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LOCAL VISIONS FOR PEACE IN MARIB

Introduction

The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and Oxford Research Group (ORG) are leading a year-long pilot project to build local capacity for inclusive strategic thinking and dialogue in two of Yemen's most stable governorates, Marib and Hadramawt. The project rethinks long-held assumptions about the form that the peace process should take. Instead of resorting to top-down centralized frameworks with regards to peace-making efforts, the project seeks to identify otherwise underrepresented parties for inclusion in any renewed and potentially restructured peace process. By training local actors in Marib and Hadramawt in the ORG-pioneered collective strategic thinking model, the project creates space for them to define their core needs within the governorates and requirements for investing in the peace process.

This project seeks to achieve greater understanding of local dynamics in order to better address the impacts and implications of the conflict. It also aims to provide platforms for easing tensions and frustrations among groups of common interest at the local level in Yemen, and to build capacity for local communities to enable them to fully participate in the democratic development of Yemen. Moreover, it pursues the strengthening of the United Nations-led peace process and other international peace-building efforts, as well as the prospects of peaceful transition following any peace agreement in Yemen.



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.

Oxford Research Group

Breaking the cycle of violence

Oxford Research Group (ORG) is an independent organisation that has been influential for over 35 years in pioneering new, more strategic approaches to security and peacebuilding. Based in London since 2006, ORG continues to pursue cutting edge research and advocacy in the United Kingdom and abroad while managing innovative peacebuilding projects in several Middle Eastern countries.

In 2018, the Sana'a Center developed a list of influential, well-connected partisan and non-partisan figures with a unique understanding of how things are run in Marib. From this list, participants were selected to join a series of three workshops in Jordan, which took place between May 2018 and February 2019. These workshops brought to light key issues, identified local groups that need to be engaged, and explored appropriate methodologies for addressing these key issues. The workshops brought together locally based and diaspora Yemeni leaders, including leaders of political parties, tribal and social leaders, senior local authority representatives, academics, business professionals, civil society activists, prominent women, and religious representatives.

These regional workshops were followed by a workshop held in the city of Marib. This workshop allowed participants from the Amman workshops to engage with other local stakeholders inside Marib: civil society organizations, youth, and women, as well as local authorities. This workshop provided a space for issues identified in the Amman workshops to be discussed in more detail. They helped foster strategic thinking capacities and cohesion within the separate groups, while also developing investment in the broader political process by allowing the groups to give voice to the issues they most wanted to see addressed.

Profile of Marib

The governorate of Marib is at the cross-roads connecting al-Baydah, Shabwah, Hadramawt, Sana'a and al-Jawf governorates. Marib's economy relies largely on agriculture and oil and gas. It is the largest source of gas for domestic use in Yemen, and a refinery located within the governorate meets its gasoline needs. As such, Marib remains the governorate least affected by the soaring prices of oil derivatives during the ongoing conflict. The governorate also has promising wealth in resources such as granite, marble and others, as mountain ranges south of Marib boast high-quality mineral deposits. As an important cultural center of ancient Yemen, Marib has ruins and heritage sites scattered across it. Although international tourism has now ceased, Marib's historical attractions could support a future tourism industry, creating a source of foreign currency and employment.

The governorate is characterized by a strong and cohesive tribal structure. In general, tribal affiliation in Marib is stronger than other ties, including partisan affiliation. Of its tribes, Murad has the largest geographical reach, followed by Abida, Jahm, and then al-Jidaan and al-Ashraf. The Abida tribe, from which the current governor Sultan al-Aradah is descended, is the most influential at the moment. The tribe's geographical reach covers the areas richest in natural resources and the gas-fired power plant. Saudi-led coalition forces are concentrated on Abida territory, and a number of heritage sites are located within it as well. Despite inter-clan conflicts arising from tribal tensions, such conflicts have consistently receded whenever a serious threat to the governorate was present.

Politically, the General People's Congress (GPC) and the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) are the most prominent parties in the governorate. Other political parties are represented in Marib, albeit to a limited extent, and include the Socialist and the Nasserite parties. The GPC was the leading actor in the governorate before the current conflict, though the influence of Islah has expanded since 2015. However, the two parties have largely overcome their differences in order to coordinate efforts, in alliance with the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Saudi-led coalition, against Houthi forces, which control the far-west of the governorate.

Impact of the Conflict

Marib was an early battlefield in the ongoing conflict. Since the outbreak of the conflict, which reached Marib early in 2014, hundreds of Marib locals have been killed, and are still taking part in the ongoing conflict on the outskirts of their governorate.

In early 2015, Murad tribes fought a fierce conflict against Houthi forces attempting to take control of the governorate. Through a coalescing tribal effort and good relations with Saudi Arabia, the tribal forces successfully repelled Houthi forces. However, Houthi forces continue to maintain a presence in Marib's peripheries, such as in Sirwah district, where many of the tribes share a doctrinal affiliation to the Zaidi branch of Shi'a Islam.

Al-Qaeda has a history of activity in Marib as well. Prior to 2014 the governorate saw frequent attacks and kidnappings of foreigners. United States drone strikes still target members of al-Qaeda in the governorate, but the visible activity of the organization and its operations have declined in recent years.

With Sirwah the exception, Marib governorate has become fairly stable since 2015. One factor in this stability is the Marib tribes' long history of customs strictly regulating the use of firearms within the governorate. For example, in so-called "excluded" markets, firing a weapon is completely forbidden; violations of this norm carry heavy fines of up to 30 million Yemeni rials, or US\$50,000 at the current exchange rate.

Stability in Marib has made it a haven for Yemenis fleeing those governorates which continue to be affected by the conflict. For the most part, these internally displaced persons (IDPs) oppose the armed Houthi movement, and they tend to originate from Yemen's northern, western and central regions. Marib is only 120 km from Sana'a, making it the closest unoccupied city to the Yemeni capital.

Since 2015, the influx of IDPs has expanded the city of Marib dramatically: Its population is estimated to have grown from under 300,000 to more than 2 million. The pressure on public services, schools and hospitals has mounted accordingly. Housing costs have reached unprecedented levels. Despite significantly increased construction efforts to accommodate IDPs housing availability is still inadequate and the governorate has seen little expansion in infrastructure, especially in sanitation and schools.

Marib recently reached an agreement with the internationally recognized government to keep 20 percent of the governorate's oil and gas revenues. Although oil and gas revenue has helped Marib to gain a degree of autonomy in decision-making — enabling it for instance to implement a number of infrastructure projects — many Maribis have even greater aspirations for self-governance.

Key Challenges

Insecurity

Despite its overall stability, security remains a challenge for the governorate. At present, security is based on social dynamics, not the capabilities of the security services. The district of Sirwah, which is contested with the Houthi forces, still represents a threat to the governorate. Houthi forces launch missiles from it, though the impact of these is limited by missile defense systems provided by the Saudi-led coalition.

To address the insecurity in Sirwah, Marib locals insist on the establishment of police academies to train security personnel and to provide the necessary equipment for police work. They further suggest the establishment of specialized counter-terrorism units and coordination with regional states to exchange security intelligence.

Limited Education Facilities

Marib locals feel as though ignorance has been deliberately promoted there in recent decades. The governorate's labor force is poorly qualified in a number of sectors, from security and law enforcement, to education and healthcare, and the local bureaucracy. The provision of higher and specialized education remains a challenge.

The governorate has begun to address this challenge, for instance by inaugurating the University of Sheba. However, education facilities remain limited. As a territory rich in agricultural and natural resources, Marib needs effective vocational and technical education that offers opportunities for employment in agriculture, the energy industry, and mining. However, investment in them remains limited. While the need for rehabilitation and training are clear, addressing this requires funding and coordination that the local authority cannot carry out alone.

Many Maribis also see the opening of a commercial airport in the governorate as an urgent requirement to connect it with the outside world. After the cessation of the conflict this could facilitate Marib, as the center of the Sheba region, becoming an important tourist destination in Yemen.

Limited Representation in Yemen's Central Government

Leaders in Marib generally seek to continue within the framework of a Yemeni federal state. Maribi locals have issued calls for redress of their governorate's grievances, demanding proportional representation in the central government and seek to expand the powers of the governorate within the federal state.

Marginalization from the Peace Process

Participants from Marib believed that the ongoing conflict has been imposed on them and that any opportunity for future peace must acknowledge their needs. They said they will not accept a peace imposed upon them as war has been, and that they have the right to participate in shaping the map of post-conflict Yemen. They said they have no wish to return to the over-centralization that deprived their governorate of services, development, and participation in political decision-making. Participants from Marib asserted that had governorates been involved in the national dialogue process of 2013, the current conflict would not have erupted. They also suggest that the governorates be included in the process proportional to their geographic size, wealth and population.

Case Study: Internally Displaced Persons

One key challenge that was taken forward as a case study by the Marib Strategic Thinking Group was in relation to internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have recently represented a major issue for the governorate, both as a challenge and an opportunity.

Besides being seen as potential security threats, IDPs are viewed as fierce competitors for jobs, housing, education and health facilities. There is competition, too, for support from international organizations: Marib residents claim that IDPs from outside the governorate receive external aid at the expense of those originating within Marib.

Because the governorate's infrastructure has not been able to absorb such large numbers of IDPs, they have put great pressure on public services. To meet housing demands, the governorate has been forced to grant many IDPs land without ownership. Local authorities have prohibited IDPs from building permanent stone or concrete structures in these areas. They allow only steel shipping containers to be repurposed into residences.

Many IDPs in the governorate do not have access to basic services. Education for children is challenged by a persistent shortage of teaching staff, while access to healthcare is also a challenge. However, the influx of IDPs also represents an opportunity. IDPs seem to have energized Marib's economy. Some have initiated investment projects, and some have qualifications that fill gaps in the security services, in public services, and in academic institutions.

In a series of workshops organized by the Sana'a Center and ORG in the city of Marib in January 2019, participants identified mechanisms to address these concerns.

- **Assessing the needs of the displaced.** This requires building a fully integrated database to track IDPs. It further involves appealing to local and international donors to assist in conducting needs assessments among the displaced. It also means connecting IDPs directly with local authorities and donors.
- **Raising awareness of IDP rights and duties** through educational workshops and media campaigns. This can be done in collaboration with local authorities and civil society organizations.
- **Improving the level of health, education and development services** by taking an inventory of available facilities and services, preparing an operational plan to bridge the deficit in services, and coordinating with government agencies.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been proposed by the Maribi participants of the Rethinking the Process project:

For local authorities:

- **Establish police academies** to train security personnel. Create specialized counter-terrorism units and coordinate with regional states to exchange security intelligence.
- **Promote education**, particularly vocation and training programs that support employment.
- **Open an airport in Marib.** Marib requires a local airport to connect it with the world as the capital of the Sheba region and as a tourism center in Yemen due to its historical significance.
- **Counter stereotypes about Marib as unstable.**

For the internationally recognized government:

- **Expand Marib's reputation within the central government**, such that its importance to Yemen as a whole is proportionately reflected in its ability to participate in decision-making.
- **Expand the authority of local officials in Marib**, enabling them to accelerate the development process.

For the international community:

- **Recognize Marib as a key partner** in creating stability in Yemen. Marib must receive international attention equal to its role in the Yemeni landscape. The governorate needs regional and international assistance to address its challenges: accommodating IDPs, expanding the structure of public services to absorb them, and training and preparing staff of local authority, services and security institutions. With effective international technical and material assistance, Marib could become an epicenter of stability in northern Yemen.
- **Fund education efforts** in Marib, particularly in vocational and training programs that will lead to increased employment opportunities for Marib locals and IDPs.
- **Invest in Marib's energy and mining industries.** With its wealth of energy and mineral resources, Marib has the potential to become a strong economic center. Therefore, domestic and international investors need to be reassured, in order to turn this potential wealth into a real source of revenue. Also, the international community should invest expanding and modernizing Marib's agricultural sector.
- **Include Maribi representation in the peace process.** This will contribute to the legitimacy of the process as a whole.

Conclusion

With its variety of natural resources and a degree of stability almost unparalleled in Yemen today, Marib has the potential to play a pivotal role in Yemen's future. Despite a number of ongoing challenges — including pockets of insecurity and limited educational facilities — Marib's stability is providing a haven for Yemenis fleeing the conflict in other parts of the country.

This rapid influx of IDPs has created intense competition for limited jobs, housing, and public services. Marib locals have identified a number of mechanisms to lessen the pressure on public services and turn the burgeoning population of displaced Yemenis into an economic opportunity. However, to put these mechanisms into practice they require technical and material assistance from international and regional partners.

In order for Marib to become a cornerstone of stability in Yemen, moreover, Marib needs greater representation both within Yemen's central government and in the peace process. Given their governorate's importance, Maribi participants said they deserve a greater voice in the decision-making process.

The opinions in this paper represent a summary of the discussions and meetings of the Marib Strategic Group and do not necessarily reflect the personal opinions of the participants, the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies or the Oxford Research Group.