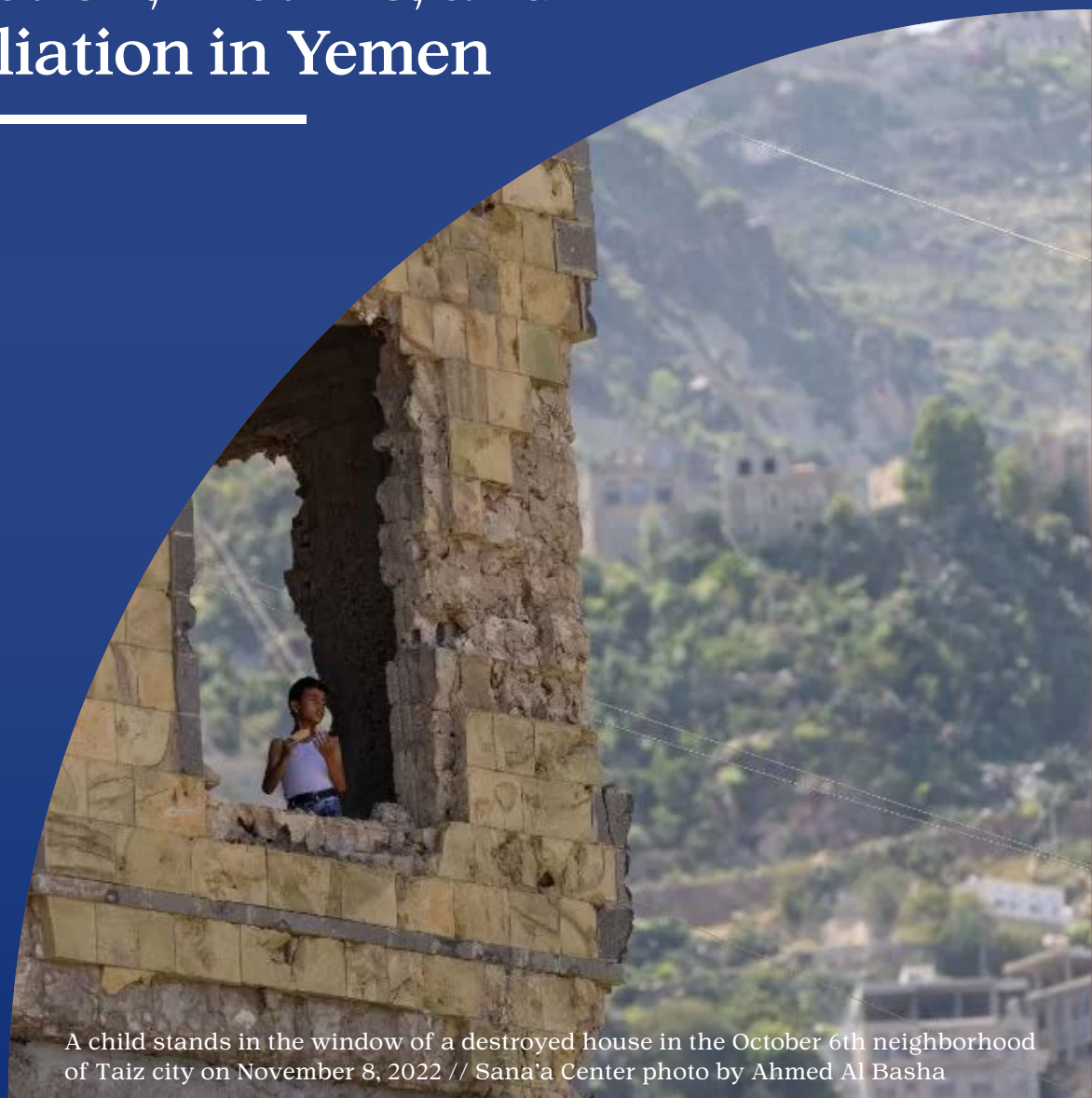




# The Past Can Wait: Memory Construction, Victims, and Reconciliation in Yemen

---



A child stands in the window of a destroyed house in the October 6th neighborhood of Taiz city on November 8, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

By: Marta Mendes  
April 30, 2026



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.

Copyright © Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies 2026





# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>Methodology</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>War Narratives and Martyrdom Discourses in Yemen</b>                    | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Implications for Victims and Reconciliation in Yemen</b>                | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Perspectives of Yemeni Civil Society Organizations</b>                  | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Toward a Victim-Centered Approach to Dealing with the Past in Yemen</b> | <b>18</b> |



## Introduction

Reconciliation is usually tackled in the aftermath of a settlement of violent conflict – during the transition from violence to peace.<sup>[1]</sup> The International Center for Transitional Justice defines reconciliation as “a complex set of processes that involve building or rebuilding relationships, often in the aftermath of massive and widespread human rights violations.”<sup>[2]</sup> However, in scenarios of protracted conflict – as in Yemen – it is challenging to establish a roadmap and clear pathways for reconciliation.<sup>[3]</sup> Conflicts lasting decades pose numerous challenges for articulating an individual’s or group’s experience of suffering and harm under a well-accepted definition of victimhood,<sup>[4]</sup> and for processes of memory, forgiveness, and healing.

This paper focuses on processes of memory construction in Yemen through the perspective of political narratives about the ongoing armed conflict. The objective is to provide a preliminary assessment of the attitudes of key Yemeni political actors and their impact on the formation of official narratives about the conflict and on the articulation of key beliefs and discourses about victimhood.

Definitions of victimhood inform “how well society is able to account for and develop policy to address diverse experiences of conflict.”<sup>[5]</sup> Informed by this line of inquiry, this paper also integrates the views of a select number of Yemeni civil society representatives on processes of memory construction as a space for discussing past violence, integrating victims’ narratives, and acknowledging harm.

---

[1] David Bloomfield, “The Context of Reconciliation,” in David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds.), *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, International IDEA Handbook Series, 2003, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/reconciliation-after-violent-conflict-handbook.pdf>

[2] Paul Seils, “The Place of Reconciliation in Transitional Justice: Conceptions and Misconceptions,” International Center for Transitional Justice, June 2017, <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Briefing-Paper-Reconciliation-TJ-2017.pdf>

[3] An issue of the International Review of the Red Cross (ICRC) dedicated to international humanitarian law and peace contained a series of articles that highlighted challenges posed by protracted armed conflicts around the world. According to one article, “2023 marked the highest number of conflicts since the Second World War [...] global crises are lasting longer and becoming more expensive at a time when the gap between humanitarian needs and funding is larger than ever. The average time that the ICRC has been present in its ten largest operations, for example, is forty-two years.” See Rebecca Brubaker, Will Bennett, and Hannah Ajelet Eriksen, “Towards common ground: Strategies for effective collaboration between the humanitarian and peacebuilding communities,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 2024, <https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/reviews-pdf/2025-03/towards-common-ground-strategies-for-effective-collaboration-927.pdf>

[4] A case in point is Canada’s treatment of indigenous peoples and communities: “The inter-generational effects of centuries of accumulated trauma also live in the way that Aboriginal peoples narrate their sense of identity and place in the world.” See Christina Woolner, “Canada’s Past: A Case Study in the Significance of Narratives in Healing Intractable Conflict,” *Beyond Intractability*, March 2009, <https://www.beyondintractability.org/casestudy/woolner-re-storying>.

[5] Sarah Jankowitz, “Sociopolitical implications of exclusive, intergroup perceptions of victims in societies emerging from conflict,” *Peacebuilding*, 5(3), 289–304, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2016.1237421>

This study is divided into three parts. The first part examines how different political actors in Yemen approach and shape memory to promote political narratives about the conflict. It also analyses key “memory practices” implemented by political actors, and how these constitute a framework for interpreting the past that prioritizes martyrdom narratives. In the second part, the study outlines the main representational precarities that victims face in Yemen as a result of this focus on martyrdom and how these are reflected in recent measures taken by the internationally recognized government vis-à-vis victims. The third part includes perspectives from select civil society organizations on dealing with the past in Yemen from the perspective of memorialization, memory work, and other processes of remembrance. The conclusion provides a summary of the main points surveyed in the report and recommendations for a victim-centered approach to memorialization and dealing with the past in Yemen.

## Methodology

Research on transitional justice in Yemen has met resistance because it questions structures of power, revealing how individual and collective actors are connected and how decision-making processes inform the allocation of political power and resources. It also has a markedly ethical dimension, as it touches on the vulnerability of victims and survivors and the complex factors that have led to their disempowerment in Yemeni society. The methodological approach used in this study takes into consideration these issues whilst trying to capture two different dynamics: the political discourses and politicization of memorialization in Yemen that hinder victim empowerment; and potential sites of politics and governance that may help Yemenis “make sense of violence as well as imagine and enact lives that sit alongside these experiences of harm.”<sup>[6]</sup>

The period selected for this research spans from April 2022, when the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) was established, until April 2025. The study analyzed the language used by political leaders to describe the conflict, its participants, and memorialization and commemoration in Yemen, particularly in social media spaces and on official websites. It draws from statements made by prominent pro-government actors between April 2022 and April 2025, as well as from select statements made by members of the de facto authorities in Sana’a during the same period. The broad dissemination of this political rhetoric, which casts opposing actors as mercenaries, terrorists, illegitimate, or foreign, suggests a collective reluctance to pursue conciliation by political leaders. The polarized nature of the discourse crowds out other narratives and creates obstacles to a victim-centered approach of memorialization and transitional justice. Further, these narratives are projected onto existing foci of collective memory, notably national holidays, encouraging the proliferation of new holidays imbued with partisan content. Rhetorical efforts to delegitimize members of other belligerent parties and a strong emphasis on martyrdom discourses pose obstacles to the recognition of violations and reparation to victims.

Against this background, the study surveyed a select number of representatives from Yemeni civil society organizations. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were organized around seven open-ended questions addressing a diverse array of topics, including the role of memory sites as spaces for education, the participation of civil society - including survivors and victims - in memorialization activities, and the transformation of personal

---

[6] Roxani Krystalli and Philipp Schulz, “Taking Love and Care Seriously: An Emergent Research Agenda for Remaking the Worlds in the Wake of Violence,” *International Studies Review*, March 2022, <https://academic.oup.com/isr/article/24/1/viac003/6527435?login=false>

and collective suffering into acts of healing and reconciliation. The questions were used to gather feedback based on participants' experiences and knowledge, aiming to identify key directions and patterns for memorialization and memory processes in Yemen. These interviews are part of ongoing efforts led by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies to feature victims' and survivors' voices in research and other knowledge production processes. The goal is to establish an evidence base to ensure that decisions and actions regarding transitional justice in Yemen are informed directly by victims, rather than having state authorities and other institutions - including international organizations - deciding what Yemeni victims and survivors need and want.

# War Narratives and Martyrdom Discourses in Yemen

Conflicts include an important component of armed confrontations and hostilities, but they also create a struggle between parties “for the perception, legitimacy and control over the story that defines winners and losers.”<sup>[7]</sup> An important part of the confrontation is the collective memory of the conflict<sup>[8]</sup> and the use of interpretations and narratives of the past to legitimize actions and perpetuate violence and conflict in the present.<sup>[9]</sup>

In the period under review (April 2022 – April 2025), political actors aligned with Yemen’s internationally recognized government, including representatives on its Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), portrayed the conflict with the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) as “a battle between state and non-state, between order and chaos, between republic and imamate.”<sup>[10]</sup> The common enemy was the “terrorist Houthi militias.”<sup>[11]</sup> They were: “the worst version of a dynastic clergy system,”<sup>[12]</sup> characterized by their “priesthood”<sup>[13]</sup> and “arrogance,”<sup>[14]</sup> amongst other attributes. The Houthis had an “expansionist project in the country,”<sup>[15]</sup> backed by Iran. By emphasizing these elements, political actors within the government contribute to an understanding and perception of the conflict as “a battle for liberation”<sup>[16]</sup> from the “Houthi terrorist militias.”<sup>[17]</sup>

<sup>[7]</sup> Khalil Gebara, “The war of narratives,” NOW, February 18, 2025, <https://nowlebanon.com/the-war-of-narratives/>

<sup>[8]</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, “Collective Memory of Intractable Conflicts,” in *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 137-173, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139025195.008>

<sup>[9]</sup> According to authors Nina Parish and Daniel Rugo, dealing with the past can help societies affected by armed conflict prevent violence, promote justice, and contribute to sustainable peace. However, collective memory is also fragmented and vulnerable to exploitation by political elites: “state institutions enforce amnesia over the past and dictate who is allowed to speak. The heritage of the conflict remains unresolved and can fuel new outbursts of violence and instability.” Nina Parish and Daniel Rugo, “Memories from the Margins: Violence, Conflict, and Counter-Narratives,” *Journal of the British Academy*, 2021, <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/3358/JBA-9s3-Memories-from-the-Margins.pdf>

<sup>[10]</sup> Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, June 3, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18jiTgtAGV/>

<sup>[11]</sup> Faraj al-Bahsani, X Post, August 25, 2024, [https://x.com/farag\\_albahsani/status/1827659184818606465?s=12](https://x.com/farag_albahsani/status/1827659184818606465?s=12) The designation of the Houthis as a terrorist militia has become more accentuated following the United States’ designation of Ansarallah as a “foreign terrorist organization” at the beginning of March 2025. See Marco Rubio, “Press Statement: Designation of Ansarallah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, March 4, 2025, <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-ansarallah-as-a-foreign-terrorist-organization>.

<sup>[12]</sup> Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, March 30, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18dosEymdo/>

<sup>[13]</sup> Abdullah al-Alimi, X post, August 24, 2023, <https://x.com/alalimibawzer/status/1694734192758706476?s=12>

<sup>[14]</sup> Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara’a), X post, December 13, 2024, <https://x.com/abuzar3a/status/1867684541709566338?s=12>

<sup>[15]</sup> Faraj al-Bahsani, X post, February 13, 2024, [https://x.com/farag\\_albahsani/status/1757454378452103181?s=12](https://x.com/farag_albahsani/status/1757454378452103181?s=12)

<sup>[16]</sup> Rashad al-Alimi, X post, April 18, 2023, <https://x.com/presidentrashad/status/1648372113223348224?s=12> “Aden was liberated from the grip of the terrorist militia beholden to the Iranian regime [...] it is an occasion and a starting point for the national liberation movement in all parts of the country.”

<sup>[17]</sup> Aiderous al-Zubaidi, X post, April 6, 2024, <https://x.com/aidrosalzubidi/status/1776687655469650174?s=12> “The liberation of the capital Aden from the Houthi terrorist militia was not only a victory for the capital Aden and the south but it was a victory of the Arab project

National holidays and other occasions, such as ceremonies involving speeches, the laying of wreaths, and the inauguration of memorial sites, constitute important “carriers of memory”<sup>[18]</sup> in Yemen, and contribute to shared understandings of the past and a sense of collective memory. They have now been repurposed by all parties to the conflict to fit “us versus them” narratives. In areas under the control of the internationally recognized government, holidays constitute an important occasion for political actors to voice ideological opposition to the Houthis and “the Imami project supported by the Iranian regime.”<sup>[19]</sup> Unity Day, celebrated on May 22, marking the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990, has been recast by some government officials in reference to the current conflict, “for facing challenges and threats, including those posed by Iran and its terrorist arms.”<sup>[20]</sup>

But national holidays have also served as platforms that expose the fissures on the government side. In April 2022, the same presidential decree that delegated power to the PLC established a Consultation and Reconciliation Commission (CRC) to consolidate “national consensus, unity of ranks, and desired partnership.”<sup>[21]</sup> However, in-fighting within the PLC created practical difficulties for the CRC in carrying out its mandate. Despite the establishment of a dedicated sub-committee on reconciliation and transitional justice, different members and parties within the government continued to pursue their own respective narratives that supported their versions of the past. Commemorations held by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), for example, highlight a separate, national (Southern) identity based on a common awareness of events, narratives, and ideas within the framework of South Yemen’s territory.<sup>[22]</sup> A day before Unity Day, the group commemorates Declaration of Disengagement Day on May 21, marking a failed 1994 attempt at Southern secession.<sup>[23]</sup>

---

led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the state of the United Arab Emirates.”

[18] Bronte Philips, “Martyrdom in Lebanon: An Evolution of Memory-Making,” Insights/XCEPT, May 10, 2023, <https://icsr.info/2023/05/10/martyrdom-in-lebanon-an-evolution-of-memory-making/>

[19] Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, March 20, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1SQPevsT26/>

[20] “Yemen Interior Minister Highlights Importance of National Unity,” Sabanet, May 24, 2025, <https://www.sabanew.net/story/en/129533>

[21] Waddah al-Jalil, “Yemen Stresses Role of Consultations and Reconciliation Commission in Backing Presidential Council,” Asharq Al-Awsat, August 15, 2022, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3816841/yemen-stresses-role-consultations-and-reconciliation-commission-backing>

[22] Mikkell Flohr, “Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities,” Critical Legal Thinking, April 25, 2023, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2023/04/25/benedict-andersons-imagined-communities/>

[23] “The STC Recommits on the 30th Anniversary of Disengagement Day to Restore State of the South and Build State of Partnership, Equal Citizenship, Development, Security, and Stability,” Southern Transitional Council website, May 21, 2024, <https://en.stcaden.com/posts/11765>

The Houthis celebrate some of the national days commemorated by government-aligned actors, but have also instituted their own holidays to supersede them. September 26, which marks the anniversary of the 1962 revolution that overthrew the Imamate, has been supplanted by a holiday on September 21, marking the Houthis' 2014 seizure of Sana'a. In recent years, the group has used excessive force and launched violent crackdowns on protesters and marchers marking the September 26 holiday.<sup>[24]</sup>

One consequence of the depiction of the conflict in Yemen as a binary positioning of two main sides - one "right" and the other "wrong"- is the portrayal of fallen soldiers and fighters as heroic sacrifices for a greater cause. On the government side, soldiers and fighters who fall in battle for the liberation of Yemen are considered martyrs. They are the ones "giving their blood" so that Yemenis can live "in freedom and dignity."<sup>[25]</sup> Martyrs are "heroic,"<sup>[26]</sup> "the symbols of victory, freedom, and dignity,"<sup>[27]</sup> "heroes who write with their pure blood the most wonderful heroic and sacrificial deeds,"<sup>[28]</sup> and "righteous."<sup>[29]</sup> In official statements, the STC calls for "Glory and immortality to the martyrs of the South."<sup>[30]</sup>

The Houthis have a broader "geography of martyrdom" that relies on a different narrative to justify their cause. With the outbreak of the war in Gaza, the group's anti-imperialist and anti-Western political stance hardened. This posture, and the Houthis' involvement in the broader Middle East crisis, have had practical consequences in terms of discourses of martyrdom, which no longer remain limited to the territory of Yemen, but also memorialize people who have lost their lives for Gaza and Palestine: "loyalty to the blood of the martyrs, with Gaza until victory."<sup>[31]</sup>

[24] "The Yemen Review, July-September 2024," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, October 16, 2024, <https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/july-sept-2024>. According to Amnesty International, "Houthi de facto authorities have carried out an alarming wave of arrests rounding up scores of largely peaceful demonstrators, who gathered to commemorate the anniversary (2023) of the country's 26th of September Revolution." See "Yemen: wave of arrests by Houthi de facto authorities following demonstrations," Amnesty International, September 29, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/yemen-wave-of-arrests-by-houthi-de-facto-authorities-following-demonstrations/>. See also Ibrahim Jalal, "A Yemen in Their Own Image," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 26, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/09/remaking-yemen-in-their-own-image>

[25] Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, June 3, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18jiTgtAGV/>

[26] Abdullah al-Alimi, X post, March 27, 2025, <https://x.com/alalimibawzer/status/1905270610067861740?s=12>

[27] Tareq Saleh, X post, March 22, 2023, <https://x.com/tarikyemen/status/1638573399977914368?s=12>

[28] Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara'a), X post, March 27, 2025, <https://x.com/abuzar3a/status/1905315089017684214?s=12>

[29] Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara'a), X post, April 6, 2024, <https://x.com/abuzar3a/status/1776616149741912086?s=46&t=8dUNIZoPHvmUCJwcYeL7ug>. See also Sultan al-Barakani, Facebook post, April 9, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CtnsVmfti/>

[30] "The STC Recommits on the 30th Anniversary of Disengagement Day to Restore State of the South and Build State of Partnership, Equal Citizenship, Development, Security, and Stability," Official website of the Southern Transitional Council, May 21, 2024, <https://en.stcaden.com/posts/11765>

[31] Mohammad al-Houthi, X post, August 2, 2024, [https://x.com/moh\\_alhouthi/status/1819406418627174600?s=12](https://x.com/moh_alhouthi/status/1819406418627174600?s=12). Examples of Houthis' "geography of martyrdom" include elegies in memory of Hassan Nasrallah (Lebanon), Hashem Safieddine (Lebanon), and Mohammed al-Deif (Palestine), as well as figures from the Iranian leadership. Commemorations involve events such as parades which are attended by large numbers of people. See "Million-man march in capital Sana'a in steadfast with Gaza despite the nose of every agent," Sabanet, July 19, 2024, <https://saba.ye/en/news3350486.htm>

## Implications for Victims and Reconciliation in Yemen

For reconciliation and other processes aspiring to heal societal wounds, the emphasis placed on martyrdom presents many obstacles.<sup>[32]</sup> Soldiers and fighters are portrayed as great heroes who stand firm at the frontlines to protect the Yemeni homeland from “occupiers”<sup>[33]</sup> and “colonizers.”<sup>[34]</sup> Their lives – which belong to a cause greater than themselves – are surrendered with selfless sacrifice. However, a construction that over-exceptionalizes heroes leaves little room for anyone else. Conflict victims, and the devastating consequences they have suffered, are largely absent – except to the extent that they fit within the hero/martyr narrative.

The emphasis on martyrs to legitimize and reinforce the liberation narrative constitutes an existing structure, a schema that assimilates other categories of people affected by the conflict. For instance, the difficulties that families go through – economic hardship, and lack of access to adequate housing and clean water, to name only a few – are framed by the government as the result of a catastrophic humanitarian situation caused by the “Iranian regime-backed Houthi terrorist militias.”<sup>[35]</sup> In such a scenario, families acquire martyr-like qualities. Their suffering renders them part of the same group as martyrs and gives them a political edge that is not readily available to others who have suffered violence in Yemen.

Similarly, women are portrayed as “fighters for human dignity”<sup>[36]</sup> who are “resisting the compelling circumstances of war to protect the identity of our country, its social fabric and the future of successive generations.”<sup>[37]</sup> They have stood “with their male brethren”<sup>[38]</sup>

[32] Marta Mendes, “Transitional Justice and Reconciliation in Yemen,” The Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, February 24, 2026, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/26418>

[33] Mohammed al-Houthi, X post, October 13, 2024, [https://x.com/moh\\_alhouthi/status/1845527730659455436?s=12](https://x.com/moh_alhouthi/status/1845527730659455436?s=12) “The memory remains. A volcanic force for free people and a torch of independence in the face of the occupiers.”

[34] Tareq Saleh, X post, November 30, 2023, <https://x.com/tarikeyemen/status/1730159257536868717?s=12> “The will of the people is invincible, no matter how much repression and abuse they face. It reinforces Yemenis’ belief in the inevitability of victory over Iranian colonialism, through its Houthi arm, and its humiliated and defeated withdrawal from Yemen.”

[35] Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, January 14, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EBKjcmdm9/>

[36] Rashad al-Alimi, Facebook post, March 27, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1DmhqQ3K2N/>

[37] “President Al-Alimi Congratulates Yemeni Women on the International Women’s Day Anniversary,” Official Website of Rashad al-Alimi, March 7, 2024, <https://presidentalalimi.net/en/news387.html>

[38] Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (Abu Zara’a) X post, April 6, 2024, <https://x.com/abuzar3a/status/1776616149741912086?s=46&t=8dUNIZoPHvmUCJwcYeL7ug>

and have “sacrificed themselves in the battle for the liberation, the greatest meaning of sacrifice.”<sup>[39]</sup> As victims of conflict-related violations, women are nevertheless largely invisible even though they continue to be disproportionately impacted by conflict and violence with very limited access to justice or redress.<sup>[40]</sup>

One important characteristic of the current system and political discourse is the extension of the recognition of the suffering and sacrifice of martyrs to their relatives and families—that is, to social units that are biologically related to martyrs. By doing so, the system overlooks non-biological relationships<sup>[41]</sup> and alternative forms of connection, care, and belonging. The recognition of victims by the state is, from this perspective, challenging, as it marks a departure from the existing system, which prioritizes a biological framework for the recognition of certain rights. A broader notion of “victim” thus challenges traditional views about the state and the meaning of citizenship, and seeks to foreground an alternative approach based on the recognition of victims as deserving of rights, notably the right to a remedy and reparations.<sup>[42]</sup>

One factor that renders this even more difficult in Yemen is the lack of a definition of a victim. In other words, there is no legal category for victims of armed conflict and violence. Yemen’s criminal code and other legal instruments define offenses and the corresponding punishments for violations. However, these offenses are different than those committed during armed conflict, which include war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is also not entirely clear what definition would apply to victims of violations that have not necessarily taken place during armed conflict, such as enforced disappearances.<sup>[43]</sup>

---

[39] Aiderous al-Zubaidi, X post, April 6, 2024, <https://x.com/aidrosalzubidi/status/1776687655469650174?s=12>

[40] See for instance, “Case Study: Addressing Incitement and Strengthening Protection for Women in Civic Space in Yemen,” Justice 4 Yemen Pact, April 13, 2026, <https://justice4yemenpact.org/case-study-addressing-incitement-and-strengthening-protection-for-women-in-civic-space-in-yemen/>

[41] Non-biological kinship (also known as fictive kinship) refers to how societies create systems of relatedness, obligation and belonging that are not based on blood (e.g., birth) or family ties (e.g., marriage). See Jason Antrosio “Anthropology of kinship,” Living Anthropologically, 2024, <https://www.livinganthropologically.com/cultural-2024/kinship/>

[42] “Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power,” United Nations General Assembly Resolution 40/34, November 29, 1985, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-basic-principles-justice-victims-crime-and-abuse>

[43] Persons who have been forcibly disappeared are considered victims of acts of enforced disappearance, which is a serious violation of multiple human rights. See “International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August,” United Nations, n.d., <https://www.un.org/en/observances/victims-enforced-disappearance>. According to the Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, “their families are entitled to obtain redress and have the right to adequate compensation, including as complete a rehabilitation as possible.” See “Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance,” United Nations General Assembly Resolution 47/133, adopted December 18, 1992, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-protection-all-persons-enforced-disappearance>. Yemen has not ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons against Enforced Disappearance.

Victims continue to exist in a legal gap due to inadequate norms under Yemen's legal system and the failure to implement existing laws. Such problems predate the war - the definition of victimhood, and distinctions between victims and martyrs, were given significant attention by working groups at the National Dialogue Conference. The conference revealed a considerable divergence of views about such classifications, both between working groups and with respect to the contemporary national unity government.<sup>[44]</sup>

An aggravating factor is the near-total absence of the terms "victim" or "survivor" in the discourse of the political actors surveyed for this report. As a result, victims and survivors are assimilated into pre-existing structures and normative frameworks that apply to other categories of people. In many situations, victims are redefined and glossed as martyrs, particularly within the current political discourse.

---

<sup>[44]</sup> Marta Mendes, "Transitional Justice and Reconciliation in Yemen," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, February 24, 2026, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/26418>

## Perspectives of Yemeni Civil Society Organizations

This section includes findings based on consultations carried out with a select number of Yemeni civil society representatives working on diverse human rights issues. The perspectives below suggest paths that could help ensure that memorialization acknowledges the suffering of victims in Yemen, that future memorialization processes complement other transitional justice mechanisms, and, above all, that they help prevent the recurrence of human rights violations and abuses.

The Sana'a Center will continue organizing consultations with various stakeholders, including minorities, women, and youth, in order to obtain a broader set of views and build a body of knowledge that can support future initiatives in the field of memorialization. The following perspectives highlight considerations that should guide future efforts in the realm of memorialization and lay the ground for future transitional justice efforts in Yemen.

### Memorialization Should Not Replace Other Pillars of Transitional Justice

Participants highlighted the importance of working on transitional justice in a holistic manner and insisted that memorialization initiatives should not be carried out to the detriment of other transitional justice mechanisms, such as accountability. As one interviewee noted, “multiple mechanisms for transitional justice are needed in Yemen.”<sup>[45]</sup> One proposal concerned the establishment of an independent body to oversee the transitional justice file, which would include memorialization processes. According to another interviewee, “this entity should be composed of technocrats and selected according to very high standards. It should lead, inter alia, discussions about the best approach and mechanisms for the Yemeni context, whether the country should pursue transitional justice or reconciliatory justice.”<sup>[46]</sup> According to another interviewee, the future members of this authority “should be untainted by blood or involvement in past conflicts.”<sup>[47]</sup>

---

<sup>[45]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, October 20, 2025.

<sup>[46]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, October 15, 2025.

<sup>[47]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

Among those consulted, some were unsure about the feasibility of working on memorialization whilst the conflict is still ongoing. Other participants, however, pointed out that there are already so-called memory initiatives taking place across the country. Examples included the Memory Museum in Taiz,<sup>[48]</sup> inaugurated in September 2025, and a memory installation in the Al-Dhahi passage on the southwest side of the city.<sup>[49]</sup> There were also references to initiatives that pre-dated 2014, such as murals in Aden dedicated to the forcibly disappeared, and those in Sana'a by artist Murad Subay, designed to shed light on the unknown fate and whereabouts of thousands of missing persons in Yemen. Other examples included the publication of an investigative piece on enforced disappearances by the Al-Niddaa newspaper in 2011. The Al-Liqa newspaper also published a book on enforced disappearances that have occurred during different historical periods, going back to 1962.

Interviewees also pointed to other memory initiatives in Yemen, such as the holidays in September and in October, which mark “milestones in Yemeni history.” However, the majority of existing initiatives are not integrated into a broader strategy for dealing with the past. One participant described the past as a “living political force.”<sup>[50]</sup> For this interviewee, without genuine efforts to “resolve the issues of the past,” “the past will keep returning and reproducing itself in our social, political, and every[day] life.”<sup>[51]</sup> A reckoning with the past, especially with a violent past, requires political commitment and support. In addition, the participation of civil society is fundamental to fostering truth, empowering victims, and preventing the manipulation of sites of memory for political purposes. As one interviewee pointed out, “the idea of memorialization initiated by a governance actor raises many questions about impartiality.”<sup>[52]</sup>

---

[48] See “Case Study: Art as a Bridge to Justice – Stories from Taiz’s Memory Museum,” Justice 4 Yemen Pact, November 10, 2025, <https://justice4yemenpact.org/case-study-art-as-a-bridge-to-justice-stories-from-taizs-memory-museum/>. The Taiz Memory Museum is an initiative implemented by the SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties in partnership with the Mothers of Abductees Association and the DT Institute, in collaboration with the Office of Culture and the Office of Siege Affairs.

[49] The Al-Dhahi passage is a former checkpoint manned by the Houthis. Between 2015 and 2024, the Houthis had total control over the passage, which was one of the main entry and exit points to and from Taiz. Hundreds of human rights violations were attributed to the group during this period, including degrading treatment, killings, arrests, assaults, and denial of humanitarian assistance. “Al-Dahei - Taiz,” Mena Mapping, n.d., <https://mappingmena.org/map/yemen/aldahei-taiz>. According to the International Committee for the Red Cross, the battle for the control of Taiz placed the city and its inhabitants in a state of siege, see “Yemen: Much needed aid finally reaches the city of Taiz,” International Committee of the Red Cross, March 22, 2017, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/yemen-much-needed-aid-finally-reaches-city-taiz>

[50] Interview with a civil society representative, October 20, 2025.

[51] Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

[52] Interview with a civil society representative, October 20, 2025.

## The Importance of Documentation for Future Memorialization Purposes

For the participants, documentation constitutes one of the most important aspects of memorialization, recording important factual information about events. Personal testimonies also play a key role in memorialization processes as they allow victims and survivors to share their experiences of conflict and violence. They reflect inherently subjective experiences, but contribute to establishing the truth about victims and perpetrators. Interviewees considered it important to have standards for corroborating the veracity of information. According to one interviewee, “stories must be verified, documented, and true. There are many fabricated stories and accounts of violations. Truth must be the primary standard for any story.”<sup>[53]</sup>

When asked how victims’ perspectives can be integrated in memorialization processes without re-traumatizing them, one interviewee emphasized that any interaction with victims must preserve their “safety, to avoid them being targeted again.”<sup>[54]</sup> Another interviewee said that in dealing with victims, the principle of informed consent throughout all stages of testimony collection was paramount.<sup>[55]</sup> Furthermore, it was considered important to provide safe spaces for interviews with victims and survivors in order to prevent exposure to political and other types of influence; to ensure the anonymity of information from those providing their testimonies; and to provide psychological assistance in order to emotionally support victims during the process of documenting traumatic events.

## Stakeholders Involved in Memorialization Processes

Interviewees highlighted the importance of involving victims and their families, civil society organizations, and the broader community in consultations about memorialization and related activities. But this involvement would likely not be the same across Yemen. As one interviewee explained, “before launching any memorialization project, we must first understand what the people of each governorate want in terms of transitional justice. Civilian victims know best what is appropriate for their areas.”<sup>[56]</sup>

---

<sup>[53]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, October 15, 2025.

<sup>[54]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

<sup>[55]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 30, 2025.

<sup>[56]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, October 20, 2025.

Consultations should also involve civil society organizations, organizations with technical mandates and expertise – such as the National Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Human Rights Violations and the National Committee for Prisoners and Detainees, lawyers and legal experts, journalists, artists, academic institutions, and governmental and local authorities, among others. Echoing an earlier point, some participants argued that these processes should be overseen by an independent authority responsible for memorialization and the broader transitional justice file.

This independent body would help prevent the political manipulation of narratives and, in addition, would promote the inclusivity of victims who are often marginalized or forgotten in memorialization processes, such as minorities, youth, and women. One interviewee explained that in the case of women, “they are directly affected, deeply pained, and often silent in ongoing conflicts. They must be consulted as a key group whose voices must be heard.”<sup>[57]</sup> Another interviewee explained that “We need to keep in mind the importance of not forgetting the neglected ones, people from minorities, from disadvantaged groups, and others who are unfortunately easily forgotten.”<sup>[58]</sup>

## Memorialization Towards Reconciliation: The Role of Education

Interviewees considered education fundamental for reconciliation. One interviewee explained that education was important to prevent the misuse of memorialization: “Our biggest challenge with memorialization and memorial sites is that some people may feel tempted to use them as sites to judge others. We need to resist that and to work hard on a culture of listening and understanding.”<sup>[59]</sup> Interviewees also said that generally, memorialization processes should be based on Yemen’s diversity and on the multiplicity of experiences within its society. As another interviewee noted, “memorialization should tell first and foremost a story about our diversity as Yemenis.”<sup>[60]</sup> In order for this to happen, it was considered essential to make Yemen’s education systems respond to the country’s multicultural diversity.

---

<sup>[57]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 30, 2025.

<sup>[58]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

<sup>[59]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

<sup>[60]</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, memorialization processes should build on stories that “mend wounds” and that “help avoid the repetition of suffering.” According to one interviewee, memory sites should thus draw from “inspirational and motivating stories” that showcase resilience and transformation, and not turn sites of memory into places “of bloodshed, confrontation, and negativity.”<sup>[61]</sup> It was also considered very important for future activities – such as remembrance activities and others falling under the umbrella of memorialization – to be handled with sensitivity. Unless managed in this manner, memory work in Yemen could easily “reignite old wounds.”<sup>[62]</sup> It was therefore considered important to remain mindful of this risk and to handle any activities and processes “with great sensitivity – in a way that promotes transitional justice and reconciliation and not the opposite.”<sup>[63]</sup>

It was suggested that one way to avoid scenarios of confrontation was to keep sight of the end goal of memorialization and other transitional justice processes: “avoiding the repetition of the same mistakes and of suffering” and “[leaving] an example for future generations to learn from.”<sup>[64]</sup> Education was said to play a very important role in this process as a vector to “promote understanding of the diversity within the country.”<sup>[65]</sup> One interviewee highlighted that “the most important thing when addressing violence, internal conflicts, and civil wars, is to include in our education system the values of dialogue and diversity.”<sup>[66]</sup>

## Toward a Victim-Centered Approach to Dealing with the Past in Yemen

This paper is guided by the belief that the construction of memory and the ways in which the past is memorialized are fundamental factors affecting Yemeni society’s ability to heal from a violent past and achieve sustainable reconciliation. In developing a way forward that promotes memory of the past and memorialization practices, many reflections and discussions remain to be held on how to proceed with the physical, emotional, and psychological scars left by conflicts and violence in Yemen<sup>[67]</sup>: How can society deal with the past without reopening wounds? Without jeopardizing the prospects of a future peace agreement? How far back in the country’s history should memory processes reach? How can we prevent the manipulation of memorialization?

<sup>[61]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, December 4, 2025.

<sup>[62]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, October 15, 2025.

<sup>[63]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[64]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 24, 2025.

<sup>[65]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[66]</sup> Interview with a civil society representative, November 30, 2025.

<sup>[67]</sup> David Bloomfield, “The Context of Reconciliation,” in David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds.), *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, International IDEA Handbook Series, 2003, p. 51, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/reconciliation-after-violent-conflict-handbook.pdf>

To date, political dialogue on victims and on other transitional justice issues has been very limited. Despite the important breakthrough achieved during the 2025 Yemen International Forum,<sup>[68]</sup> which featured a session with political party representatives on the topic of transitional justice, more engagement with Yemen's political class is needed. This report has documented the extent to which political actors continue framing each other as violent antagonists, rendering them reluctant to pursue reconciliation or embark on a broader process of reckoning with the past and with the harm that Yemenis have suffered. It also argues that attempts to develop a victim-centered approach to transitional justice in Yemen will have to contend with the focus of political actors on war narratives and martyrdom discourses. Acknowledging the diverse experiences of victims from across Yemeni society and promoting platforms where victims share their views in their own voices are critical steps for reconciliation. Memorialization has a fundamental role to play in this process by helping to create a public memory of the past and ensuring that victims' experiences are acknowledged as part of Yemen's history.<sup>[69]</sup>

Memorialization is the fifth pillar of transitional justice, alongside accountability, truth-telling, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.<sup>[70]</sup> According to the Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, memorialization is a vital tool for enabling societies to emerge from the cycle of hatred and conflict and begin taking definite steps towards building a culture of peace.<sup>[71]</sup> The following recommendations are offered as a guide for national and international stakeholders to promote memorialization and other processes for dealing with the past that take into consideration their sensitive and delicate nature in the Yemeni context and that are meaningful for - and informed by - those who have been most affected by violations and violence. The recommendations are a starting point for further practice and knowledge production on dealing with the past, healing, and reconciliation in Yemen. Yemeni civil society organizations have a fundamental role to play in further developing best practices to achieve comprehensive, inclusive guidance that adequately supports truth and memory initiatives in Yemen.

---

[68] "Yemen International Forum 2025 Report: Dialogue for a Stable Yemen and a Secure Region," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, August 4, 2025, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/25152>

[69] "The importance of memorialization processes in addressing armed violence: a path to accountability and peace," Action on Armed Violence, September 9, 2024, <https://aoav.org.uk/2024/the-importance-of-memorialisation-processes-in-addressing-armed-violence-a-path-to-accountability-and-peace/>

[70] "A/HRC/54/24: International legal standards underpinning the pillars of transitional justice - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Fabián Salvioli," United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, July 10, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5424-international-legal-standards-underpinning-pillars-transitional>

[71] David Bloomfield, "The Context of Reconciliation," in David Bloomfield, Teresa Barnes and Luc Huyse (eds.), *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, International IDEA Handbook Series, 2003, p. 51, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/reconciliation-after-violent-conflict-handbook.pdf>

### **To the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen:**

- Establish a national human rights institution in full accordance with the Paris Principles.
- Ratify core human rights treaties and optional protocols, including but not limited to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.
- Respond positively to any pending requests from Special Procedures Mandate Holders and address a standing invitation to the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence, as well as to the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, to make official visits to the country.
- Initiate discussions with civil society organizations, with the aim of adopting a legal definition of “victim.” Take active steps to raise awareness on the adoption of a status for victims, to ensure that victims and survivors have a chance to contribute and participate.
- Review the 2001 law on associations and foundations in order to allow for the registration of victims’ associations and networks. Address and remove security and other regulatory restrictions that hinder the activities and operations of civil society organizations in Yemen.
- In close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission, civil society organizations, and other national institutions, support the preparation of a national educational policy on the history of armed conflict and violence in Yemen, gender perspectives, and perspectives of religious minorities and historically marginalized groups. Ensure that such history is part of the national curriculum.
- In collaboration with civil society organizations, the United Nations, and other relevant institutions, identify the necessary steps to adopt a state archive policy that removes obstacles to public access to state archives and other sources of information relating to armed conflict and violence in Yemen.
- Identify the steps and conditions necessary for the adoption of a comprehensive public policy on memory on armed conflict and violence in Yemen that is informed by the findings of the National Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Human Rights Violations, relevant court rulings, and documentation conducted by civil society organizations.

### **To the United Nations and Other International Stakeholders:**

- Provide technical support to the National Commission for the Investigation of Alleged Human Rights Violations to develop policies and procedures on archival preservation, management, and access to the commission's archives.
- Support the organization of an interactive dialogue during the Human Rights Council session on the human rights situation in Yemen in the context of the ongoing armed conflict in the country.
- Provide technical guidance and financial support to the work of victims' organizations and other civil society groups working to promote truth, justice, and memorialization of human rights violations and violence committed during armed conflict, including during the pre-2014 period.
- Ensure that victims take part in peace negotiations so that the resulting decisions are compatible with their rights to truth, justice, and reparations. <sup>[72]</sup>

### **To Civil Society Organizations**

- Civil society organizations and governmental institutions working in the field of human rights should provide space for victims and the organizations that represent or assist them, so that they may voice their demands for transitional justice.
- To the extent rendered possible by the circumstances, all human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law should be properly documented, together with testimonies from the victims, for the preservation of historical memory and for use in future transitional justice processes.
- Implement processes that help ensure the adequate preservation and archiving of documentary and testimonial information, according to international best practices, and the necessary legal and regulatory frameworks at the national, regional, and international levels.

---

[72] "Visit to Colombia: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparation, and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence." United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, July 11, 2024, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/57/50/Add.1>



**Marta Mendes** is an independent consultant and a graduate from the European University Institute and The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. For seven years, Marta worked as a delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross. Her last two missions were in Yemen (2015-2017) and in Syria (2017-2019), where she worked as a Protection Coordinator. Since 2019, Marta has been carrying out research on transitional justice in Yemen. Her current work focuses on developing mapping tools and similar methods to identify organizations and initiatives in Yemen that support victims and survivors in accessing assistance and seeking redress for human rights violations. Marta is also engaged in advocacy to enhance the engagement of the international community and promote their support to justice and redress in Yemen.

*This publication was produced as part of the Supporting Political Dialogue for Peace in Yemen program, implemented by the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and CMI-Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation and funded by the European Union.*



[www.sanaacenter.org](http://www.sanaacenter.org)

