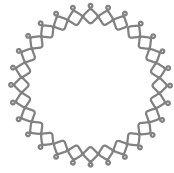




YEMEN
INTERNATIONAL FORUM
منتدى اليمن الدولي
Stockholm 2022

THE YEMEN INTERNATIONAL FORUM 2022: ABRIDGED REPORT





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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.

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ABSTRACT

With few advances on Yemen's formal peace track since the 2016 Kuwait negotiations, the UN-led effort to achieve a sustainable peace must be better integrated with Yemeni initiatives if it is to succeed. This was the premise of the Yemen International Forum held on June 17-19, 2022, in Stockholm, Sweden, which brought together international actors with Yemeni political stakeholders, individuals involved in parallel initiatives to the political process, youth and civil society representatives, experts and academics. By providing a platform for these 205 stakeholders, 71 percent of them Yemeni, to envision a post-war Yemen and explore creative solutions for the many challenges en route to it, the forum aimed to ensure groundwork progresses in six critical areas: Political Settlement, Political Life, The Southern File, The Economy, Reconciliation & Justice, and Security. YIF participants highlighted ideas, opportunities stemming from local-level initiatives and potential new directions to overcome challenges to a sustainable peace so that a Yemeni-led, internationally supported course can be charted. A fuller version of this abridged report is available through the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies.

INTRODUCTION

International efforts to bring peace to Yemen secured a two-month truce from the warring parties in April and facilitated two further extensions. Diplomacy through the formal UN-led peace track strives to convert a truce into a permanent cease-fire and formal peace deal. Even if this goal is achieved, this formal political process cannot succeed in bringing a lasting peace to Yemen on its own. Moving beyond a cease-fire requires Yemenis to start sculpting the final framework of the political settlement, which in turn requires wrestling with a long list of difficult issues, such as: What shape should the state take? How can the economy be rebuilt and state institutions, split for years between Sana'a and Aden, be reintegrated? What roles will exist for key players on both sides of the larger conflict? How should the army be structured and former fighters integrated into society and new roles? What sort of national security strategy is needed? How and when should southern issues be integrated? What national reconciliation and accountability mechanisms can heal deep and painful societal divisions? What roles can political parties and civil society play in restoring communities, cities, regions and the nation? Where will the capital even be located? These sensitive issues are among many that are critical for Yemenis to work out.

The Yemen International Forum (YIF), held June 17-19, 2022, in Stockholm, Sweden, sought to launch that process, though work began many months earlier to identify issues and bring as diverse a group of participants from across Yemen as possible to meet with each other and relevant international settlement actors. Beyond highlighting the ideas that YIF participants brought forward during discussions and workshops, the forum also served as a discrete platform for Yemeni political stakeholders to converse, and for international actors to engage meaningfully with stakeholders and to brief them on international concerns including the truce and current peace efforts.

Follow-up research and activities continue to evolve from the dialogue in Stockholm. Potential areas for follow-up discussions, research and refinement that were identified through the YIF sessions are noted under key outcomes for each theme below, with the hope that as ideas are shaped and refined they will influence the domestic and international stakeholders involved as well as the formal peace process. In this way, any final settlement that ends fighting on the ground will have the best chance of being sufficiently tailored to Yemen's needs to survive the monumental tasks of reintegrating state institutions, reconciling Yemenis and rebuilding the economic, security, political and social constructs so profoundly warped and fragmented by the prolonged war.

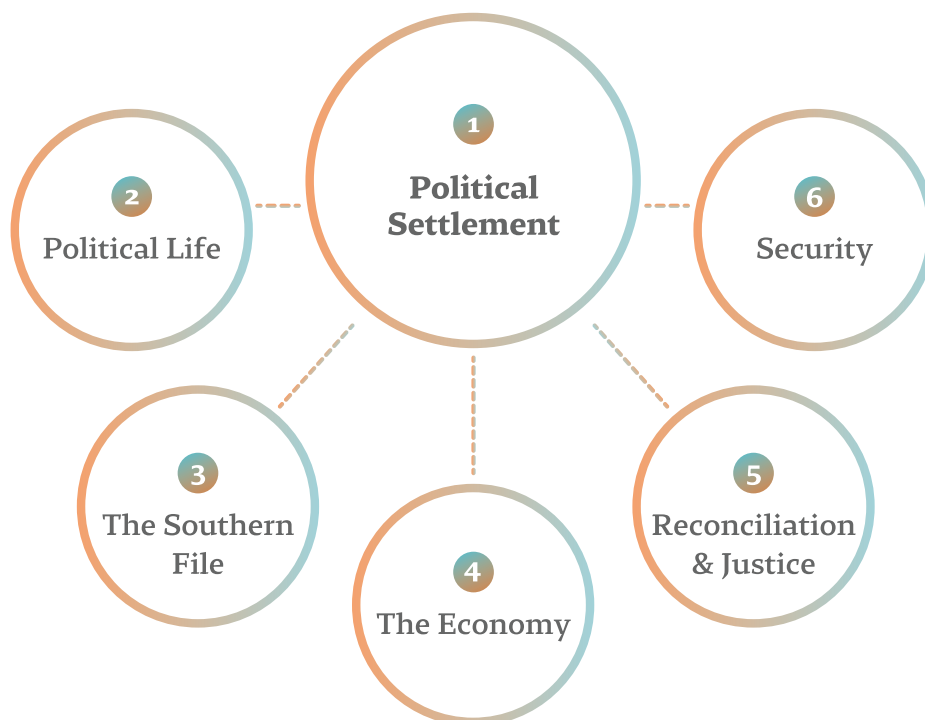
PREPARATION FOR THE FORUM

From the outset, the design of the Yemen International Forum was grounded in the idea that the discussions and processes be Yemeni-owned and Yemeni-led, with international stakeholders primarily engaged as active listeners in the sessions. Preparation for the Stockholm forum involved broad consultations, including 64 key informant interviews and 15 roundtables engaging approximately 150 individuals from February through April 2021. These included major political stakeholders and civil society activists, Yemeni and international experts and practitioners, representatives from the UN Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen, international non-governmental organizations involved in Track II initiatives.

Discussions focused on six themes proposed by Sana'a Center experts: Political Settlement, Political Life, The Southern File, The Economy, Reconciliation & Justice, and Security. These consultations, conducted primarily online, were combined with desk research carried out by the Sana'a Center's thematic experts, resulting in six internal discussion papers used to inform the forum agenda and provided to session facilitators.

The background process of YIF was guided by a comprehensive methodology note that delineated the selection and prioritization of sub-topics under the six thematic files. This was framed as follows: 1) issues that can be addressed inside the UN-led political process; 2) issues best addressed in informal complementary processes; and 3) issues that can be addressed ahead of a political settlement.

The Yemen International Forum Themes



Diplomatic outreach ahead of the forum included meetings with the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, the European Union, the Netherlands, France, the United States and the United Kingdom. Outreach to domestic actors included governors, cabinet ministers, representatives from the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) and the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and members of the recently established Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and associated committees. Ultimately, 205 participants, 71 percent of them Yemeni and 32 percent of them women, took part in the YIF.

Forum discussions aimed to provide practical guidance that can strengthen both the formal political process and complementary Yemeni-led mediation processes. YIF participants identified areas where mechanisms are or would be needed but currently do not exist, and also examined how to improve links between formal and informal initiatives.

Political Settlement: The Overarching Need

YIF participants widely viewed ending the war as the overarching requirement for significant progress across all themes; while a series of truces have instilled relative calm nationwide since April and allowed for piecemeal progress in some areas, even these gains will remain tentative unless integrated within formal peace negotiations. Track I settlement actors, including the UN special envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, and regional, American and European envoys, briefed YIF participants in plenary sessions and held focused, private bilateral discussions on the sidelines of the forum.

Political Settlement sessions acknowledged the need for a final framework to address regional security concerns, especially those of Saudi Arabia, but Yemeni and international participants generally agreed that, for a lasting peace, Yemenis must decide Yemen's needs. Doing so will require inclusivity in shaping the final settlement, and drawing in political parties outside the internationally recognized government's new Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) along with civil society actors and tribes. Several of these diverse actors, focusing on the specific themes of the forum, were asked to identify what could begin prior to a settlement deal that would both ease the socioeconomic burdens on Yemeni civilians and prepare the way for quick and united post-war steps to shore up the peace.

Key Outcomes

- A common vision of a secure future for Yemen, established through dialogue between the warring sides, could facilitate the many transactional issues required to reach a settlement.
- For the best chance at security and stability, a settlement agreement must:
 - address national security concerns of regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia;
 - dismantle non-state forces and require them to give up their weapons; and
 - deter external threats by grounding a deal in international law; and

- Be shaped in an inclusive manner, considerate of Yemen's political, societal and geographic diversity.
- Tap tribal leaders to document truce violations, secure roads and public spaces and ensure stability within their local areas. Consult directly with tribal figures on how they can best support peace efforts in their local and regional contexts going forward.

Political Life

The Yemeni government body now primarily responsible for guiding the war to a close is the eight-member PLC, led by Rashad al-Alimi. Formed in April in Riyadh as a replacement for the Yemeni presidency, its members represent the main political-military factions on the ground fighting Houthi forces. Creation of the PLC was generally supported by Yemen's political parties, the international community and by many YIF participants, despite concerns about its exclusion of non-military civil-political actors.

Yemeni political life encompasses a full array of actors and organizations, many of which have been fundamentally weakened by the prolonged conflict. Representatives of these political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), syndicates, trade unions and tribes used YIF sessions to look at how they can rebuild internally, the roles they can play now and in the future, and how they can influence the parties to the conflict and the UN peace process to ensure their concerns and interests are taken into account. Post-war Yemen will be defined in large part by how well these sectors of society reform and engage. Civil society, trade unions and professional syndicates were early victims of Yemen's war, with most unions closing and many of the surviving CSOs having shifted their activities to the humanitarian aid response. During the YIF, civil society actors focused on how to prepare to shift again, to participate in Yemen's reconstruction and reconciliation.

Key Outcomes

- Assess changes needed to party leadership, organization and programs in light of the truce and the new PLC governing structure.
- Address the insufficiency of data available for defining the scope of community needs in areas such as electricity and infrastructure.
- Invest in virtual tools for communication between party members and officials in and outside Yemen, and among parties more broadly.
- Address the lack of meaningful representation of women in the political sphere by:
 - assisting women in attaining positions of decision-making authority, locally and nationally;
 - creating zero-tolerance gender discrimination policies to ensure a unified response from civil society to harmful gender-based policies;

- pressuring the international community to integrate women into decision-making processes in all areas rather than bringing them in only to discuss “women’s issues”;
- protecting women peace-builders from security threats; and
- ensuring wartime gains, such as the broader acceptance of women working outside the home, are not lost when the war ends.
- Address the exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in political processes by:
 - setting up advisory panels on diversity, which can act in a consultative role with UN agencies or others on matters such as ensuring curriculums incorporate a better understanding of Yemen’s minority communities;
 - reviewing legislation to criminalize racism and discrimination; ensuring constitutional protections for minorities are included during state-building; and
 - establishing a neutral state judicial system, while ensuring access to international courts and laws when discriminatory practices are ignored.
- Improve the selection process for, and diversity of, Track II efforts, and create platforms for Track II organizations that are free from donor pressures or dictates, allowing local groups to coordinate among themselves.
- Initiate strategic planning, training and capacity-building among CSOs that promotes financial independence, prioritizes partnerships, and emphasizes sustainability and alternative funding schemes.
- Encourage Yemeni authorities and the international community to involve local communities in needs assessments and program planning, and to allow for real, rather than symbolic, participation in international political discussions.
- Develop funding strategies and create trade union networks that collectively promote and sustain union activities.

The Southern File

Formation of the PLC brought with it a formal role at the highest level of decision-making for southern actors, which was broadly welcomed – with caveats – by YIF participants in sessions focused on southern Yemen. The STC, strengthened by its affiliated, Emirati-backed fighting forces, has cast itself as the sole representative of the south, but other southern actors present agreed the PLC cannot be effective if it marginalizes any southern constituencies. They also advised the PLC to be transparent about its appointments, end armed groups’ control of population centers, act quickly to provide public services and support an intra-southern dialogue, which participants saw as critical to unifying southern positions ahead of peace talks. Another key issue of consensus among southern leaders present was the need to focus on local control of the south’s natural resources and to begin a structured decentralization of public revenue collection and decision-making.

Key Outcomes

- Convene an inclusive intra-southern dialogue with international support to build trust, unite southern factions around common understandings, and address long-term southern Yemeni goals. Most southern groups represented at the forum preferred neutral, international mediation for such a dialogue.
- Focus attention on local control of resources and decentralization, possibly drawing on gains made in the 2013-14 National Dialogue Conference. Toward this end, seek out independent collection and transparent sharing of resource-related data, so potential revenue streams are fully understood.
- Create mechanisms to transition from dominant local groups exerting informal governing authority to formal governance by the PLC to improve services.
- Advise the PLC on improving living standards and basic services, recognizing this will require ending the free reign of armed groups, building institutions of government and dealing seriously with corruption.

The Economy

Within the economic file, YIF participants engaged in discussions on how to ameliorate the country's economic deterioration in sessions focusing on the central bank and commercial banking sector, development and humanitarian aid, Yemen's private sector and missed opportunities. Banking and financial sector actors from throughout Yemen also hammered out a three-pronged initiative to: restore the banking sector's capacity to facilitate foreign trade and reduce the cost of imported goods; restore currency stability, narrow the divergence of old and new rials and prepare the groundwork for reunifying the currency; and address the country's liquidity crisis. To succeed, participants agreed technical and financial support is needed from the international community along with the direct involvement of the UN special envoy's office.

YIF participants identified short-term socioeconomic improvements that could help support a peace settlement and provide the foundations for a stable political and security environment. These included supporting local food production, improving service delivery and preventing further deterioration of state institutions. Participants also noted the obstacles to such projects, such as insecurity, endemic corruption and water scarcity.

Key Outcomes

- Create an inclusive mechanism to engage key stakeholders and generate political buy-in for a three-pronged banking initiative, drafted by YIF participants primarily from Yemen's banking sector, to address central bank divisions, the currency crisis and liquidity issues.
- Empower the private sector by directly confronting barriers to international trade and obstacles to domestic commerce by:

- expanding operations at the air and sea ports in Al-Mahra governorate and in Mukalla, Hadramawt;
- resuming large-scale overland trade with Saudi Arabia and Oman; and
- opening, rebuilding and maintaining roads along key trade routes, which will require support from the international community.
- Consider, through further research and consultations, where and how best to:
 - invest in alternative energy production;
 - improve access to microfinance opportunities;
 - engage the Yemeni diaspora to help reverse the “brain drain” the country has experienced during the war; and
 - redirect development policies toward improving productivity in agriculture, fisheries and other food-related sectors.
- In support of development policies, address water scarcity by shifting to rain-fed, fast-maturing crops less impacted by climate change and enforcing environmental protection policies aimed at preventing the depletion and contamination of water basins.

Reconciliation & Justice

Once the war ends, Yemenis will not only be left to rebuild their state structures, economy, institutions and organizations; they will also need to reckon with the deep divisions, personal trauma and scars to the national psyche created by wartime abuses and crimes. YIF participants, including torture survivors, relatives of victims and victim advocates, sought ways to ensure reconciliation and justice are incorporated into the peace process despite any reluctance by political actors and warring parties.

Key Outcomes

- Explore ways to effectively engage in and coordinate efforts by CSOs, youth and women to actively lobby the UN special envoy's office for support on the inclusion of justice and reconciliation issues in the formal settlement process. This exploration could be done in conjunction with CSOs' planning to promote activities to build tolerance and cohesion.
- Support and promote artistic efforts to draw attention to the impact of war on ordinary people and memorialize civilians' experiences.
- Take a victim-centered approach that combines formal justice with reconciliation to ensure accountability.
- Seek international funding to offset costs of documenting violations, providing mental health support and other locally determined needs.
- Capitalize on the interest among youths and women to advance reconciliation and justice, and ensure support is not only focused on city centers.

- Create networks to adapt effective local mediation techniques and channel them for use in other localities or nationally.
- Identify potentially transferable elements of transitional justice frameworks used by other countries.

Security

In examining the imbalances within the military and security sectors, YIF participants considered how a post-war restructuring of Yemen's armed forces could ensure national security and the specific needs of individual governorates. These discussions focused on restructuring the military, the need to develop national defense and security strategies, the challenges of integrating fighters into the armed forces and the private sector, and salary payment schemes to incentivize accountability and professionalism among fighting forces before and after the war ends. Doing so while the country is still at war poses challenges, but YIF participants agreed organizational reforms could begin immediately to improve accountability and better protect communities. Participants also sought to shift security priorities on the ground away from the battlefield and toward human security by, for example, emphasizing community policing.

Key Outcomes

- Refine ideas to decentralize the armed forces, integrate fighters and provide basic salaries by establishing reserve forces under local control at the governorate level. Options exist at each juncture, which may vary based on regional needs, and should be fully explored in focused research and consultations. Elements to explore include:
 - Fighters from any armed group could enlist in their home governorate's reserve force;
 - local government security personnel could be drawn from reserve forces, with remaining reservists working in the civilian economy while receiving professional and vocational training;
 - some former fighters could be channeled to the military engineering corps, helping it to play an important role in reconstruction;
 - a national fund to help rehabilitate fighters;
 - a guaranteed basic military salary as a safety net so reserve personnel are financially able to leave armed groups;
 - how to work with the Interior and Defense ministries on clear criteria for integration and accurate numbers of actual fighters; and
 - when and how to engage donors and economic experts given that absorbing fighters is likely to significantly expand the state payroll, at least initially.

- Reform the Yemeni armed forces to address the security sector fragmentation that has made communities less safe. Suggested short- and medium-term steps toward accountability and professionalism include:
 - instituting an interim payment scheme to supplement or replace the irregular paychecks many fighters receive so integration and a degree of accountability can begin;
 - strengthening retention criteria;
 - building transparency into reforms to budgets and processes;
 - promoting early retirement and job rotation;
 - emphasizing community policing;
 - seeking out examples of local civil society improvements to security, such as Taiz's community safety programs, and striving to replicate them;
 - funding CSOs' accountability-related programs, such as those providing legal aid to prisoners;
 - transitioning toward prioritizing human security, through focused dialogue between civil society and military-security organizations; and
 - addressing the issue of untrained civilians who were recruited to fill officer ranks, without knowledge of laws or discipline.

CONCLUSION

Since the war began, the voices of Yemeni citizens, analysts and political stakeholders have been marginalized in international mediation efforts, which instead have been largely shaped by the interests of regional and international actors. What has been lost, then, is a deep understanding of the conflict dynamics and with that an ability to create implementable agreements. Within each of the themes considered at the YIF, participants began to sort what could be best addressed within the formal political process, when and how Yemeni-led processes may be more successful, and what measures can be taken ahead of a political settlement to improve Yemenis' lives now and prepare for the immediate post-war period.

That process played out across the themes. It meant looking at the applicability of local mediation methods to elements of a transitional justice and reconciliation framework. It prompted civilian and military actors to think creatively about how a post-war military structure would need to look in order to provide security and stability with its future personnel drawn from competing armed groups loyal to at least three regional powers. It led Yemeni bankers to work together on concrete steps to de-escalate the conflict between the CBY in Aden and Sana'a, and identify where they would require international support. Political leaders considered together how to influence the peace process through the newly established PLC and ensure that the war-focused presidential council does not neglect the very real and immediate civilian needs. Civil society actors discussed with Track II organizations the need to bring decision-making closer to the local level, with meaningful local involvement in planning to ensure programs' relevancy.

The 2022 YIF was conceived as a model for future platforms for Yemeni perspectives to be heard and incorporated into formal settlement processes. Work developing and refining the outcomes is continuing through follow-up consultations with YIF participants and others. Ultimately, when a final settlement emerges it should be built on a framework shaped by Yemenis, realistic in what it is asking parties to concede and cognizant of the local complexities and interests that would be integral in determining whether the peace is lasting or a prelude to further conflict.



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