

# Youth as Drivers of Transitional Justice

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**By:** Mohammed Wateeri and Qobol al-Absi

**Cover photo:** Students gather in the courtyard of Taiz University's College of Education at the start of a new semester on January 10, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed al-Basha.



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## Executive Summary

This paper explores the significant yet often overlooked role of youth in Yemen's transitional justice process. It is premised on the belief that any peace settlement must be accompanied by a transitional justice process to ensure its sustainability and to address all forms of injustice and violations that have occurred during the war. Crucially, it argues that any transitional justice process will be neither effective nor successful in achieving its goals without the meaningful and comprehensive participation of youth across all its mechanisms, from design and planning to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

The paper is based on an extensive desk review, a rapid survey of 24 respondents from multiple Yemeni governorates, including members of civil society organizations, youth activists, and university students, and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. It starts by providing context on the role of youth in Yemen's National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2013-14, with particular emphasis on their participation in the Transitional Justice Working Group. It highlights how young participants at the NDC prevented political parties complicit in human rights violations from bypassing justice efforts, enabling discussions to shift from formal debates aimed at achieving national reconciliation to addressing critical matters such as truth, accountability, redress, and victims' rights.

Consultations with young Yemenis and members of civil society reveal a generation that views itself as an architect, not just a beneficiary, of justice. They also reveal a profound conviction among youth that their active participation is the cornerstone of a genuine democratic transition in the country. However, their participation in public life and discussions on transitional justice remains limited and does not adequately reflect the significant contributions that Yemeni youth can make.

The study's findings point to numerous challenges impeding effective youth participation in transitional justice. Chief among these is the insufficient political will among the conflict parties to adopt a comprehensive justice framework, much less to incorporate youth participation into it. Second is the country's ongoing conflict and unstable security situation, which continues to threaten youth-led activities. Third, there is insufficient funding for youth initiatives and youth-led organizations working on transitional justice. Finally, the elitist nature of the very concept of transitional justice, and the limited awareness among young people of its roles and mechanisms, further hinder their participation.

In response to the findings above, this paper calls for systematic and comprehensive youth inclusion, moving beyond viewing them solely as "victims." It advocates for inclusion that spans all stages of transitional justice, from documentation and reparations to institutional reform and reconciliation. Furthermore, it stresses that transitional justice must transcend legal liability to also address the social and psychological scars left by conflict on society and youth. To achieve real progress in transitional justice and enhance the role of youth, a comprehensive approach is urgently needed. This should include the localization of transitional justice in Yemen, capacity-building for younger generations, institutional support, and the creation of a safe and sustainable environment that encourages meaningful participation by young people.

# 1. Introduction

Across the globe, transitional justice serves as an important internationally recognized framework for uncovering human rights violations, holding perpetrators accountable, providing redress to victims, establishing the rule of law, and preventing the recurrence of violence. Transitional justice, however, is not just a legal process, but a long-term social and political process aimed at rebuilding trust between citizens and state institutions and achieving national reconciliation.

In Yemen, discussions on transitional justice began to surface with the 2011 revolution and the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which included outcomes specifically related to redress, reparations, and institutional reform.<sup>[1]</sup> Youth had at the time emerged as a social force in the country, capable of driving change and demanding the establishment of principles of justice and equality. Despite limited political empowerment and the absence of institutional channels, they led an active movement that extended beyond political life to encompass social, economic, and cultural dimensions. They did this through fierce advocacy, and by establishing grassroots organizations and initiating creative projects to further their cause.

Yemen's democratic transition, however, was abruptly halted. Political leaders who participated in the NDC later found themselves entangled in a bloody civil and proxy war that has now entered its twelfth year. The ongoing conflict is the latest in a series of wars that have plagued Yemen's modern history, largely characterized by periodical violence, deep political and social divisions, and the widespread collapse of state institutions over the decades. These challenges have created a complex political and social landscape marked by significant human rights violations and unresolved historical grievances. Trust has consequently eroded between political and civil groups, further increasing the political system's fragility.

Since the outbreak of war in 2014, Yemeni youth have engaged in the conflict as both fighters and military leaders on opposing sides. At the same time, other youth have actively sought to promote peace by participating in Track II and Track III activities, efforts supported by the United Nations Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agenda.<sup>[2]</sup> Yet, the scale of their involvement in peacebuilding efforts is nowhere near enough and reflects a broader global issue. Experts have noted a clear gap in the inclusion and participation of youth in transitional justice frameworks worldwide, despite them being a key dimension of peace processes and essential mechanisms for sustaining peace and preventing the recurrence of violence.<sup>[3]</sup> In Yemen, over a decade of conflict has left a legacy of serious violations that demand an immediate, comprehensive transitional justice framework. To be effective, this process must bridge the gap between historical injustices and the violations. It must also ensure that Yemen's youth, an important demographic and underutilized driving force for transformative change, is at the heart of this process.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the extensive role of Yemeni youth in

[1] "National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document," The Republic of Yemen, 2014, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/masterdocument/1400>

[2] "Report of the Secretary-General on Youth and Peace and Security [S/2020/167]," United Nations, March 2, 2020, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2020/167>

[3] Anjli Parrin, "Advancing Peace through a Youth-Centered Approach to Transitional Justice," Interpeace, August 28, 2024, <https://www.interpeace.org/ri/outside-the-box-amplifying-youth-voices-and-views-on-yyps-policy-and-practice/advancing-peace-through-a-youth-centered-approach-to-transitional-justice/>

supporting transitional justice initiatives and provides policy recommendations for government entities and local and international NGOs to improve youth participation in achieving just and sustainable peace in Yemen.

Research for this paper utilized a mixed-methods approach for data collection, integrating qualitative insights from 11 in-depth interviews conducted between October and December 2025 with individuals from diverse legal, political, and civil society backgrounds. Additionally, qualitative and quantitative information were gathered through an electronic multiple-choice survey targeting 24 participants (15 males and 9 females) from various fields, including CSO members, youth activists, and university students. This was supplemented by a desk review of several studies, reports, and documents relevant to youth issues, transitional justice, and peace processes.

## 2. A Seat at the Table: The NDC Experience

The Yemeni revolution in February 2011 marked an important moment in the participation of young people in public life. The uprisings brought Yemeni youth, a demographic comprising over 30 percent of the population aged 15-29,<sup>[4]</sup> into decision-making circles, allowing them to shape the political landscape at the time.

The National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which took place from late 2013 to early 2014, was a vital platform for political dialogue among the country's diverse social groups and political factions. Among the participants were 40 young men and women who served on the NDC's working groups and played a critical role in discussions on transitional justice, one of the nine files addressed during the conference. Many political parties present at the NDC had been implicated in human rights violations during their time in power, which led many to undermine transitional justice efforts<sup>[5]</sup> and adopt defensive positions to protect their leaders from accountability and prosecution, and block calls for reparations and institutional reforms.<sup>[6]</sup> Young participants at the NDC, in contrast, were largely unburdened by the past and the perpetration of widespread violations, a freedom that allowed them to advocate for the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms and to engage in discussions about sensitive issues with a level of pragmatism and impartiality.<sup>[7]</sup> It also enabled them to adopt a more future-centered approach rather than just settling past conflicts.

According to a female civil society worker who participated in the NDC Transitional Justice Working Group, the youth's contribution was "effective in pushing toward a transitional justice approach based on institutional reform, reparations, and compensation."<sup>[8]</sup> Despite differences among the participating youth, including those affiliated with political parties, their future-oriented aspirations and practical thinking enabled them to serve as bridges between different political forces, in contrast to traditional elites who remained prisoners of ideology and past conflicts. This made it almost impossible to agree on a timeframe for transitional justice.

[4] "Young People," UNFPA, <https://yemen.unfpa.org/en/topics/young-people-12>

[5] Interview with a participant in the Transitional Justice Working Group at the National Dialogue Conference, December 17, 2025.

[6] Interview with a female civil society worker who participated at the NDC's Transitional Justice Working Group, December 17, 2025.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

Baraa Shiban, another participant in the Transitional Justice Working Group, stated that “youth raised the bar for the discussions, refusing to settle for the national reconciliation discourse and insisting on substantive transitional justice mechanisms rather than superficial political settlements.” According to Shiban, young participants in the NDC focused on uncovering the past and understanding the violations that took place in previous decades, despite pressures by the political actors in the working group suggesting there was “no need to re-open old files.”<sup>[9]</sup> Young NDC participants also pushed for an institutional framework for transitional justice, one focused on truth-seeking and the inclusion of victims’ files, specifically the forcibly disappeared and political detainees, emphasizing that the testimonies of victims and their families be heard first-hand.<sup>[10]</sup> This occurred despite pressures suggesting this path would “open the door to complex accountability.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Young participants at the NDC ultimately played an instrumental role in preventing the circumvention of the transitional justice track. They shifted discussions within the Transitional Justice Working Group from predetermined, surface-level, symbolic discussions for political reconciliation into serious, responsible discussions on truth, accountability, and victims’ rights.

The Transitional Justice Working Group succeeded in addressing several sensitive issues, including investigations into key political developments such as the February 11 protests, the Sa’ada Wars, and the Southern issue, among others.<sup>[12]</sup> Against all odds, participants reached consensus on several outcomes, including compensation programs for victims of human rights violations, material compensation, formal apologies, memorialization, and institutional reforms. Sadly, these outcomes did not see the light of day due to the outbreak of war in 2014, which abruptly aborted the democratic transition.

Fifteen years after Yemen’s revolution, young people find themselves once again relegated to the sidelines. While many today participate widely and meaningfully in civil society, the media, and the private sector, their participation remains limited in governmental institutions and in the political sphere. Such systemic exclusion distances them from decision-making positions and policy-shaping circles, creating a gap between youth and their real needs on the one hand, and general policies and programs that are designed, planned, and implemented on the other.

In the past decade, a significant and promising transitional justice track in Yemen has emerged, largely led by civil society organizations and initiatives focused on documenting violations, memorialization, limited reparations and compensation efforts, and calls for accountability, among other activities. While this informal track plays a crucial role in laying the groundwork for a future formal transitional justice process, it remains insufficiently inclusive of youth voices.

<sup>[9]</sup> Interview with Baraa Shiban, Associate Fellow at the Royal Institute for Defence and Security Studies, London, and a participant in the National Dialogue Conference, December 17, 2025.

<sup>[10]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[11]</sup> Ibid.

<sup>[12]</sup> “National Dialogue Conference Outcomes Document,” The Republic of Yemen, 2014, <https://www.peaceagreements.org/masterdocument/1400>

### 3. Findings

In an electronic survey on the importance of young people's role in transitional justice, over 90 percent of respondents considered it "very important" and linked their involvement directly to the likelihood of a successful democratic transition in Yemen. Respondents emphasized the importance of youth engagement at every stage, including documentation, accountability, and the construction of collective memory. Youth participation was perceived as an opportunity to redefine political and institutional roles and to rebuild confidence in state-building efforts. Additionally, some argued that excluding youth silences a significant segment of society and deprives transitional justice processes of fresh perspectives that could improve their effectiveness.

Globally, young people do not just inherit their ancestors' political, economic, or social history; they also carry the psychological and physical consequences of violence experienced by previous generations. In Yemen, this burden has become systemic. Since 2014, Yemen's youth have been subjected to widespread recruitment campaigns by warring parties, targeting tens of thousands of young people across the different governorates. Actors in the conflict exploit deteriorating living conditions, unpaid salaries, and lack of employment opportunities to force youth into armed groups as the only available source of income for their families.<sup>[13]</sup>

The cycles of systemic exploitation of youth demonstrate that traditional approaches are no longer enough. A fundamental shift in the approach to transitional justice is needed, from a traditional focus on legal and political reforms to a comprehensive framework that places youth at the center of transitional justice, and prioritizes psychological recovery and social cohesion – not only for direct victims of conflict, but also for those who inherited its impacts through earlier generations. International experiences demonstrate that informed and meaningful youth participation contributes to stabilizing new political systems and sustaining peace, as youth tend to support accountability and reform and play active roles in building human-rights-based societies.<sup>[14]</sup> Empowering youth within transitional justice processes is therefore a crucial step toward renewing traditional approaches and ensuring the non-recurrence of violations.<sup>[15]</sup>

Global experiences of justice initiatives—spanning the United States, Sudan, and the Balkans—demonstrate one consistent truth: that youth can bring life to stagnant political processes. Across the globe, young people have not only documented violations, but have developed creative policies to address structural injustice, using art, performance, and digital media for awareness-raising and advocacy, and engaging groups traditionally excluded from peace and justice processes.<sup>[16]</sup> Through their creativity and energy, they have consistently shown the ability to re-imagine transitional justice mechanisms, push dialogue about the past toward structural change, introduce new leadership models that encourage community participation, and influence the design, implementation, and evaluation of these processes.<sup>[17]</sup>

<sup>[13]</sup> Mohammed Al-Wateeri, "Toward More Effective Demobilization Programs for Recruited Fighters and Returnees from the Frontlines," Youth without Borders Organization for development and Youth Peace and Security Pact Yemen, <https://ywbod.org/en/References/15>

<sup>[14]</sup> Clara Ramirez-Barat, "Engaging Children and Youth in Transitional Justice Processes: Guidance for Outreach Programs," International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), <https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Children-Youth-Outreach-2012.pdf>

<sup>[15]</sup> "Youth Engagement," International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), <https://www.ictj.org/youth-engagement>

<sup>[16]</sup> Anjli Parrin, "Advancing Peace through a Youth-Centered Approach to Transitional Justice," Interpeace, August 28, 2024, <https://www.interpeace.org/fit/outside-the-box-amplifying-youth-voices-and-views-on-yyps-policy-and-practice/advancing-peace-through-a-youth-centered-approach-to-transitional-justice/>

<sup>[17]</sup> Ibid.

Such examples can also be found in Yemen. The Yemen Peace Forum, for instance, a local platform for youth, women, and civil society organizations led by the Sana'a Center, has made strides in shedding light on transitional justice in Yemen. Last year, it announced September 1st as the national day for transitional justice in the country, during which several activities were implemented, including webinars, awareness campaigns, and advocacy meetings.<sup>[18]</sup> Another important initiative is the launch of the Yemen Justice Network (YJN), a coalition of Yemeni and international civil society organizations working together to advance justice and reconciliation within Yemen's peace process.<sup>[19]</sup> The Transitional Justice Ambassadors Forum,<sup>[20]</sup> another resourceful initiative, serves as a national umbrella platform focused on justice and redress issues, bringing together victims, activists, experts, decision-makers, and stakeholders interested in transitional justice in Yemen. Lastly, the "Walls Remember Their Faces" campaign, led by artist Murad Subaie, is a symbolic youth-led initiative that brings the long-standing issue of enforced disappearances into the public eye by painting the faces and names of the disappeared on walls in Sana'a city.<sup>[21]</sup>

Beyond the initiatives mentioned above, young people in Yemen continue to play a pivotal role across all areas of transitional justice. The study findings reveal that their efforts encompass experience in documentation, monitoring, knowledge production, and digital and visual documentation of violations, as well as amplifying victims' narratives and protecting the truth from politicization. In accountability and judicial justice, youth play an important role through wide-scale advocacy and public debate. In reparations, youth-led social initiatives have promoted social cohesion, countered hate speech, and created spaces that restore dignity to victims. In institutional reform, youth contribute through civic, media, and technical engagement, pushing for more transparent and accountable institutions. Memory preservation, too, remains a central space for youth creativity through art, storytelling, and community archiving.<sup>[22]</sup>

The rationale for youth inclusion in transitional justice is ultimately rooted in its capacity to act as a dual catalyst for individual healing and state-building. Survey respondents indicated that youth participation is the linchpin for breaking cycles of violence, building peace, restoring trust in the state and its institutions, and improving youth political and social engagement. By addressing the psychological scars of conflict, while simultaneously opening economic and development opportunities, a youth-centered transitional justice process does more than provide redress; it reinforces the foundational values of justice, citizenship, and tolerance. In the Yemeni context, this creates a vital win-win dynamic: the state gains renewed legitimacy through inclusive governance, while a marginalized generation secures a tangible stake in a peaceful and stable future.

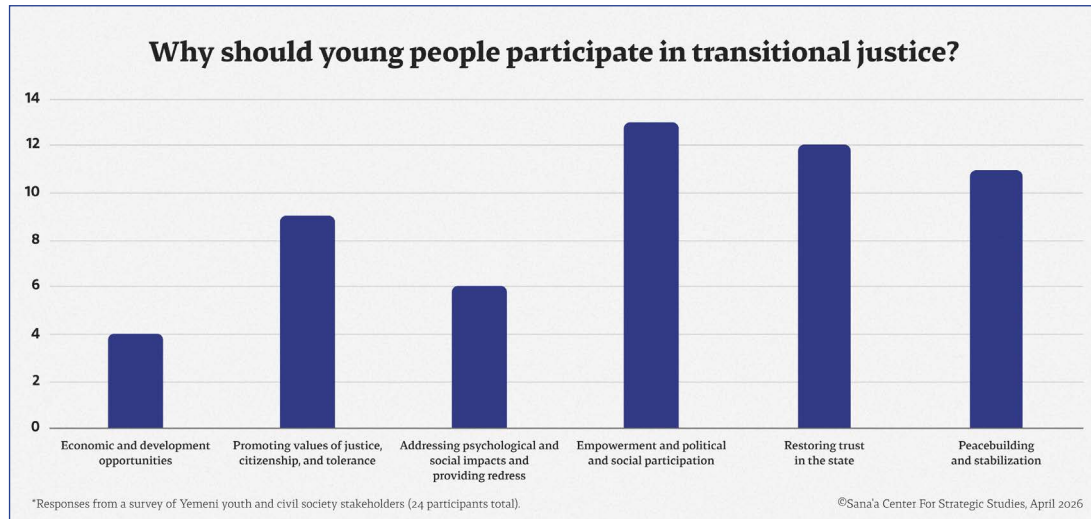
[18] "The Launch of Transitional Justice Week," September 1, 2025, Yemen Peace Forum, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/news/25408>

[19] For more information on Yemen Justice Network (YJN) see: <https://yemenjustice.org/en/>

[20] For more information on the Transitional Justice Ambassadors Forum see: [www.ama-ye.org/ar/منتدى-سفراء-العدالة-الانتقالية/](http://www.ama-ye.org/ar/منتدى-سفراء-العدالة-الانتقالية)

[21] "The Disappeared in Yemen: The Government Ignores Them and the Walls Remember Them [AR]," Deutsche Welle (DW), October 9, 2012, <https://www.dw.com/ar/المخفيون-في-اليمن-الحكومة-تجاهلهم-والجدران-تذكرهم>

[22] Insights from respondents' answers regarding youth roles in transitional justice pathways.



## 4. Key Challenges

This section outlines the key challenges related to transitional justice efforts in Yemen, based on interviews and responses to the electronic survey distributed to Yemeni youth and civil society stakeholders. Although it is still too early to assess the full impact of youth-led transitional justice efforts in Yemen, emerging initiatives offer valuable insights into the current operational landscape. Many of these challenges overlap, indicating that they pose shared challenges for both the transitional justice process and youth participation in it.

### 4.1. Lack of Political Will and Conflicting Interests

The absence of political will, coupled with conflicting interests among political parties, remains the primary barrier to establishing a comprehensive justice track in Yemen. Respondents emphasized that without such will, initiating a formal justice process – and ensuring meaningful youth participation within it – is highly unlikely. Compounding this challenge is the involvement of the warring parties in human rights violations, whether during the current war or previous wars, which undermines both the prospects for launching a transitional justice framework and its effectiveness.

### 4.2. Ongoing Conflict and Weak Political and Security Stability

Ongoing conflict in Yemen hinders access to victims and the documentation of violations, and creates an unsafe environment. The absence of a comprehensive ceasefire means an unsafe environment for the work of truth commissions and the public prosecution, and the continuation of armed conflict and political division, which obstructs any inclusive national track for justice and reconciliation. In practice, activities remain mostly limited to partial initiatives, including monitoring and documentation, awareness-raising, reparations, and memorialization. At the same time, restrictions are imposed on youth and civil society initiatives by the different authorities, and undertaking such activities entails risks, especially in the absence of policies to protect them.

### 4.3. Elitism of the Concept and Limited Awareness

Some respondents emphasized that, despite the importance of civil society activities in spreading the concept of transitional justice, transitional justice remains predominantly an elitist concept discussed exclusively within a narrow segment of society that includes politically engaged youth and activists, while remaining absent from broader public discourse and from the wider youth population—especially in rural areas and remote towns. In parallel, while a large proportion of respondents view transitional justice as a national necessity for a just path to peace and an important tool for reconciliation, others view it as an accountability-based mechanism limited to prosecuting and punishing perpetrators of crimes. Some critics go further, questioning the validity of transitional justice as a whole, viewing it as a Western concept that does not align with the Yemeni context. They argue that it may exacerbate the conflict in Yemen and potentially ignite new disputes by rekindling old grievances. Consequently, the concept of transitional justice is often met with skepticism, resulting in both political and societal resistance to transitional justice initiatives. This is particularly evident given the Yemeni people's limited sense of ownership of such initiatives.

### 4.4. Traditional Views of Youth Roles

Beyond their contributions to transitional justice, youth in Yemen generally continue to face limited societal recognition and acknowledgment of the roles they can play in decision-making processes. Young people's efforts to participate in public life often clash with stereotypical societal views that regard them as immature and lacking the skills and experience to assume responsibility. There is also a traditional tendency to treat youth as “beneficiaries” or “recipients,” rather than as core contributors and partners in decision-making processes.

### 4.5. Weak Funding and Limited Resources

Finally, the transitional justice track in Yemen receives insufficient attention from international institutions, and organizations face difficulties in accessing the limited funding available for transitional justice projects. This affects, on the one hand, the capacity of these organizations, especially youth organizations, to implement transitional justice-related projects and programs; and, on the other hand, their ability to provide the knowledge and expertise needed to qualify youth and strengthen their participation in transitional justice pathways. This challenge has been compounded by the withdrawal of a number of international organizations from Yemen and the closure of a large number of programs and projects, including major institutions such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as governments such as Sweden, which announced the complete suspension of all its programs and projects in Yemen in late 2024.

## 5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from an analysis of the interviews, the electronic survey, and the literature review, reflecting ways in which young people could overcome barriers and enhance their participation in transitional justice in Yemen.

- **Yemenization of the Concept of Transitional Justice and Strengthening Political Will**

International and local civil society organizations should work to “Yemenize” the concept of transitional justice by developing and using simplified concepts that align with Yemen’s social and cultural context, and by building on local and national models to link transitional justice to the Yemeni societal context. This should entail mobilizing local and international support to secure political will for a comprehensive justice track that includes meaningful youth participation.

- **Integrating Youth in All Formal and Informal Transitional Justice Processes**

Government and civil society organizations should work together to ensure youth participation and representation in the design, planning, implementation, and oversight of all transitional justice processes, whether informal processes currently led by civil society organizations and international organizations or other potential formal processes. This should be done through transparent mechanisms that ensure fair representation of youth from all governorates across all potential transitional justice-related bodies (such as truth commissions or reparation bodies) and institutions at national and local levels, with no less than 20 percent youth representation and 30 percent women representation, as agreed in the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference.

- **Protecting Youth and Raising Awareness to Enable Effective Participation**

To elevate youth awareness of transitional justice, it is essential to move concepts and mechanisms beyond a narrow, elitist framework into a broader societal space that reaches youth in cities and rural areas through training programs and digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. It also requires developing national protection mechanisms to protect youth engaged in monitoring and documentation work.

- **Sustainable Funding and Institutional Support**

Providing sustainable funding for youth organizations and initiatives working in transitional justice requires establishing institutional support mechanisms that connect with international expertise to enhance the quality and continuity of their work. It also calls for local and international civil society organizations to adopt a more inclusive approach to involving youth in the transitional justice processes they implement or finance.

**Mohammed Wateeri** is a researcher with expertise in human rights, transitional justice, and public policy. He has over six years of experience focused on Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. Wateeri has worked with several international organizations, including Human Rights Watch, Geneva Call, Mercy Corps, and DeepRoot Consulting, in both research and operational capacities. He holds a master's degree in Transitional Justice, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law from the University of Geneva and is a member of the Yemen Peace Forum.

**Qobol al-Absi** is a specialist in media, human rights, and refugee protection, boasting over 15 years of experience in program management, humanitarian work, field research, and development media. She currently serves as the President of the Qarar Foundation for Media and Sustainable Development. Al-Absi has worked with local organizations in the fields of human rights, child protection, and food security, and has contributed to studies on migration, asylum, and media literacy, among other topics.

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