youth.
- Provide financial support for youth projects and innovative initiatives. Roza

^[42] "A New Youth, Peace & Security Pact for Yemen," UN Population Fund, November 4, 2020, <https://yemen.unfpa.org/en/news/new-youth-peace-security-pact-yemen>

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- This policy brief was produced as part of the Yemen Peace Forum, a Sana'a Center initiative that seeks to empower the next generation of Yemeni youth and civil society activists to engage in critical national issues.
- Supporting communication between youth groups and international institutions and networks to promote an exchange of expertise.

4. For promoting the inclusion of youth in peacebuilding:

- Conduct studies and further research to better understand the challenges of youth political participation;
- Consult youth on how to design new policies and mechanisms that promote their inclusion in peacebuilding.
- Developing mechanisms such as youth councils or units in government entities that bring youth close to decision-making processes.
- Provide resources, track implementation, and evaluate efforts to amplify youth voices and their role in peacebuilding.

5. For activating the role of youth abroad:

- Arrange virtual meetings and workshops for youth political party members in Yemen and abroad to communicate and exchange ideas and expertise.
- Provide opportunities for Yemeni expats to participate in activities related to Yemen in the countries they live in as well as online forums to strengthen the relationship between them and political parties in Yemen.

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