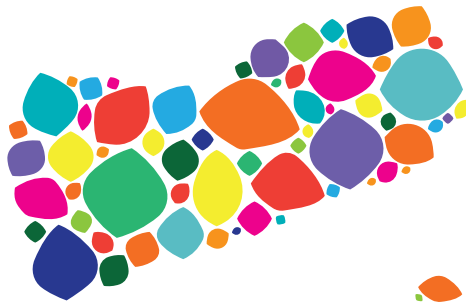




The Impact of the Yemen War on the Priorities and Needs of Youth

By Yazeed al-Jeddawy



منتدى سلام اليمن
YEMEN PEACE FORUM

The Impact of the Yemen War on the Priorities and Needs of Youth

By Yazeed al-Jeddawy

January 12, 2022

Cover Photo : A young man looks out at Cairo Citadel in Taiz city, where a Yemeni flag is seen over the war-wrecked historic site on July 18, 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.



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	5
Methodology	7
Limitations and Challenges	8
Part One: The Rising Political Influence of Young People in Yemen.....	9
Causes of the 2011 Uprising	11
Youth Participation in the 2011 Uprising: Gains and Setbacks.....	11
Political Elites Strike Back	13
Growing Fragmentation Among Youth Movements.....	15
The UN Seeks to Empower Youth Movements	17
The Participation of Youth in the National Dialogue	18
Part Two: War Eclipses the Youth Agenda.....	22
Mental Health Frays	22
Social Fabric Tears.....	25
Coping with a Long War.....	26
Young People's Political Involvement Declines	28
UN Attempts to Revitalize Youth Participation	30
Conclusion	32
Recommendations.....	33



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much has changed for Yemen's youth since they played such a decisive role in the overthrow of the country's authoritarian president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, back in 2012.

In a country where around 75 percent of the 30 million-strong population are under the age of 30, many of those youth had hoped that Saleh's overthrow would mean they were only steps away from realizing a peaceful transition to a new Yemen.

Yet today, after years of war, the economic, political and social consequences of the conflict have forced a shift in the needs and priorities of the country's youth. Indeed, the majority of them now live in a 'new Yemen' different from the one they had strived for. Now, they exist in a fragmented country with a collapsed economy, its social cohesion torn apart and narrow ways forward – often to the battlefield and suffering.

This report is the result of a qualitative study that explores how the ongoing war in Yemen has impacted the needs and priorities of the country's youth, compared to their situation prior to the eruption of the conflict. It draws on focus group discussions, 18 in-depth interviews conducted with young Yemeni researchers, activists, NGO and INGO staffers, active members of youth-led peace-building coalitions and youth groups from marginalized communities.

The report finds that Yemeni youths' most urgent priorities and most pressing needs now center around:

- Economic recovery
- A growing mental health crisis
- Ensuring the protection of young men and women
- Preventing continued damage to the education system due to its politicization and weaponization
- Healing eroded social cohesion and the deterioration of the social fabric.

The following recommendations for action are offered to the United Nations, international NGOs, development organizations and the international community:

- Support regular, youth-focused human rights reporting at all levels, inclusive of all forms of gender-based violence.
- Establish an impartial, overseas-based digital space to document and highlight rights violations and abuses.
- Support regular conferences, collaborations and partnerships between youth coalitions, movements and peace organizations, and local and international human rights actors.
- Build the capacity of local human rights actors in Yemen.
- Support programs for raising awareness around and destigmatizing mental health issues among the Yemeni population. Support more training for counselors, psychologists, teachers and community leaders.
- Increase support for programs that provide youth-focused economic and social development opportunities.
- Increase education-specific donor support and establish new partnerships and exchange programs between Yemeni and international universities.
- Commission an independent report examining the extent that conflict actors in Yemen politicize or exploit educational settings.
- Support capacity-building in Yemeni youths' political engagement, public policy decision-making, and peacebuilding activities, and ensure their meaningful participation in all tracks of the peace process.
- Facilitate youth, peace and security coalitions and platforms to engage youth – particularly those from excluded communities and rural areas – in program design.
- Increase funds for sport and cultural activities.



METHODOLOGY

This report aims to understand how the ongoing war has impacted and changed the priorities and needs of Yemeni youth since March 2015. It also explores whether or not today's young men and women are still clinging to the aspirations, visions and priorities that came to life during the 2011 youth-led uprising and the post-Saleh regime transition process.

To reach that understanding, the report has benefitted from the growing momentum the youth, peace and security (YPS) agenda has had among young Yemeni peace-builders, and youth-led/youth-focused peace coalitions, groups, initiatives and organizations. It has also benefited from these entities' continuous demands for the inclusion of youth in the peace process and in all levels of decision-making.

The report also uses the pillars of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 (participation, protection, prevention, partnership, and disengagement and reintegration) to guide Yemeni youth in expressing their most urgent priorities and pressing needs, after seven years of brutal armed conflict.

The report also combines a review of existing literature and qualitative data collection methods. These methods include, but are not limited to, in-depth and key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs).

Data collection took place between June and September 2021. Eighteen in-depth and key informant interviews were conducted with nine young men and nine young women between 18 and 35 years old. The interviews were conducted in person, by phone or via Zoom. Participants included youth working with local youth-led peacebuilding organizations, humanitarian NGOs and youth-led community service initiatives, as well as researchers, activists, youth from marginalized communities, youth from rural contexts, former combatants, youth in diaspora, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and members of youth peace coalitions.

Among respondents, there were some who had previously conducted research studies on youth, briefed the United Nations Security on the situation of youth in Yemen or been engaged in local mediation efforts.

The 18 respondents were from eight governorates: Aden, Sana'a, Taiz, Lahj, Ibb, Abyan, Hudaydah and Hadramawt. The aforementioned governorates include Houthi movement-controlled areas, areas under the control of the internationally recognized government and areas under the control of the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The selection of participants from various areas informed the analysis of this report on how the war has impacted the lives of young men and women in different parts of the country.

In addition to KIIs, two FGDs were conducted in Aden and Mukalla, Hadramawt. These included young men and women leaders participating in the Friedrich Ebert-funded Yemeni Young Leaders Network program (Aden), and in the Sana'a Center's Yemen Peace Forum program (Mukalla). Each of the FGDs included 12 gender-mixed participants, including youth journalists, artists, leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs), writers, social media influencers, peacebuilders, UN volunteers, youth from minorities and marginalized groups, and INGO and NGO workers.

Limitations and Challenges

A major limitation to this study is the security situation in Yemen, which played a factor in how some KIIs responded to the invitation to take part in the study. Some of the participants agreed to take part only on the condition of anonymity. Others who were originally included in the initially-planned KIIs list felt hesitant and asked to be excused. These cases all came from persons living in Houthi-held areas. No FGDs were conducted in Houthi-held areas.

Another challenge faced was the unreliable electricity situation in Aden, where the author is based. Long power outages occurred every day between June and September 2021, heavily affecting every aspect of life for people living in the city and a primary factor in sparking popular protests there in September. This was a challenge also faced by some of the participants. In addition, mobile networks in Aden were often unoperational and presented a challenge when conducting interviews.

PART ONE: THE RISING POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN YEMEN

In the years before the uprising of 2011, the political, social and economic situation in the country was already bleak.^[1] Yemen was the poorest Arab state and one of the least developed countries in the world. The UN's National Millennium Development Goals Report for 2010^[2] predicted the country would be unlikely to achieve many of its targets, such as reducing extreme poverty and hunger by half. The report cited the state's failure to provide for its 23 million citizens.

Most of those citizens were young. In 2010, 75 percent of the population was under 30, making it one of the youngest countries in the world. Analysts often regarded this as a problem rather than an opportunity — more a demographic time bomb than a potential demographic dividend.^[3] The Yemeni government sought the help of donors to reduce the fertility rate, as figures from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) office in Sana'a in 2008 predicted a population of 60 million – three times the level at the time – by 2050, calling the projected growth alarming and saying it posed major development challenges.^[4]

While young people in themselves were not a threat to Yemen's stability, their situation was nonetheless grave.^[5] They faced endemic corruption, dwindling resources, very high unemployment, poverty, political divisions, and recurrent (and likely contrived)^[6] conflicts. The political elite in Sana'a, led by President Saleh, was playing a Yemeni Game of Thrones rather than addressing these fears and grievances.^[7]

[1] Christopher Boucek, "Carnegie Papers: Yemen: Avoiding a Downward Spiral," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2009, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_downward_spiral.pdf

[2] "Yemen Report 2010: Millennium Development Goals," UNDP and Republic of Yemen Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2D11821049E382E48525782200637A8C-Full_Report.pdf

[3] Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Yemen faces population explosion 'time bomb,'" The National, January 23, 2010 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/yemen-faces-population-explosion-time-bomb-1.510447>

[4] "Government planning to curb population growth," New Humanitarian, July 14, 2008, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2008/07/14/government-planning-curb-population-growth>

[5] Ragui Assad et al. "Youth exclusion in Yemen: Tackling the Twin Deficits of Human Development and Natural Resources," Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper 9, November 30, 2009.

[6] Elisabeth Kendall, "Making Sense of the Yemen War," Engelsberg Ideas, July 7, 2020, <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/making-sense-of-the-yemen-war/>

[7] Gerald M. Feierstein, "Yemen: The 60-Year War," Middle East Institute, February 2019, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2019-05/Yemen_The_60_Year_War.pdf

Indeed, the Yemeni state's approach to youth has been inadequate and short-sighted for decades. The word 'youth' was only mentioned once in the Yemeni constitution, while the governments of Abdul Qadir Bajamal (2001-2006) and Ali Mohammed Mujawar (2006-2011) set almost no youth-specific policies.

One exception was the 2005 National Strategy for Children and Youth, set to run from 2006 to 2015, that was largely drawn up as part of global efforts to localize UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This contained 12 policy areas, four of which were aimed at youth and the rest at children.

As a 2013 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Yemen and Yemeni Youth Observatory assessment of the strategy noted, it did have some positive elements to it. The strategy took into account the risks and opportunities faced by children and youth over their whole life cycle, while also giving a welcome focus to the protection of youth and children. The assessment also identified weaknesses, concluding that the role of youth in the development of the strategy was very minimal – largely limited to taking part in an advisory committee – while it was also not based on a national vision or national commitment and understanding of the needs and priorities of youth and children.^[8] A young man interviewed for this report also suggested that the strategy's definition of 'youth' as young men between the ages of 15 and 24 was also deeply flawed.

The 2013 assessment concluded that government policies related to youth had not done enough to realize their untapped potential and had continuously neglected the needs and priorities of young people. There had been "a number of deficiencies and imbalances in the way the youth and their causes are addressed throughout past years, which has resulted in the aggravation of youth problems." Amongst these problems were a number of negative social norms and traditions that made adopting a national, youth-specific strategy a must. These include chewing qat, vendettas, arms proliferation, early marriage, the weakness of the education system, political polarization and exploitation.^[9]

[8] UNDP & Yemeni Youth Observatory. "Primary Proposal for youth related policies," June 19, 2013, https://www.ye.undp.org/content/yemen/en/home/library/democratic_governance/primary-proposal-for-related-youth-policies/

[9] Mohammed al-Najar, "The Laws and Policies for Empowering Youth in Yemen [AR]," June 4, 2010, <http://www.felixnews.com/news-5052.html>

Causes of the 2011 Uprising

In 2011, hundreds of thousands of Yemenis protested for months against then-President Saleh, who had been in power for over 30 years. In interviews, our respondents considered the underlying causes behind that uprising. They brought up an entrenched patronage system, social inequalities, social exclusion, and a lack of official vision or interest in empowering young people economically and politically.

A young woman from Aden, who is active in several youth peacebuilding coalitions and forums, said, “Young men and women in Yemen were cornered with no light at the end of the tunnel. There were no jobs for people who had graduated from university several years earlier, insufficient educational opportunities and no prospects for growth, as all opportunities went to those in power.”

Another respondent, a young woman peacebuilder from Ibb, thought that young people wanted to end the “prevailing economic misery” and nepotism that made “young people feel insecure about their future”. Other interviewees said the government should have addressed specific problems in specific geographical areas, especially rural regions. A few said that the momentum of the wave of uprisings widely referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’ offered opposition parties the opportunity to end years of political impasse with the ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC).

Youth Participation in the 2011 Uprising: Gains and Setbacks

When masses of Yemeni youth took to the streets in February 2011, young people’s initial demands were democratic and economic reforms, human rights and good governance.^[10] Young people, university students and recent graduates with no political affiliation^[11] were also driven by their desire for an inclusive civic state, promoting equality. Local and international commentators praised the young people as “champions of transformative change”^[12] on account of their bravery and the peaceful nature of the protests, despite the participation of tribesmen from heavily armed regions of Yemen.

[10] Silvana Toska, “The rise and fall and necessity of Yemen’s youth movements,” Project on Middle East Political Science, January 2018, <https://pomeps.org/the-rise-and-fall-and-necessity-of-yemens-youth-movements>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Youth Observatory Project Document, UNDP Yemen, June 2011, <https://info.undp.org/docs/pdc/Documents/YEM/Youth%20Observatory%20Project%20Document%20Yemen.pdf>

In the first two months of the uprising, young people took advantage of the fact that many factions were living together in an encampment in a space in Sana'a dubbed Change Square. They found opportunities to engage with political actors and communicate their wish to break their long exclusion from political participation. They formed coalitions, movements and forums, including the Coordination Council for Yemeni Revolution Youth (CCYRC), called a "stunning achievement" by Silvana Toskana, Assistant Professor at Davidson College.^[13] The CCYRC was able to play a mediating role between the various youth groups that had formed in protest squares nationwide. It tried to bring those different groups into agreement on a list of 13 demands regarding the nature of a future peaceful transition,^[14] including equal citizenship, a restructuring of the military within a unified and transparent structure, and independence of the judiciary.

Meeting people such as intellectuals, journalists, politicians, artists and academics encouraged young people not only to think about political change but also change in Yemen's political, cultural and social landscapes.^[15] With newfound resilience and confidence, they introduced their redefined priorities. They found meaningful participation and genuine partnership with traditional and progressive political leaders, while also finding that these conditions were a prerequisite for bringing about the change they were striving for. Point five of the 13-point action plan identified a key role for youth, stating that a "Transitional National Board be formed and include representatives of the youth and all political and national powers."^[16]

With the uprising lasting almost a year, revolutionary youth groups were able to develop capacity and empower themselves with the tools they needed to cope with the multiple challenges they faced. Yet, the length of the uprising also gave traditional political parties time to penetrate youth groups and co-opt their leaders and members.^[17]

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

[14] Atiaf al-Wazir, "Yemen's enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization," Mediterranean Politics, October 13, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081446?needAccess=true>

[15] Atiaf al-Wazir, "The Square of Change in Sana'a: An Incubator for Reform," Arab Reform Initiative, April 2011, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/the-square-of-change-in-sanaa-an-incubator-for-reform/>

[16] Sheila Carapico, "Counter-proposal from Yemen's revolutionary youth," Jadaliyya, 26 May, 2011, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1689/counter-proposal>

[17] Maged al-Madhaji, "The Youth Revolution: From the First Marching Protest to the (GCC) Initiative [AR]," The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Al-Masdar Online, June 11, 2012, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/78575>

The more than 70 active youth groups in Change Square also failed to unite under one leadership and political ideology, and thus became fragmented.^[18] On many occasions, for example, prominent independent youth would leave Change Square in protest of the influence Islah party affiliates had on decisions made there. As researcher Nadia al-Saqqaf explained, “The problem for Yemen’s youth is that they had never exercised democracy in any true organizational sense before now. Except for a few activists, who are still divided among themselves on ideological and intellectual levels, the rest of the revolution’s youth have no idea how to organize themselves.”^[19]

To continue protesting for long periods also required logistical, organizational and financial capabilities independent youth lacked, but established political groupings could provide. Food, drink, materials for banners and publicity, and all the other tools necessary to keep Change Square going, depended heavily on support channeled through the established political actors – and especially those tied to Islah.

These factors would ultimately enable the established opposition parties to steer the uprising to their advantage.

Political Elites Strike Back

On March 18, 2011, tens of thousands of demonstrators held a rally in Change Square that they called the ‘Friday of Dignity’. As they finished the Friday prayer, men in military uniforms opened fire and killed at least 45 protesters.^[20] In the aftermath of the massacre, with the nascent youth movements demoralized, the established opposition group known as the Joint Meetings Parties (JMP) was able to take the lead in the revolutionary movement. It became the main decision maker in and out of the revolutionary encampments around the country and formed a council called the Revolutionary Committee, which benefited from the parties’ existing organizational and material resources.

[18] Nadia al-Saqqaf, “The Politicization of Yemen’s Youth Revolution,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 27, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/43735>

[19] Ibid.

[20] “Yemen’s Failed Response to the ‘Friday of Dignity’ Killings,” Human Rights Watch, February 12, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/12/unpunished-massacre/yemens-failed-response-friday-dignity-killings>

The massacre also saw General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Saleh's long closest and (arguably) most powerful ally, join the revolutionaries. This triggered the defection of hundreds of Saleh's military and government officials, further consolidating the influence of established political actors – especially the Islamist Islah party – within the revolutionary camp. The event created a new dynamic in which “the most powerful supporters of the democracy movement are veteran regime insiders.”^[21]

The JMP — the traditional political elites — thus became regionally and internationally recognized and called on to negotiate with Saleh on a political transition, rather than the independent youth. These negotiations resulted in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative in November 2011 that stipulated Saleh's stepping down in return for immunity. This agreement was widely felt to have excluded youth movements, with some young people sometimes referring to a “hijacked revolution.”^[22]

Many of the research respondents in both of the FGDs and KIs felt that aside from the power transfer from Saleh to his handpicked vice president, Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the signing of the GCC initiative led to a containment of the protests and a diversion from the original demand for ousting the political regime.^[23] They also saw the initiative as catalyzing the fragmentation of a once-unified public front that aspired to create a new Yemen into smaller groups with competing goals.^[24]

Respondents also felt young people were instrumentalized and exploited by political actors who had failed over decades to force Saleh to make political and economic reforms. Many of our interviewees and participants at the Mukalla FGD said many of the young leaders of the 2011 uprising now had political affiliation after being co-opted into political parties. Today, unaffiliated youth have minimal political influence. The interests of the political parties have been prioritized even if they had come at the expense of the goals that independent youth across the country had for the uprising. Some interviewees said that independent youth were initially shortsighted, politically

[21] Tobias Thiel, “After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: Yemen's Arab Spring: from youth revolution to fragile political transition,” LSE IDEAS, May 2012, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43465/1/After%20the%20Arab%20Spring_Yemen's%20Arab%20Spring%20Is%20a%20Revolution.pdf

[22] Letta Tayler, “Yemen's Hijacked Revolution,” Foreign Affairs, September 26, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2011-09-26/yemens-hijacked-revolution?page=2>

[23] Maged al-Madhaji, “How Yemen's Post-2011 Transitional Phase Ended in War,” Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, May 19, 2016, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/39>

[24] Atiaf al-Wazir, “Yemen's enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization,” Mediterranean Politics, October 13, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081446?needAccess=true>

inexperienced and did not realize that the rise of JMP-aligned groups would result in the hijacking of the revolution by the entrenched political elites.

Despite this, our respondents thought that young people in 2011 had made progress in achieving political change and transformed their own political agency. In the discussion in Mukalla, participants said young people had seen a growth in political empowerment, and gained greater understanding of the conflicting dynamics. They thought young people had formed a new identity as key actors and partners in the political and socio-economic spheres. One participant said, “What young men and women did in 2011 broke the walls of silence, and they had their voices heard. They convinced the world that the failures in Yemen were the result of the greed and incompetence of the political leaders, and proved Yemen can be a better country, if youth are taken as partners.”

Growing Fragmentation Among Youth Movements

A year after the signing of the GCC initiative in November 2011, fragmentation among the revolutionaries continued, in part catalyzed by the United Nation’s growing involvement in negotiating the political transition.

The GCC initiative, backed by the UN, divided the revolutionaries into two camps. The first included many independents, as well as the Houthi movement and the southern separatist Hirak movement. This camp rejected the plan and disapproved of the negotiations. The second camp was predominantly JMP-affiliated, and participated in the negotiations.^[25]

The first group’s rejection of the GCC initiative was driven by the belief that the plan and its implementation mechanism did not address the root causes of the long-standing grievances that drove public outrage. As academic Ibrahim Fraihat noted, “It opted for regime innovation — rather than regime change — which carried seeds of future instability.”^[26] The initiative was described by some young leaders as “the Gulf conspiracy (against the revolution)” and viewed as a “manipulative process” to retain power within the hands of the traditional political elites.^[27]

[25] Maged al-Madhaji, “How Yemen’s Post-2011 Transitional Phase Ended in War,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, May 19, 2016, <https://sana'acenter.org/publications/main-publications/39>

Letta Tayler, “Yemen’s Hijacked Revolution,” Foreign Affairs, September 26, 2011, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/78575>

[26] Ibrahim Fraihat, *Unfinished Revolutions*, (Yale, Yale University Press, April 19, 2016).

[27] “Youth of the Revolution in Yemen: Revolutions do not Succeed with Innovations [AR],” DW, December 2, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/v44ykbva>

This group vowed to continue their protests in the streets. These youth in particular saw themselves as “a third force to the old regime” independent of both established ruling and opposition forces, and guardians of the revolution.^[28] Like the Houthi and Hirak movements, they felt they were seen as outsiders or irrelevant to the political process.^[29] But despite this group’s adamant rejection of the GCC plan, the second group, preferring the political process in Riyadh to non-violent revolutionary escalation, prevailed.

Still, some independent youth groups continued to be proactive in discussions about the future of young people’s role in Yemen after the revolution. They realized there was a great need for organization, political knowledge and understanding, and for formal recognition from internal and external actors, without which they would lose their ‘fight for visibility’.^[30] Such aspirations, coupled with a desire to transform the entrenched political system,^[31] prompted youth groups and movements to take concrete steps to establish the first ever youth-led political party, Al-Watan (the Homeland), in 2011.^[32] Others formed NGOs or civil society organizations aimed at advocating reform in the country.^[33] A study carried out by the World Bank found that, between 2010 and end of 2012, the number of registered civil society and similar organizations increased by 33 percent, with much of that mobilization attributed to the post-2010 political upheaval.^[34]

[28] Saleem Haddad and Joshua Rogers, “Moving beyond promises: perceptions, priorities, and participation of youth in Yemen’s transition,” Saferworld, September 2012, https://www.academia.edu/11077395/Moving_Beyond_Promises_Perceptions_priorities_and_participation_of_youth_in_Yemen_s_transition

[29] Mareike Transfeld, “Political bargaining and violent conflict: shifting elite alliances as the decisive factor in Yemen’s transformation,” *Mediterranean Politics*, October 7, 2015. pp. 150-169. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081454?needAccess=true>

[30] Nadia al-Sakkaf, “The Politicization of Yemen’s Youth Revolution,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 27, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/43735>

[31] Hadil al-Mowafak, “Yemen’s Political Activists Find New Spaces for Mobilization,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, March 29, 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/yemens-political-activists-find-new-spaces-mobilization-29776#n1>

[32] Atiaf al-Wazir, “Yemen’s enduring resistance: youth between politics and informal mobilization,” *Mediterranean Politics*, October 13, 2015, pp. 170-191, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2015.1081446?needAccess=true>

[33] Author’s interview with Lubna Al-Qadasi, a human rights defender and member of the Women Pact, August 2021.

[34] “Yemen Civil Society Organizations in Transition: A Mapping and Capacity Assessment of Development-Oriented Civil Society Organizations in Five Governorates,” World Bank Report, 2013, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/16638/810950WPoENGLIoBox0379828BooPUBLIcO.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

The UN Seeks to Empower Youth Movements

While youth movements felt excluded from the initial GCC initiative negotiations, the UN to some extent buoyed up young people's hopes for democratic change. In recognition of young people's struggle to begin a true transformation in Yemen, the UN later urged the parties to "think beyond the GCC initiative's basic terms," according to a 2018, UN University study,^[35] and find a role for youth, women, civil society and others during the transitional process.

The visits of the UN special envoy, Jamal Benomar, to Yemen did lead to the development of a more inclusive implementation plan for the GCC initiative, with this eventually signed up to by Yemeni political parties in November 2011. Benomar also said young people's aspirations should be expressed by the youth themselves and had meetings at Change Square with representatives of youth groups, giving them reassuring messages.

Benomar also sought to convince young people and others excluded from the GCC negotiations that they would still be able to influence the outcomes of the initiative by participating in the proposed national dialogue outlined in the implementation plan. This dialogue then took place between March 2013 and January 2014.^[36] This was a new approach and aimed to avert what Sheila Carapico and Stacey Philbrick Yadav described as the GCC's goal of "repackaging of the ancien regime".^[37]

Benomar was strongly supported by the UN Security Council (UNSC). UNSC Resolutions 2014 and 2051 in November 2011 and June 2012, respectively, sought to overcome barriers to young people's participation and relationship-building with other constituencies during and after the national dialogue. Benomar's office in 2013 established a new unit, the Women and Youth Forum, aiming to "support youth and women participation in the transition to democracy through awareness-raising on economic, social and political rights with the aim of achieving equal citizenship."^[38]

Through the forum, the special envoy aimed to address some of the challenges that the

[35] Adam Day, Rebecca Brubaker, João Honwana, "Capturing UN Preventive Diplomacy Success: How and Why Does It Work?" UNU Centre for Policy Research, April 2018, p. 5, <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2753/PD-Yemen.pdf>

[36] Ibid.

[37] Sheila Carapico, Stacey Philbrick Yadav, "The Breakdown of the GCC Initiative," Middle East Research and Information Project, Winter 2014, <https://merip.org/2014/12/the-breakdown-of-the-gcc-initiative/>

[38] "Constitutional Guidelines on Youth in Yemen: As per NDC Outcomes Document," UNDP, Women and Youth Forum, 2014, https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/4-youth_constituional_guidlines_en.pdf

independent youth were facing ahead of their participation in the national dialogue. This forum provided logistical and technical support to the representatives of Yemen's youth, such as a well-equipped center where they could meet and collaborate, build their advocacy and communication skills, and hold discussions with various experts to bridge knowledge and experience gaps.^[39]

The UNDP had funded the establishment and operation of the Yemeni Youth Observatory, a non-partisan youth-focused watchdog. The observatory sought to provide a robust, comprehensive analysis of the situation of young people in Yemen, assessing existing youth-related policies, and developing policy recommendations.

The Participation of Youth in the National Dialogue

Before the national dialogue began in March 2013, there was some resistance to the inclusion of youth, women and civil society in a peace process meant to decide the future of the country. Some parties, according to Belqees al-Lahbi, a political activist, pushed for a more traditional elite-centric transition process.^[40] More broadly, there were attempts to hinder the transition. As researcher Helen Lackner noted, "There were innumerable smaller and larger rebellions against President Hadi's orders."^[41] The UNSC, in response, adopted Resolution 2051 in June 2012. In addition to signaling its readiness to impose sanctions on those whose acts sought to obstruct the political transition, the resolution also "emphasize(d) the importance of conducting a fully-inclusive, participatory, transparent and meaningful National Dialogue Conference, including with the youth and women's groups."^[42]

The national dialogue commenced on March 18, 2013, with the participation of 565 delegates representing political parties, movements (the Hirak and Houthi movements) and independents (youth, women and civil society). The majority of seats went to representatives of the main political parties, close to 47 percent. Besides the seven percent of seats assigned to unaffiliated members of youth movements, other participating groups were required to assign 20 percent of their seats to people under 40.

[39] Author's interview with Ola al-Aghbari, co-author of "The Missing Track: Yemen's Youth Participation in the 1st Track of Peacebuilding," conducted in June 2021.

[40] Author's interview with activist Belqees al-Lahbi, July 2021.

[41] Helen Lackner, "Yemen's 'Peaceful' Transition from Autocracy: Could it have Succeeded?" International IDEA, 2016, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/yemens-peaceful-transition-from-autocracy.pdf>

[42] Full text of UN Security Council Resolution 2051 (2012), UNSC, New York, June 12, 2012, <http://unscr.com/files/2012/02051.pdf>

The 40 independent young people included in the dialogue were selected from a list of 1,000 applicants through a selection mechanism run by the national dialogue technical committee and the UN special advisor and finally endorsed by President Hadi.^[43] The criteria were that the participants be aged 18-40 with no political affiliation, and that they had been active in the 2011 uprising.^[44]

According to researcher Atiaf al-Wazir, the 40 independent youth delegates selected came from diverse demographic, geographical and educational backgrounds. From 18 governorates, "Some are highly educated and articulate technocrats in their late 30s from the political elite, others are as young as 20, less educated and do not necessarily have knowledge of the political scene," Al-Wazir writes. "The majority (of the youth delegates) have never been members of any political party, nor were they directly engaged in politics prior to the revolution."^[45]

The dialogue was set to last six months, during which time the delegates were split into nine thematic working groups to provide recommendations on critical issues and long-standing grievances, and to provide a guiding national framework for the founding principles of a 'new Yemen'. The themes included good governance, the social contract, security and the military, development, transitional justice, and rights and freedoms.

The participation of youth, as well as other independent constituencies, in such a process in Yemen was described by US Institute of Peace Program Officer Erica Gaston as unprecedented. As she notes, it "enabled greater inclusion of smaller political parties, youth, women, and other groups beyond the traditional power centers."^[46]

Young people tried hard during the dialogue to bridge the generational gap and change the political culture.^[47] Many would arrive early to meetings to get seats in the front rows, for example, as according to Yemeni tradition, these seats would usually

[43] Atiaf al-Wazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference: Triggering a Change in Political Culture," SWP Comments, August 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2013C23_wzr.pdf

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Erica Gaston, "Process Lessons Learned in Yemen's National Dialogue," USIP, Special Report 352, February 2014, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR342_Process-Lessons-Learned-in-Yemens-National-Dialogue.pdf

[47] Atiaf al-Wazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference: Triggering a Change in Political Culture," SWP Comments 23, August 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2013C23_wzr.pdf

be filled by tribal sheikhs, high-ranking military figures and senior politicians.^[48] Youth engaged in alliances with independent women and civil society representatives to form an influential non-partisan bloc which voted with one voice.^[49] They shifted the tone from a zero-sum game to a cooperative endeavor.^[50] Policy analysts and researchers like Helen Lackner, Erica Gatson and Atiaf al-Wazir all considered this bloc's contributions in the national dialogue a transformative moment in Yemen's political discourse — one difficult to roll back and relevant to the future.

The greatest impact the independent and party-affiliated youth achieved was the adoption of a set of recommendations promoting equal citizenship between men and women in the decisions adopted by the conference. This was made possible only after relentless advocacy and lobbying by the youth within the conference working groups. National dialogue participants thought equal citizenship would come about if there were investment in the political, cultural and socio-economic empowerment of young people.^[51]

Among the national dialogue's results were also a number of recommendations that youth-related policies be included in a new constitution, aimed at bringing about such empowerment.

On the political side, it was decided to establish an independent High National Youth Council to advise on youth-related policymaking. The council would work to protect young people from violence and health risks and to build a capable and active new generation to help develop society. It would do this by encouraging development programs, capacity building, support for intellectual creativity and cultural development as well as allowing young people to have input into policy-making. It was also decided that young people should form a 20 percent quota in all state-run bodies, as well as economic, cultural and social bodies, boards of political parties and constitution-drafting committees. The Council would guarantee equal representation of male and female young people.^[52]

[48] Ibid.

[49] Graeme Simpson, "The missing peace: independent progress study on youth, peace and security," UN General Assembly, March 2, 2018, p. 71, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Progress_Study_on_Youth_Peace_Security_A-72-761_S-2018-86_ENGLISH.pdf

[50] Adel al-Sharjabi, "Yemen's Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference Document: Winners, Losers, and Applicability," The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies and the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, March 2014, https://siyasatarabiya.dohainstitute.org/ar/issue007/Pages/Siyassato7-2014_Elsharjabi.pdf

[51] Atiaf al-Wazir, "Yemen's Independent Youth and Their Role in the National Dialogue Conference: Triggering a Change in Political Culture," SWP Comments, August 2013, https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2013C23_wzr.pdf

[52] "Constitutional Guidelines on Youth in Yemen: As Per NDC Outcomes Document," UNDP, Women and Youth Forum, 2014, https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/4-youth_constituional_guidlines_en.pdf

On the economic side, the recommendations focused on addressing unemployment through micro-financing to provide zero-interest loans to youth-led projects, along with state creation of small-scale agricultural and cooperative projects. The recommendations also stipulated more support by the state for labor-intensive-enterprises and those creating jobs in rural areas, such as the Social Fund for Development, the Public Works Projects and the Small Enterprises Fund.^[53]

The third area focused on education, and on social and cultural engagement. For example, ensuring freedom of scientific research, literary, artistic and cultural accomplishment and guaranteeing the means to achieve those things. Also, the provision of assistance to advance science and arts to encourage scientific and technical innovation and creativity, and to protect the resulting products.

The significance of the national dialogue's youth-related outcomes, according to Rafat al-Akhali, chairman of Resonate! Yemen, was the fact that they were "binding statements of principles", and if incorporated in the new constitution and implemented successfully, they "could lead to a substantive shift in the reality of Yemeni youth and their future."^[54] The idea of the establishment of a High National Youth Council had also been raised in earlier policy recommendations.^[55]

[53] "Constitutional Guidelines on Youth in Yemen: As Per NDC Outcomes Document," UNDP, Women and Youth Forum, 2014, https://osesgy.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/4-youth_constituional_guidlines_en.pdf

[54] Rafat al-Akhali, "What Yemen's Youth Got Out of the National Dialogue Conference," Atlantic Council, April 7, 2014, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/what-yemen-s-youth-got-out-of-the-national-dialogue-conference/>

[55] Saleem Haddad and Joshua Rogers, "Moving beyond promises: perceptions, priorities, and participation of youth in Yemen's transition," Saferworld, September 2012, https://www.academia.edu/11077395/Moving_Beyond_Promises_Perceptions_priorities_and_participation_of_youth_in_Yemen_s_transition



PART TWO: WAR ECLIPSES THE YOUTH AGENDA

Seven years ago, however, this transitional process failed and a devastating civil war broke out. This would erase many of the tentative gains Yemen's youth had made – socially, economically and politically.

While in January 2014, many celebrated the conclusion of the national dialogue, believing they were beginning to build the new Yemen that young people had been calling for, by September, Houthi movement forces, in alliance with deposed president Ali Abdullah Saleh, had taken Sana'a by force. A few months later, these forces placed President Hadi under house arrest.

By March 2015, the armed conflict had extended to southern governorates, and the conflict became a regional war, following a military intervention by Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their allies against the Houthi-Saleh alliance.

The conflict's impact has gone beyond a collapsed economy, gutted health sector, deteriorated security and high food insecurity. As ways in which the war has affected people's lives, especially young people, our respondents highlighted: a prevalent and worsening mental health crisis; a torn social fabric; systematic and deliberate destruction of the education system; and exploitation of people's poverty to radicalize adolescents and young men.

Mental Health Frays

The majority of our respondents indicated that they, or young relatives, had suffered psychologically because of difficult wartime economic conditions.

The Yemeni rial has been greatly devalued, and goods have become much more expensive. Civil servants have gone years without salaries and unemployment has soared. The pressure on young people has been unbearable, many respondents said, as they feel responsible for feeding their families.

As one young participant said, “We feel we are in constant need of money. If we can pay for food, we struggle to pay for medications. I cannot count how many nights have gone by without being able to sleep. I never expected to see my family and other families in endless struggle.”

The lack of jobs has made many, especially young men, feel cornered, traumatized, fearful and depressed. Many have been recruited by armed groups, enticed by regular pay. Young women’s mental health has also suffered. In Dhamar, research conducted by the Mercy Center for Mental Health in 2019 revealed that in the city of Dhamar alone, the number of people affected by mental health issues might exceed 4,000, most of them young girls and women. Center officials estimated that the figure was around 6,000 by October 2021.^[56] A community activist in the suburbs of Dhamar city said half the members of many households were suffering psychological problems as a result of the war.^[57] Such a figure is alarming, especially in Yemen, where families and individuals are rarely open to acknowledging traumatic or psychological issues due to the widespread stigma around mental health.^[58]

One major source of mental health issues among young men in particular is the growing pressure to join an armed group. Prior to the outbreak of the ongoing conflict, tribal leaders would sometimes pressure those in power not to recruit their young men, or at most, to add them to ‘shadow lists’ of army and security forces, allowing them to receive monthly pay while not joining these units in reality; this has now changed as a result of the conflict, according to one young tribal leader.^[59] “We are pushed by the Houthis to recruit more fighters in exchange for their show of respect for us before our communities and people. It looks like a hectic and troubling bargaining process to preserve social status,” he said.

During the focus group in Aden, a further source of trauma for young people was revealed, with young women saying some families forced their daughters to marry too young because the family needed the money from dowries. According to the

[56] Saqr Abu Hassan, blog post, “A Case Without File [AR],” Khuyut, October 10, 2021, <https://www.khuyut.com/blog/without-file>. The population of the city, according to a 2017 projection on the basis of a 2004 census, was 251,534. See <https://yemenlg.org/governorates/dhamar/>

[57] Ibid.

[58] “Yemen’s Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Right to Mental Health,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and George Warren Brown School, Washington University, January-February 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/files/UPR_32nd_Session_2019_en.pdf

[59] Author’s personal interview with a tribal young leader, August 2021.

participants, most cases of this occurred in IDP camps, or in the poorest neighborhoods, including where marginalized communities known as Muhamasheen^[60] live.

Diaspora Yemeni youth have also experienced trauma. The restrictions and risks associated with traveling inside Yemen have made them feel going home would mean risking their lives, said one interviewee who lives in Europe. Youth are increasingly subject to abuses based on their origins, with northern citizens heading home through southern airports, for example, sometimes unlawfully detained, accused of supporting the Houthis, or forced to pay more money.^[61] Meanwhile, many Yemenis in Gulf countries, especially in Saudi Arabia, have lost their jobs because of work nationalization policies.^[62]

At the focus group in Mukalla, a young woman who had been volunteering with the UN in Germany burst into tears as she was describing the impact of the war:

“Every young person in this country wishes they could travel outside of Yemen, but to be forced to leave or flee your home and your country, and to be unable to see your family, is not easy at all. Everyone tells us how lucky we are, without realizing the pain we live in, and they don’t realize that if there were not war, we would have stayed, enthusiastically worked and supported our country and contributed to building our beautiful country. Those who forcibly left the country always feel restless and preoccupied with thinking about the events and situation in Yemen.”^[63]

Participants also spoke of the war’s insecurity, violence, general hopelessness and restricted access to civic spaces as causes of mental suffering. According to a 2019 study by the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, Yemenis who were 25 years old in 2019 had already lived through 15 armed conflicts, and warfare had directly or indirectly affected over 80 percent of the population.^[64] Yet mental health services are scant. Statistics compiled for the 2011 World Health Organization (WHO) Mental Health Atlas show just

[60] The Muhamasheen are an underclass outside Yemeni tribal structures. See Aisha al-Waraq, “The Historic and Systematic Marginalization of Yemen’s Muhamasheen Community,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, June 4, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/files/Muhamasheen_en.pdf

[61] Zakaria Al Kamali, “Traveling in Yemen: trips in torture and perilous adventures.” The New Arab, September 14, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/yckp276d>

[62] Mohammed Gobari and Reyham Mokhashef, “Mass job terminations hit hundreds of Yemenis in Saudi Arabia,” Reuters, August 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/mass-job-terminations-hit-hundreds-yemenis-saudi-arabia-2021-08-17/>

[63] Female participants in focus group discussion, Mukalla, July 2021.

[64] “Yemen’s Obligations to Respect, Protect, and Fulfil the Right to Mental Health,” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic and George Warren Brown School, Washington University, January-February 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/files/UPR_32nd_Session_2019_en.pdf

0.17 psychologists per 100,000 Yemenis, compared to 29.03 in the United States.^[65] In January 2016, the WHO estimated that there were only 40 psychiatric specialists in all of Yemen, most of whom were based in Sana'a.^[66] Mental health is an invisible crisis that does not receive adequate attention and its impact might last long after the war ends.^[67]

Social Fabric Tears

The effects of war on Yemen's social fabric were a recurring theme in the responses we received. Respondents said the conflict had damaged personal relations, ignited hostile attitudes and led to a rise in hate speech and crimes often motivated by bias and prejudice against people from other parts of the country.

On the whole, young people blame the warring actors for this. The majority of our respondents from Houthi-controlled areas spoke about growing mistrust between families and neighbors. Parents fear seeing their adolescents persuaded to join armed groups and taken to battle fronts, one respondent said. This worry stokes family disputes, and erodes trust between neighbors, as families mistrust people in their community who they believe are recruiting adolescents. In Hadramawt, the conflict has to some extent affected social cohesion between people from different districts of the governorate, respondents said. They mentioned tension and division between the local authorities and people of Mukalla on the one hand, and those who live in Wadi Hadramawt on the other.

One respondent from Shabwa said that young men from the governorate do not feel safe to travel to Aden. This was attributed to a growing sense of insecurity and accumulating tensions since the bloody events of August 2019 in Shabwa, when there were clashes between forces loyal to President Hadi and the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Since, there were several reported incidents of Shabwani people being targeted in Aden, she said.

[65] "Mental Health Atlas 2011: Yemen," WHO, 2011, http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/atlas/profiles/yem_mh_profile.pdf

[66] S. al-Wesabi, "Insecurity Drives Health Workers Out of Yemen," WHO, January 7, 2016, <http://www.who.int/features/2016/yemen-health-insecurity/en>

[67] Author's interview with Nebras Ana'am, researcher and peacebuilding and conflict specialist at DeepRoot, August 2021.

Coping with a Long War

Many respondents expressed growing concern with the long-term impact of the conflict on their lives and on the declining prospects of achieving durable peace in Yemen. The collapse of the education system, the spread of radical ideas in schools, the growth of sectarian rhetoric and recruitment by armed factions all present persistent threats to peace and stability. One respondent said, “Even if the UN-led peace process manages to convince the parties to sign a peace deal today, it is very likely to collapse the following day, or days later, as parties to the conflict invest in recruiting more young fighters and in instilling radical thoughts in their minds.” The situation was described to AFP by the UNDP’s Yemen director Auke Lootsma, who said, “If you continue like this, Yemen as a country will be very difficult to rebuild. If more assets get destroyed and people become poorer and poorer, then it will become almost like an unviable state.”^[68]

Other respondents echoed the same concern. The deterioration has forced many young people to leave schools and universities, or seek part-time jobs to be able to continue their education and support their families. Activist Ola al-Aghbari said that in some areas, young people join battle fronts not only for the money, but because they feel they are to some extent responsible for causing their communities’ economic crisis after they participated in the 2011 uprising.^[69]

Protection also emerged as one of the most pressing needs, according to interviewees and participants in focus group discussions. One young woman respondent said her brother was killed in cold blood after helping establish a cultural club in Aden to promote the principles of a civil state, freedom of expression and open debates among youth:

“My brother and I, with a couple of young men and women, were active and established a cultural club. Our objective for establishing the club was raising the community’s cultural awareness. We received threats, our work was perceived as a threat, cultural awareness was perceived as a threat by armed people. They repeatedly asked my brother to join them as a soldier in one of the recently-formed military units. He refused and continued his activism on social media. My brother was killed and we were not even allowed to bury him.”^[70]

[68] “War turning Yemen into broken state, beyond repair: UN,” AFP, February 28, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/middle-east/20210228-war-turning-yemen-into-broken-state-beyond-repair-un>

[69] Author’s interview with Ola al-Aghbari, researcher and executive director of Sheba Youth Organization, June 2021.

[70] Female participant in focus group discussion, Mukalla July 2021.

She added, "Our family received calls from European embassies, from the president's office, from high-ranking officials all condemning the crime. But that was all, and no one helped us get justice."

Another respondent who works in a medical facility in Sana'a said Houthi authorities sometimes bring captives who appear to have been brutally tortured, all young men. Their captors seem to want them to recover, and the respondent suspected this was so they could be used in prisoner exchanges. Other concerns mentioned by respondents included cyber-bullying if they expressed their opinions online, danger when traveling between cities and the proliferation of arms and fighters whose factions do not hold them accountable.

The need for protection of young women has also been increasing every year during the conflict. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), female child marriage rates have soared, as families in dire economic straits seek money or even a misguided way to protect young girls.^[71] A report by the Sana'a Center, published in 2019, noted the increase of gender-based violence to unprecedented levels in several parts of the country during the conflict. The report found that women and girls have been affected by rape, kidnapping, sexual harassment and domestic violence perpetrated by militias and community members as well as husbands, fathers and brothers.^[72]

A young women participant in the Aden focus group said, "All the young men in our neighborhood [in Aden] have joined armed groups. Their attitudes and way of thinking have changed, and they have become violent in the way they deal with women in their homes."

Another interviewee, based in Sana'a, questioned the silence of the international community around Houthi authorities' campaigns to increase fertility rates, which creates huge burdens, especially on women and girls. The interviewee said that misinterpreted religious rhetoric is used by the Houthis to urge men to have more children so that they can defend Islam against 'Western aggression', and become fighters in the Houthi movement's future battles. Young women respondents found this alarming and feared it would have dire consequences for the future. This was not only because they felt

[71] "Families increasingly resort to child marriages as Yemen's conflict grinds on," UNFPA, November 16, 2016, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/families-increasingly-resort-child-marriage-yemen's-conflict-grinds>

[72] Dr Fawziah al-Ammar, Hannah Patchett, Shams Shamsan, "A Gendered Crisis: Understanding the Experiences of Yemen's War," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 15, 2019, https://sanaacenter.org/files/A_Gendered_Crisis_en.pdf

overpopulation and the Yemeni state's inability to address the needs of the Yemeni people had been underlying causes of Yemen's conflicts, but also because such rhetoric manipulated and exploited the high levels of illiteracy among Houthi fighters, and among young men in general, unknowingly leading them to practice violence against women.

Interviewees also wanted to avoid returning to a peace in which there were still scarce opportunities to live without becoming a lost generation. Young people desperately regret the lack of enrollment in and the forced quitting of education, as well as the absence of cultural activities and restrictions on recreation and sports. The majority of our interviewees stressed the need to support the continuity of quality education, and to prevent its politicization. Analyst Ibrahim Jalal of the Middle East Institute noted that children, young people and men, instead of going to schools and universities and before seeing what a peaceful life looks like, have been used as fuel for the conflict, learning only *zawamel*—folk songs that inspire fighters ahead of battle.^[73]

Young People's Political Involvement Declines

Young people were enthusiastic about their role in decision-making and political participation during the 2011 uprising and subsequent transitional process, but the trajectory of that interest seems to be in rapid decline.

The conflict forced a change in their priorities, and in their attitudes toward politics. Among all the young people interviewed and involved in discussion groups, more than 70 percent said that young people today across Yemen think very little of political engagement, or of having a role in decision-making, as they are struggling to feed their families.

One of the interviewees, a young man from Ibb, said people now are busier thinking how to survive than about involvement with what he called “the political gangs”. Another participant from Aden, who leads a community center that supports marginalized groups and IDPs, said even before the outbreak of conflict most people were poor, but now they are in extreme poverty. He added that political participation is now something

[73] Author interview via Zoom, June 2021.

only elites speak of, not those in marginalized communities, in rural areas or in city centers where the delivery of basic services has failed entirely. While most participants believed youth interest in political participation is now at an all-time low, they said this could change if the political and socio-economic situation improved.

One respondent thought the decline in young people's interest in political participation was not only because of the catastrophic humanitarian situation, but also because of what he described as a collective sense of betrayal. According to him, and many others, the public attitude toward the independent youth who participated in the national dialogue has turned negative. While participants placed most of the blame on the Houthi movement and Saleh, they also criticized the splintering of the independent youth. Participants said one group "sided with the regional powers," and criticized another for "disappearing and becoming remote watchers after accepting decision-making or diplomatic roles."

One interviewee said political parties were no longer capable of political mobilization, nor could they regain the trust of the public any time soon. He explained, "After the 2011 uprising, the leadership of the political parties were shortsighted and did not see this day coming. They didn't make any real investment in empowering the youth of their parties and in building their capacities, they were only busy with taking their share of the power."

Two other participants, one based in Sana'a and one from Abyan and based in Aden, criticized the international community for not holding anyone accountable for human rights violations committed by what they referred to as the "new patronage networks, proxies and local servants" of regional powers. Both cited examples of the brutal actions of authorities and non-state actors in Shabwa, Taiz, Aden and Sana'a to prevent political activities, with only "shy and worthless condemnations" by the international community.

UN Attempts to Revitalize Youth Participation

In December 2015, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2250 – the first ever on youth, peace, and security (YPS). The resolution was hailed around the globe by youth-led organizations as a landmark, recognizing the positive role and contributions of youth to peace-building and conflict resolution.

The resolution defines youth as young men and women aged between 18 and 29 years old, while recognizing that there are various national and international definitions of youth. The resolution includes five main pillars: participation, protection, prevention, partnerships, disengagement and reintegration. It also requests the Secretary-General of the UN to “carry out a progress study that examines the contributions of youth to peace processes and conflict resolution.”^[74]

In June 2018, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2419 unanimously as the second thematic resolution on the YPS agenda. It urges UN member countries and all relevant stakeholders to, “facilitate their equal and full participation in peace and decision-making processes at all levels.” Two years later, the UNSC adopted the third YPS-dedicated resolution, 2535. The third resolution’s significance lies in the UNSC’s recognition of the YPS as a UNSC permanent agenda. The three UNSC YPS resolutions provide a groundbreaking framework that young people and youth-led organizations can use to advocate or work on YPS issues.

The first Yemen-specific YPSs projects were launched in early 2018. The pioneer project was ‘Localizing UNSCR 2250 in Yemen’, implemented by UNFPA and three local NGOs. UNFPA and UN Women also implemented a subsequent two-year project, ‘Furthering the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in Yemen’, between January 2019 and December 2020.

The first project sought to increase access to knowledge of young people about UNSCR 2250 and identify ways to contribute to peacebuilding. The second sought to operationalize UNSCR 2250 in Yemen, through three levels of impact: individual, institutional and enabling environment.^[75]

[74] Full text of UNSC Resolution 2419 (2018), United Nations, June 6, 2018, <https://www.youth4peace.info/unsr2419>

[75] “Furthering the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda in Yemen,” YPS Evaluation Report, January 22, 2021, <https://mptf.undp.org/document/download/26402>

In 2020, the UN, international donors and NGOs supported Yemeni civil society and think tanks to create Track II youth-focused peacebuilding platforms that advanced the YPS agenda and connected young peacebuilders with the relevant policy and decision-makers, community leaders, diplomats, prominent researchers and think tanks. The Yemen Peace Forum, Youth Platforms for Peacebuilding, and the Youth Peace and Security Pact are some such platforms.

In December 2020, the Youth Leadership Foundation, Youth Without Borders Organization and the Group of Nine organized a three-day virtual event, the 'Yemeni Youth Peacebuilding Conference', with support and technical assistance from UN Women and UNFPA. A total of 990 Yemeni youth participants took part in nine virtual consultative sessions after which the conference was concluded with a statement that included 33 recommendations to the UN special envoy, parties to the conflict, UN agencies, the international community and Yemen's civil society.

But some of the Yemeni youth participants felt they were included merely as tokens. One keynote speaker said that on the opening day, "I found myself on the wrong end of one of these high level platforms that are fairly typical of the processes when run by international actors – too many older people, mostly outsiders, occupying too much time and space with young people listening in and inevitably somewhat frustrated." Another of the young speakers said, "It felt it was a branding conference to highlight the achievements of organizers before an international audience, and then it seemed to be a platform to advocate the YPS agenda, before they [the organizers] give us chances to speak."

CONCLUSION

The momentum of the YPS agenda in Yemen has resulted in the creation of several youth-led peace groups, coalitions, forums and platforms with support from the UN and international donors. One of the main goals of these initiatives is to advocate for the meaningful participation of youth in peace processes at all levels. However, there is a prevalent sense of discontent within these groups, resulting from feeling a lack of required knowledge and skills to actively participate in the Track I UN-led peace process, if they were invited to do so. The blame, according to our respondents, is on the design of the programs, which fail to ensure the provision of capacity building components that meet the expectations of the members of these youth-led peace groups.

The contributions of Yemeni youth during the early years of the conflict proved the positive role they could play in mitigating the impact of the violent conflict on their local communities. Until 2019, at least, young Yemeni peacebuilders, activists and NGOs staffers were still speaking of youth resilience, creativity and resourcefulness in navigating and addressing the social, political, and economic effects of the conflict,^[76] and their aspirations to play a meaningful role in peace processes.^[77] However, the political, economic and social impacts of the war have taken a visible toll. Today, young people in Yemen are increasingly losing hope about the future of their country. Thus, this research offers the following recommendations to guide efforts that may to some extent address the impact of the war on youth in Yemen.

[76] Maged al-Kholidy, Yazeed al-Jeddawy and Kate Nevens, "The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding in Yemen," CARPO & Youth Without Borders Org. for Development, April 4, 2020; https://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/carpo_brief_17_27-04-20_EN.pdf

[77] Kate Nevens, Marwa Baabbad and Jatinder Padda, "The Situation Needs Us to Be Active: Youth Contributions to Peacebuilding in Yemen," Saferworld, December 2019; <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/the-situation-needs-us-to-be-active.pdf>



RECOMMENDATIONS

To Donors:

- Fund an overseas-based impartial digital space that documents or highlights violations and abuses committed against youth, and give access to young people to voice their concerns, aspirations and stories. Such a platform could raise people's awareness of their rights and help preserve the collective memory of Yemenis during future transitional processes.
- Commission an independent, impartial local or international think tank to conduct a Yemen-focused report that assesses to what extent the conflict actors in Yemen politicize or exploit educational settings.
- Support programs for raising awareness and de-stigmatization of mental health issues among the Yemeni population and support more training for counsellors, psychologists, teachers and community leaders.
- Support regular conferences, collaborations and partnerships between youth coalitions, movements and peace organizations, on one hand, and local and international human rights actors, on the other, to explore synergies and coordination mechanisms between both domains.
- Increase support for programs that provide youth-focused economic and social development opportunities. These will help connect youth with opportunities for entrepreneurship and employment, in tandem with enhancing their civic engagement and leadership skills.
- Prioritize support for economic recovery interventions at the macroeconomic level and ensure the meaningful participation of youth in leading such interventions (before, during and after implementation), since this would make them more capable of positive engagement in the post-conflict recovery, helping the goal of sustainable development.
- Increase education-specific donor support that goes beyond the inadequate funds allocated for emergency responses.
- Begin now with capacity-building programs regarding mediation, negotiation, political engagement, public policy decision-making, peace-building, and state-building, rather than wait for the conflict to end before starting such programs. The investment should meet participants' expectations in terms of duration and content, since short workshops that navigate only basic terms have previously proved insufficient.

- Encourage the UN and international and local organizations that facilitate YPS coalitions and platforms to engage youth in the design of programs, particularly youth from excluded communities and rural areas.

To the UN, NGOs and Human Rights Organizations:

- Support regular youth-focused human rights reporting at all levels, or at least ensure the addition of youth sections in the already existing reports of human rights actors. Ensure that young peacebuilders and human rights defenders are present in all hearings and create an environment that encourages their meaningful participation in such hearings.
- Support the creation of safe, accessible, transparent, accountable, youth-friendly and gender-responsive mechanisms for young people to report experiences of violence and other human rights violations, including all forms of gender-based violence.
- Provide capacity-building to local human rights actors in Yemen, and support the development of a basic gender-sensitive coordination framework that ensures their full commitment to humanitarian principles, enabling them to unify efforts in defending human rights in Yemen.

To De Facto Authorities, Local Authorities and the Yemeni Government:

- The de facto authorities in Sana'a should stop child recruitment and use of schools and other academic settings for recruiting students as fighters.
- The de facto authorities in Sana'a should stop all forms of abuse that young women including women activists are subject to in areas under their control. Using violence to silence young women activists is against Yemeni traditions and religious teaching.
- The de facto authorities across Yemen, the local authorities, and the Yemeni government should all ensure respect for young peoples' freedom of speech and ensure that young people are not targeted because of their activism.
- All ruling authorities should establish gendered-balanced youth advisory councils and effectively engage these councils in monitoring decisions related to public policy at the local and national levels.

To Donors, International NGOs and the Yemeni government:

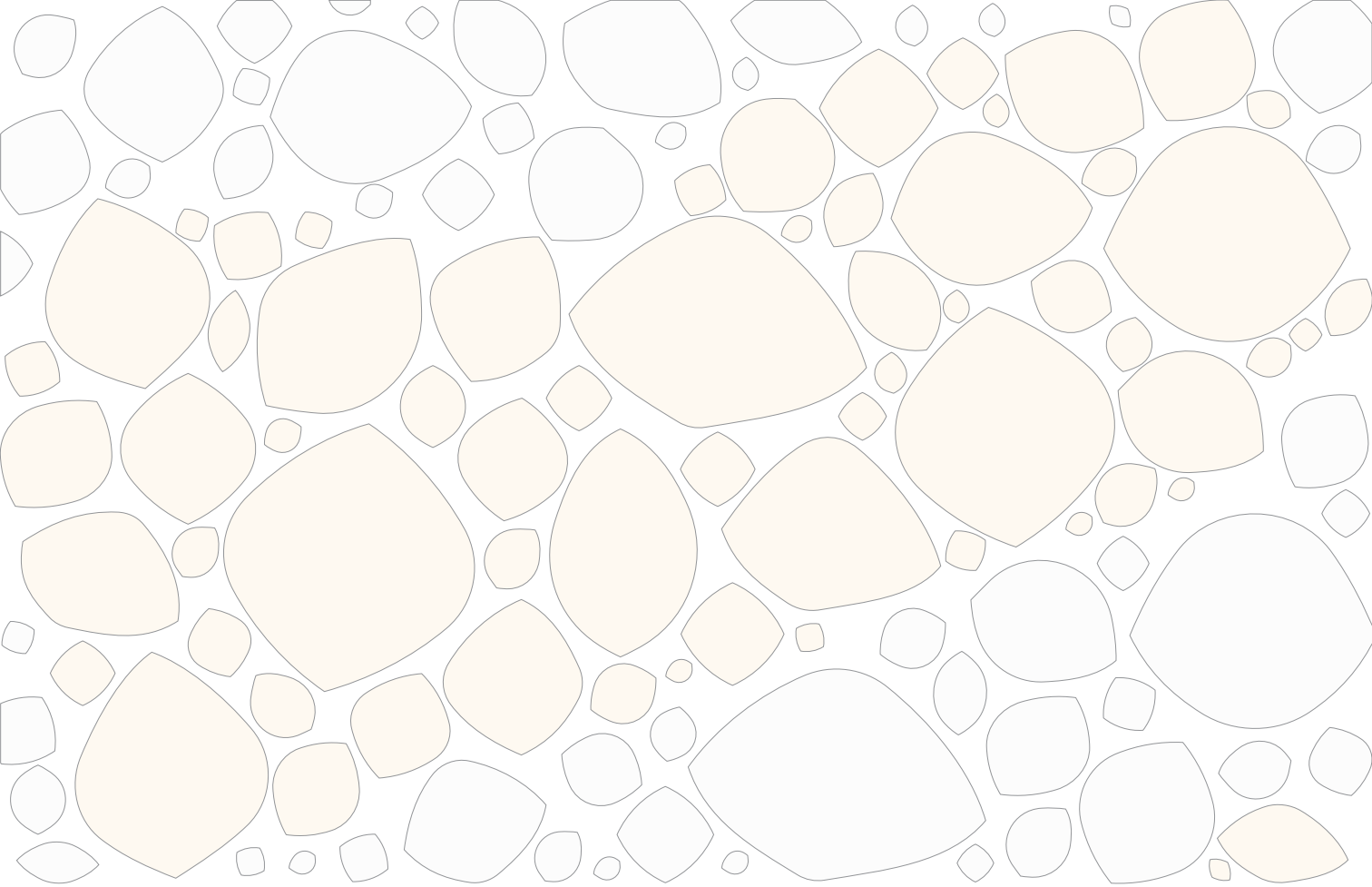
- Establish new partnerships and exchange programs between Yemeni and international universities to motivate Yemeni students to continue their education. Consider the blended learning modules that may enable Yemeni students to obtain degrees and other academic qualifications from recognized international institutions.
- Increase funds for sport and cultural activities.

To the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for YemenO (OSESgy):

- Ensure youth meaningful participation in all tracks of the peace process that goes beyond tokenism and window-dressing.
- Recognize local youth initiatives that support the peace process and provide youth with the tools to scale up their initiatives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yazeed al-Jeddawy is a fellow at the Yemen Peace Forum and an independent research consultant. He has co-authored papers and policy briefs on youth, arts, transitional justice, development and peacebuilding in Yemen. He previously worked as a coordinator of youth-focused projects/programs at Youth Without Borders Organisation for Development (YWBOD), and as Education Program Manager at Nahda Makers Organization. Al-Jeddawy is currently the MENA Regional Representative of the United Network of Young Peacebuilders (UNOY).



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