

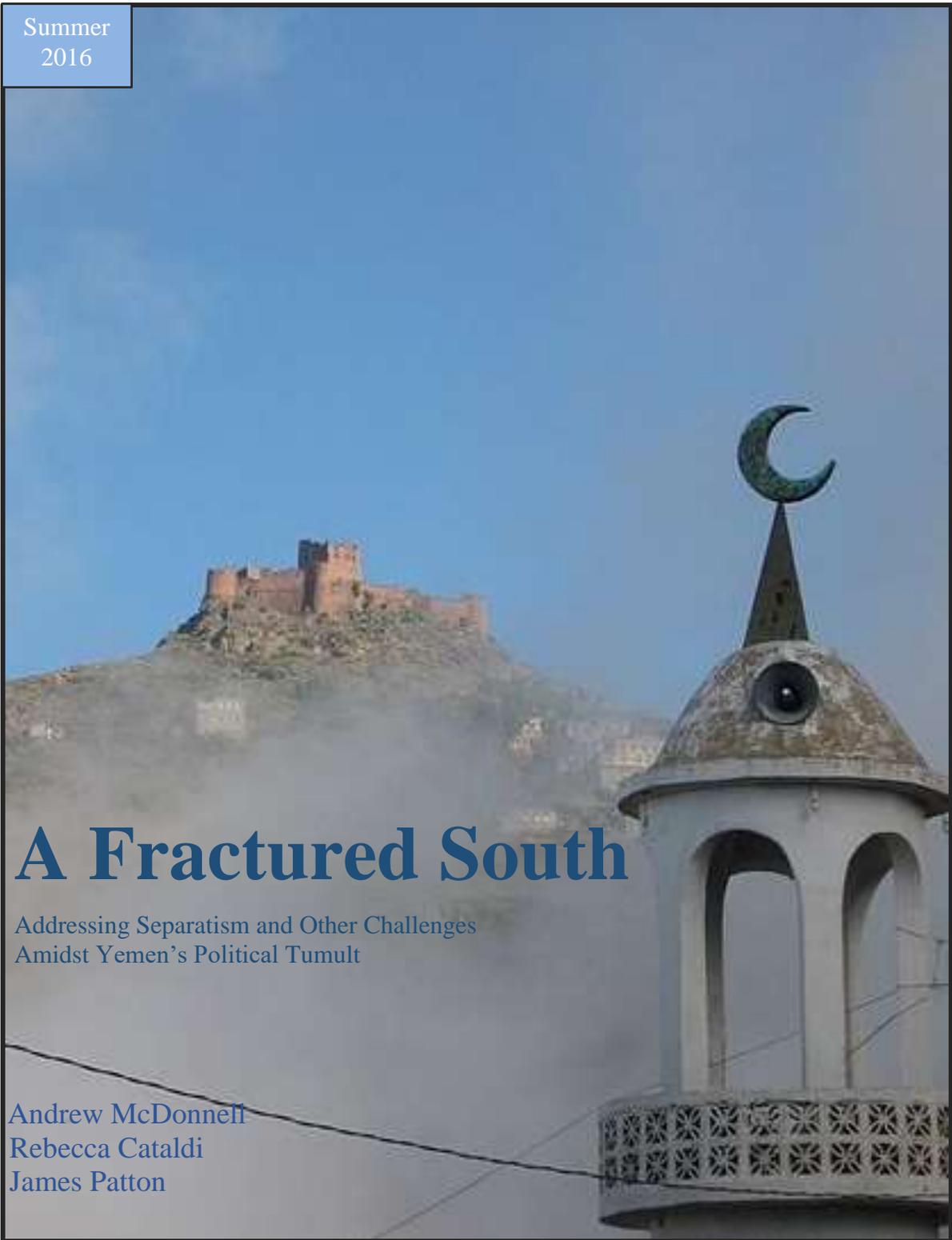


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**Religion & Diplomacy**



**PARTNERS YEMEN**  
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# A Fractured South

Addressing Separatism and Other Challenges  
Amidst Yemen's Political Tumult

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*Photo by Franco Pecchio CC BY-SA 2.0*

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## **About ICRD**

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2. Increase the capacity and number of religious peacemakers;
3. Increase the role of religious clergy and laity in peacemaking; and
4. Increase policy-makers' awareness of and receptivity to the potential contributions of religious peacemakers.

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- US diplomacy has abandoned or has not yet engaged the area of conflict;
- Official diplomats cannot reach important conflict actors;
- Religious adherents are actively involved in the conflict or are ineffectively engaged in seeking peace; and
- ICRD has access to relationships of trust that can be brought to bear on the problems at hand.

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## **Executive Summary**

In November 2011, Yemen's long-ruling President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in a Gulf Cooperation Council-brokered transfer of power, the first in the history of the modern Yemeni state. This dramatic turn of events set in motion a seismic shift in the Yemeni political landscape, marked by dialogue, division, and civil war. In the midst of this contentious transition, the 2013 National Dialogue Conference (NDC) was convened to outline a new framework for Yemeni politics and society and inspire some measure of hope.

Though the NDC was intended to be an inclusive discussion, inadequate representation of Yemen's 'Southern Movement', known as al-Hiraak al-Janoubi—made up of southern separatists and others who advocate for southern grievances—eroded the legitimacy of its outcomes. To further complicate matters, the most hotly-debated point of the conference—the structure of a new federal system—was ultimately decided outside the confines of the dialogue by a committee hand-selected by President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, thus frustrating hardline separatists and other key constituent groups, including the Houthis movement. Such tensions, along with various parties' desire for revenge and power, devolved into an all-out civil war, pitting Saleh and the Houthis against the loyal supporters of Hadi, who entered into a tenuous alliance with Islamist fighters, southern separatists, tribal militants, and a coalition of Arab states.

As Yemen now struggles to resolve the current conflict and chart a course back to democratization, it is important to reflect on the challenges and lessons learned from the previous transition process, especially the NDC. Although most international attention has focused on the role of the Houthis and the Gulf States, Yemen's fractured south will continue to pose a key challenge to future stability. At present, southerners are grappling with an ascendant al-Qaeda, the proliferation of militia forces, and rising disenchantment with the existing leadership. In an effort to better understand the perspectives and interests of the southerners, the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) undertook a research study in four key southern governorates (Aden, Lahj, Shabwa, and Abyan) from October 2015 – March 2016. Through this study, ICRD sought to gather insights on what could have been done better to improve the NDC, and how any future transition process could be made more effective.

Structured interviews and focus group discussions with southern citizens revealed mixed opinions on the overall impact of the NDC. Interviewees widely acknowledged that the conclusions of the conference are still relevant, with 87% agreeing that all or some of the dialogue's recommendations should be incorporated into a future constitution. However, they also identified several pervasive failings that undermined confidence in the process.

According to many, the NDC failed to address the key concern of southerners—independence. Further, though the NDC issued recommendations on issues like the pensions of former military personnel and the release of southern activists in prison, no substantive follow-on action was taken post-dialogue. This sense of being ignored was only compounded by the ultimate decision to create a six-region federal system, in spite of clear opposition to such a structure by southerners throughout the NDC. Despite this tension over adopting a federal system, however, the widespread concerns among southerners about the dialogue were not all related to separatist ideals. In fact, although 75% of structured survey respondents believe that Yemen is no longer a unified state, fewer than half want Yemen to exist as two separate states in the future.

While support for separatism was mixed, there was demonstrable frustration with the process by which these decisions were made. Many interviewees were critical of the fact that some of the NDC members seemed to be selected based on personal or political connections, rather than popular support. Even the explicit inclusion of greater representation from al-Hiraak al-Janoubi would not have mitigated this tension fully, as many southerners do not identify with either the main political parties or the fractured Hiraak movement. Further exacerbating the problem was the fact that the final decision on the federal system was

left to a shadow committee appointed by President Hadi. All these factors contributed to a general feeling of disenfranchisement that enabled Hiraak, the Houthis, and Saleh to derail the transition process.

Based on this assessment, ICRD has identified three general lessons for any future National Dialogue:

1. *No single actor or institution at the national level has sufficient legitimacy to unify or represent all parties. Therefore, points of agreement must be generated first and foremost at the local level.*
2. *International actors cannot be effective guarantors of agreements or stability until they gain a greater degree of trust and legitimacy with the population.*
3. *The complexity of actors at the local level, including militants, significantly increases the likelihood of spoilers destabilizing any macro-level process. Those engaged in facilitating a dialogue process need to prevent controversial issues from becoming a rallying point for spoilers.*

While these reflections should continue to inform any transition process or future dialogue, the situation on the ground has evolved substantially since the end of the NDC. The outbreak of civil war and an extended humanitarian crisis have yielded new challenges for Yemen's southerners. Among these challenges, respondents identified security as the gravest concern, with a dizzying array of militant groups all vying to fill the void left by the weak state security forces. Southern resistance forces, in particular, were a key concern, with many respondents worried that, if they are not properly integrated into the official security forces, they will ultimately destabilize the region.

At the same time, the south continues to fracture at a local level along both new and old fault lines at ideological, geographical, and other levels. Pervasive anti-Houthi rhetoric, fostered by national and international leaders, has fueled a newfound intolerance toward Shi'a communities. This rhetoric may lessen when the conflict ends, but it has proven a valuable recruiting tool for ISIS and al-Qaeda. At the same time, tensions between northerners and southerners remain a major problem. Half of all survey respondents agreed that there is a conflict between people in the north and people in south, and many focus group discussants raised concerns about the mistreatment of northern-born Yemenis living in the south.

### *Strategic Recommendations*

Overcoming years, if not decades, of fracturing is no small task, and one that cannot wait until the fighting has subsided. Regardless of the status of high-level talks between the major political actors, concrete steps must be undertaken at the local level to maximize the chances of success and future stability. The majority of respondents, for example, insisted that dialogue should be prioritized over political reform. While dialogue may seem an insufficient response to a civil war, lingering social fissures will undoubtedly prove a serious impediment to any post-conflict peace process.

Given the deep divisions that remain in the south, local dialogue will be required to: (a) identify common goals and interests along with strategies for achieving them, and (b) build relationships and cooperation across identity divides. Any national-level process is unlikely to be successful without such efforts to build social cohesion at the community level. A key consideration in this process will be the role of shared religious identity, which could help to facilitate collaboration, despite widespread cynicism about the neutrality of religious leaders.

It will also be crucial to find ways to bridge these local initiatives with national-level processes, ensuring that (a) outcomes of local dialogues are communicated to national decision-makers, and (b) local citizens have a credible and inclusive mechanism for determining who will represent them in national processes. As local initiatives are incorporated into a larger national transition process, national-level actors may also build trust in the process by addressing some of the confidence-building measures that were not successfully implemented in the aftermath of the NDC but which remain important to southerners (e.g., military pensions and the release of prisoners).

While ICRD's research has identified many obstacles to conducting local dialogue—security, cost, representation, lack of formal mechanisms or structures—Yemen's problems cannot be solved from the top down. Instead, community leaders must be given the tools and motivation to bring their neighbors together to identify key needs and grievances, and to rally around leaders who can represent them at higher levels. Such dialogues must begin internally in southern communities, before working through existing structures at the sub-regional level and eventually engaging with northerners and national policymakers.

To ensure that the ongoing peace process does not collapse into further chaos, and to maximize the potential for a successful future political transition, it is essential for national and international stakeholders to focus on building a bottom-up approach that complements and strengthens the formal process. Due to the complex nature of the current conflict, with many actors having overlapping interests and roles, ICRD has identified recommendations along three key themes and outlined a select few below:

*Build upwards from civil society:*

- Indigenous civil society organizations (CSOs) should bring diverse voices together to identify common values, needs, and those local leaders who can represent the interests of the community at a higher level. International civil society groups should look to support their efforts by providing funding, training, or strategic guidance as necessary.
- Civil society leaders should specifically focus on shared religious values that support non-violence, social unity, and collaboration, as religion seems to be one of the few commonalities cutting across other identity rifts in Yemen.
- Foreign stakeholders, such as the US State Department, should bolster non-military aid directed at relief and civil society dialogue in Yemen. Even if security concerns hamper large-scale relief efforts, effective dialogue among local communities could provide the collaboration necessary to open a channel for the delivery of emergency aid. Careful vetting of civil society partners will be crucial to ensure that extremist elements do not exploit external support.

*Address security concerns:*

- The Arab coalition and Yemeni officials should work with local leaders of southern resistance forces to vet fighters for possible integration into official security forces. Regional and international allies should support security sector professionalization with training and technical assistance, with assiduous attention to the significant risk of identity-based spoilers.
- The international community should support the capacity building of local CSOs to apply traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in communities where they might resolve drivers of violence, particularly between armed groups.

*Respect the concerns of southerners:*

- Yemeni government officials should develop mechanisms that southern leaders and interest groups accept as a legitimate way to voice their concerns about the shape of any future state; key foreign powers should push top Yemeni leaders to prioritize these mechanisms.
- Alongside any discussion of demobilization, ongoing talks must address the question of federalism. It should be assumed at the outset that the six-region system is a proposal that might need reconsideration, as intransigence on this point may well jeopardize any other progress.
- The Yemeni government should focus on local and regional officials as a place to begin building trust between communities and institutions. Currently considered very corrupt, most communities acknowledged the importance of these positions in any transition. Anti-corruption purges and the appointment of representative local leaders to these positions would be meaningful steps.

## **Methods and Data Collection**

The insights and analysis presented in this paper are based on field research designed and led by the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD) and conducted on the ground by Partners Yemen (PY). The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach that included:

- Structured surveys of 401 Yemeni citizens from four governorates in the south—Aden, Abyan, Lahj, and Shabwa—conducted in October and November 2015.
- Six focus group discussions conducted in those same regions in December 2015 and January 2016.
- Unstructured interviews with scholars, civil society activists, and political figures with relevant expertise on Yemen and the current conflict.
- Facilitation of a dialogue between southern Yemeni civil society leaders from each of the four target governorates, led by PY in Sana’a in March 2016.

Given the scope of data collection, the findings below are not intended to be representative of the average Yemeni in the south. Instead, the study drew on a snapshot of local insights to inform and enhance a critical analysis of the NDC, the current concerns in the south, and the prospects for future peace.

### *Data Demographics*

For the purposes of this study, researchers sought first and foremost to solicit insights from respondents who were familiar with the NDC and were willing to express their opinions on contentious political topics. The respondents who met this criteria tended to be university-educated and more likely to be employed than the average Yemeni. Any potential bias in the study’s results is acknowledged whenever relevant in the subsequent analysis. The following is an overview of the respondent demographics:

<b>Gender</b>	
Men	47%
Women	53%

<b>Heard of the National Dialogue Conference</b>	
Yes	97%
No	3%

<b>Highest Level of Education</b>	
No School	1%
Informal School at Home	1%
Primary School	2%
Middle School	2%
High School	20%
University	73%

<b>Region</b>	
Aden	25%
Abyan	25%
Lahj	25%
Shabwa	25%

<b>Age</b>	
18-25	13%
26-35	34%
36-45	26%
46-55	18%
Over 55	7%
No Response	2%

<b>Career Field</b>	
Religion	2%
Student	7%
Education	24%
Government & Military	8%
Business & Customer Service	6%
Management & Administration	10%
Law & Judicial System	3%
Media & Communications	3%
Health	3%
Activism & Resistance Movement	5%
Engineering & Technology	2%
Other	8%
Not Employed or Retired	11%
No Response	5%

To ensure that the perspectives of individuals without a university education were not completely discounted from the discussion, researchers conducted two additional focus group discussions exclusively with Yemenis who had only received a primary school education or less. Data from the focus groups and the limited number of surveys conducted with this demographic do not suggest that their insights differ in any significant ways from the other respondents on the topics under analysis. However, the data is insufficient to substantiate any meaningful comparisons.

## **History and Background**

On March 26, 2015, a coalition of nine Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, began a campaign of airstrikes in Yemen, escalating a civil war that has continued to the present. Over the course of the past year, Yemen has descended into chaos, as fragmented alliances struggle for supremacy and average Yemenis suffer under a horrific humanitarian crisis. This war, however, is only the latest manifestation of social and political conflicts that have defined Yemen for the past few decades. While the current conflict between President Hadi and the rebel Houthis<sup>1</sup> has captured many headlines, the struggle for southern independence may prove just as consequential in the coming years.

### **South Yemen and Independence**

In May 1990, the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) formally united with the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen). Building on historic trade ties and the promise of enhanced development, the union enjoyed popular backing on both sides.<sup>2</sup> South Yemen, however, entered the arrangement in a weaker economic and political position, allowing the north to largely dictate the terms of the partnership. Over the next few years, almost no real effort was made to meaningfully unify the two states, such as fully integrating military forces, and tense relations soon erupted in the 1994 civil war. In the end, the north prevailed, and Yemen was united under the rule of northern President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who sought to quell southern resentment by appointing loyal southerners to nominal positions of authority, including Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who became Vice President.

Though the war lasted just three months, it left the south devastated. Many southern military officers were sacked or forced into retirement, while northern elites were accused of stealing southern land and resources.<sup>3</sup> Over the next twenty years, power remain concentrated in the hands of key northern stakeholders—including Saleh, the Ahmar clan, and the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party. Southerners were passed over for civil service jobs, and, despite the abundance of natural resources (e.g., oil in Hadramaut and Shabwa, and the port of Aden), the region remained comparatively underdeveloped.



*Image by Orange Tuesday / CC BY-SA 3.0*

Frustration over this perceived systemic discrimination finally coalesced in 2007 around a group of army pensioners who organized protests to demand reinstatement in army service and higher pensions. Their protests catalyzed a regional movement, which became known as Al-Hiraak Al-Janoubi, or “The Southern Movement”. Hiraak protestors quickly expanded their demands to include equal opportunities in civil

service for southerners and more local control over southern resources.<sup>4</sup> Though Hiraak remained a loosely-defined movement, it continued to build momentum and attract an array of activists. As protestors met with steady resistance from the state, their demands escalated into a call for complete independence. Under the repressive rule of Saleh these protests made little tangible progress until the onset of the Arab Spring.

### **The Arab Spring and the Creation of the National Dialogue Conference**

Yemen's Arab Spring began in early 2011, not long after the protests in Tunisia and Egypt. Frustrated over poor economic conditions and widespread corruption, protesters spread from Taiz to Sana'a to Aden to Mukalla. Their efforts were soon bolstered by support from Hiraak and the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a coalition of five major opposition parties.<sup>5</sup> Though the protests encountered harsh resistance from the regime, Saleh eventually relented and agreed to hand over power in a deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). As part of this deal, Saleh was granted full immunity and was allowed to maintain his position as the head of the GPC.<sup>6</sup> The presidency was temporarily transferred to Vice President Hadi, who would be responsible for overseeing the coming transition period.

Under the guidance of the GCC, a framework was put in place to guide the next stages of Yemen's transition. This framework crystalized in UN Security Council Resolution 2051, which called for the convening of an inclusive National Dialogue, followed by constitutional and electoral reforms, and general elections by February 2014.<sup>7</sup> In theory, the National Dialogue would provide a space for disparate Yemeni constituencies to address major political and social issues and outline a set of principles which would be enshrined in a new constitution, written after the Dialogue's conclusion. With a new constitution in place, elections would be held for parliament and the presidency.

To bring the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) to life, President Hadi established a 25-member Technical Committee (TC), which had responsibility for preparing all aspects of the NDC's implementation without prejudicing its outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Various constituencies were invited to participate in the TC, including the Houthis, youth civil society activists, and women. Despite the inclusive intentions of the committee, most representatives of Hiraak refused to participate, arguing that they would not be a part of a process where southern independence was not up for discussion. Hadi, along with most political stakeholders, did not demonstrate any willingness to consider separation as a valid option. In turn, many delegates from the south who did participate were disavowed by Hiraak.<sup>9</sup>

Despite contentions over representation, the TC published a detailed report in February 2013, which outlined the Rules of Procedure as well as the division of the 565 available seats among various constituencies.<sup>10</sup> Delegates for the conference would be selected from identified groups or communities, including the major political parties, Hiraak, the Houthis, and independent youth, women and civil society organizations (CSOs). The TC set quotas across the board of 50% representation from the south, 50% from the north, 30% women, and 20% youth.<sup>11</sup> Organizations and political parties were asked to identify their own representatives, while youth, women, and CSOs could respond to an open call for applications which would be assessed by the TC.

In addition to the rules and procedure of the conference, the TC report outlined "twenty points" of action which were intended to build confidence ahead of any dialogue. A number of these points specifically addressed issues relevant to the south, such as "land ownership; access to government employment and pensions; release of political prisoners; an apology for the 1994 war; and reopening the South's most prominent newspaper, *al-Ayyam*."<sup>12</sup> By the time the dialogue began in March 2013, none of these points had been implemented or even attempted. In fact, it was not until August 2013, after a three-week boycott led by the Hiraak delegation, that the government apologized for the 1994 war.<sup>13</sup>

## The National Dialogue Process and the Representation of Hiraak

The NDC was structured into independent working groups, each of which would address one key issue—the southern issue, the conflict in Sa’ada, transitional justice, state-building, good governance, military and security, the independence of special entities, rights and freedoms, and development. Working groups would compile and approve general recommendations in their issue area, which would be then be brought to the full conference for a vote. Most of these working groups proceeded in their deliberations with minimal complications. The southern issue, however, faced serious challenges.

From the beginning, it was clear to all parties involved that full independence for the south would not be taken under serious consideration during the dialogue.<sup>14</sup> Even though many key leaders, including top figures in the GPC and the Islamist Islah party, acknowledged the importance of incorporating Hiraak into the dialogue, they would not contemplate independence. Despite this immovable stance, there was still some hope that the dialogue could attract moderate voices from within Hiraak, who might accept concessions that fell short of full independence. After all, Hiraak was not a unified organization, but rather a coalition movement that included a diverse range of interests. Unfortunately, the vehement opposition of the separatist faction of Hiraak ensured that any southern activist who participated in the NDC would be perceived as illegitimate by the separatist communities.

A total of eighty-five slots were set aside for members of Hiraak. While most of those slots were filled by representatives of different southern groups, the more hardline factions, led by former southern president Ali Salim Al-Beidh and Naser Bayoom, were not represented. To complicate matters further, approximately fifteen of the eighty-five slots were filled by Hadi’s own cadre.<sup>15</sup> Though these delegates did represent the interests of a portion of the Hiraak movement, they were roundly criticized as government agents. Yet, despite the self-exclusion of the hardline separatists, the southern issue working group was unable to reach an agreement by the September deadline. In an effort to streamline the process, a subcommittee consisting of eight representatives from the south and eight from the north was assembled. After months of contentious and extended negotiations, and substantial resistance from Hiraak leaders, the so-called “8+8 committee” reached an agreement that Yemen would become a federal state, and allocate greater autonomy and control to the regional level.<sup>16</sup>



Proposed Six Region System –  
Image by MrPenguin20 / CC BY-SA 4.0

Though the idea of creating a federal state and expanding local authority received wide support, there was fierce disagreement over the shape of the federal system. On one side, southern leaders pushed for the creation of two sub-regions, divided along the pre-1990 border. On the other, the ruling powers advocated for more sub-regional divisions to avoid hardening existing divisions. Ultimately, the 8+8 committee failed to come to a consensus before the drafting of the final NDC document in January 2014.

Not content to leave the question of federalism unresolved, Hadi appointed a special committee to address the issue. Within two weeks of the NDC’s conclusion, Hadi’s committee had finalized an agreement on the structure of the new federal system. They agreed to the proposal, which had been considered and rejected by the 8+8 committee, to split the country into six regions: two in the south and four in the north. This arrangement was intended to increase local autonomy while weakening the overall unity of the historic south. While widely perceived as the most tolerable compromise, this solution was finalized without substantial efforts to cultivate local buy-in.<sup>17</sup>

## **Post-NDC and the Dissolution of Yemen**

In the months following the NDC, very little was done to implement meaningful social, political or economic reforms. On March 8, 2014, President Hadi announced the creation of a Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC), a 17-member body which would have one year to complete a draft constitution. The committee was criticized for its small size and the weak credentials of its participants.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, with no new interim power-sharing agreement in place, various parties began to chafe under Hadi's continued rule.

Tensions finally boiled over in late July 2014, when the government cut fuel subsidies, inspiring massive protests in the streets of Sana'a.<sup>19</sup> At the forefront of these protests was the Houthi movement, which aimed to leverage the rising populist anger to increase their influence in the national political system. While the Houthis had maintained significant regional influence for years, a national presence had become an urgent priority in light of the new federalism agreement. The six-region solution that was opposed by southern separatists divided the Houthi territory and cut off their access to the Red Sea.

By September, Houthi militia fighters had entered Sana'a and encountered little resistance from security forces. In the hopes of avoiding a civil war, President Hadi, along with various political stakeholders, signed the Peace and National Partnership Agreement (PNPA). The PNPA outlined the formation of a new government, which would elevate representatives from the Houthis and Hiraak to higher levels of influence.<sup>20</sup> The agreement was hailed as a step toward a more inclusive transition process and temporarily abated conflict with the Houthis, who still maintained a strong military presence in Sana'a.

Tensions peaked once again in January 2015, when the CDC released a draft constitution, which formalized the six-region partition. The Houthis, frustrated with this turn of events, stormed the presidential palace and rapidly seized control of large portions of Sana'a.<sup>21</sup> Hadi tendered his resignation on January 22, 2015, only to escape from house arrest one month later and reassert his claim to the presidency.<sup>22</sup> Shortly thereafter, he fled to Saudi Arabia, where he solidified a close partnership with the newly-crowned King Salman.

## **Mapping the Current War**

The rise of the Houthis was cause for significant concern in Saudi Arabia. The militant Shia movement had long received substantial arms support from Iran in its fight against Salafi and Wahhabi communities in the Sa'ada governorate on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Under Houthi control, Yemen would be an unstable and unfriendly neighbor and allow Iran to expand its regional influence. Hoping to mitigate this danger and expand his own influence, King Salman assembled a coalition of Arab states and launched Operation Decisive Storm (later rebranded as Operation Restoring Hope). The purpose of the Operation was to halt and reverse the advance of the Houthis, primarily through a campaign of airstrikes. By that point, the Houthis had expanded into nearby Taiz, Lahj, and even Aden (the historic capital of the south).

The Houthi expansion into the south directly confronted the southern separatist movement. Heretofore, the Houthis and Hiraak had maintained a tenuous partnership, united around the common goal of preventing Hadi from implementing the six-region federal system. However, the incursion of Houthi forces quickly soured that relationship, and led many southerners to turn the brunt of their anger away from Hadi and toward the Houthis. With the support of the Arab coalition, southerners formed local militias, known as the Southern Resistance Movement. Over the course of the summer and fall of 2015, the Houthis were largely driven out of Aden and several other key areas by a disparate group of southern militias and factions of the army still loyal to Hadi, all supported by airstrikes and, eventually, foreign ground troops.

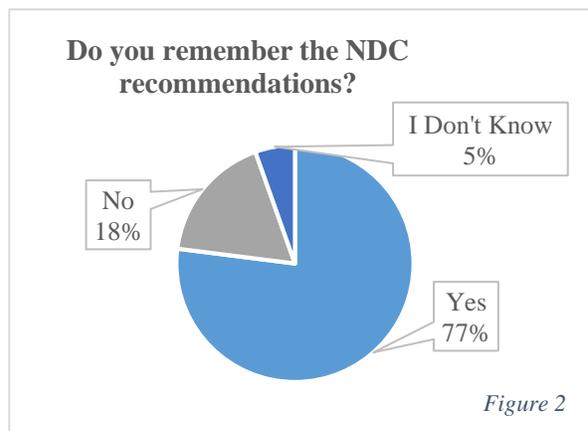
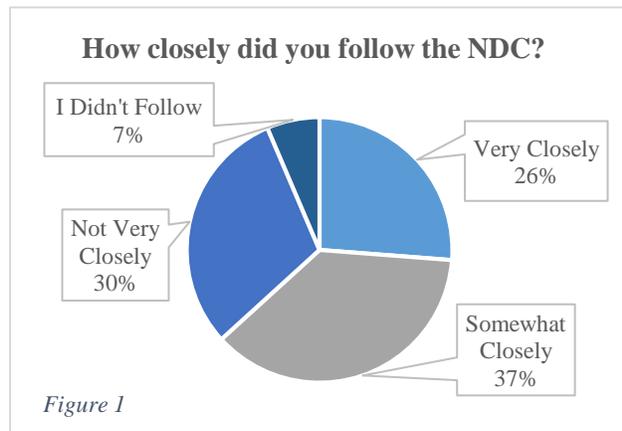
Meanwhile, the Houthis found a crucial ally in their former enemy, ex-President Saleh. Seeing the conflict as an opportunity to reassert his influence, Saleh mustered the factions of the army and the GPC who

remained loyal to him to back the Houthis.<sup>23</sup> The Houthis were already the most organized and heavily-armed militia force in the country, and Saleh’s support enabled them to withstand significant military assault. However, as the Arab coalition expanded its ground presence, the Houthi alliance steadily lost ground.

To complicate matters further, the fighting in the west left a power vacuum in the eastern province of Hadramaut, which was quickly filled by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Operating under the moniker “Sons of Hadramaut”, AQAP took control over the major port city of Mukalla in April 2015.<sup>24</sup> Over the subsequent months, it expanded its presence in Hadramaut and throughout the southern regions of al-Bayda, Shabwa, and Abyan, encountering little opposition from the distracted Arab coalition. At the same time, the Yemeni branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) exploited growing sectarian tensions and the permissive environment to gain a small but significant foothold in Sana’a.<sup>25</sup>

## **Reflections on the National Dialogue**

Field research for this project was conducted nearly two years after the conclusion of the NDC, at a time when political and conflict realities on the ground had largely rendered the UN-outlined transition framework irrelevant. While nearly all participants had heard of the NDC, their familiarity was somewhat varied, as illustrated by Figures 1 and 2 below. Given the fact that the NDC issued nearly 1800 recommendations, it was always unlikely that participants would be familiar with the entirety of the dialogue’s outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, as will be clear below, most participants expressed a basic fluency in the current issues most relevant to the south.

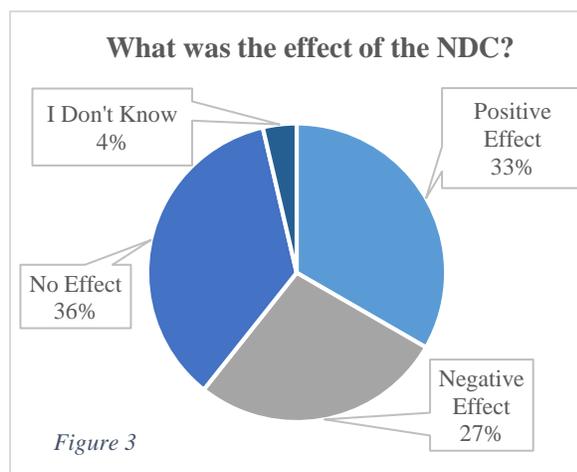


Given the time lapse and the pre-existing opposition among Hiraak leaders, one might assume that southerners would generally express negative or apathetic attitudes toward the dialogue. In fact, although a third of survey respondents expressed a positive opinion of the NDC generally, the majority saw little to celebrate, as illustrated by Figure 3 below. Focus group discussants in Abyan, Aden, and Lahj remarked that the NDC ultimately failed to address the concerns of southerners.

This low level of enthusiasm, however, does not provide the whole truth. 87% of survey respondents agreed that all or some of the recommendations of the NDC should be incorporated into a future constitution. Furthermore, 90% stated that their interests were represented on all or some of the issues under discussion. Importantly, while many individuals’ overall impression of the NDC was tainted by a few contentious problems, it would seem they saw something salvageable in its process and outcomes.

## Concerns about the Process

It is important to note, first and foremost, that before the NDC even began, many southerners had lost faith in the process. By failing to take any concrete steps towards implementing the twenty confidence-building measures recommended by the Technical Committee (TC), many of which were related to southern grievances, the government seemed to disregard the south. While many of these points may not have seemed pressing, they held great significance to many southerners. The vast majority of survey respondents (more than 85%), for example, identified the pensions of former military personnel and the release of imprisoned southern activists as *urgent* items. Advancing into the dialogue without any clear plan to address these practical and symbolic issues, which had been publicly identified as important by the TC, validated the narrative that the NDC was dismissive of and irrelevant to southern concerns.



The perception that there was disregard for southern concerns was only compounded by the delegate selection process. As noted earlier, the exclusion of key Hiraaki leaders was a major point of contention during the dialogue itself, and there was little effort to cultivate support for the NDC outcomes among the more separatist factions of the movement. Regardless of the question of southern independence, however, many individuals interviewed in this research were frustrated that the participants were appointed rather than elected. According to one focus group in Abyan, this method resulted in many delegates being chosen based on personal and political connections, rather than their credentials or popular support.

The method of selecting delegates was designed to ensure a balanced representation from all relevant constituencies in the country. However, by identifying specific organized groups to participate, the TC further alienated the populations who are not well-represented by existing organizations. There was no way to ensure that the voices of southerners who did not strongly identify with existing political parties or Hiraak were being heard. Even the selections made from the open applications for youth, women, and CSOs were done by the TC, rather than a direct vote. In fact, when presented with the following range of recommendations, survey respondents clearly identified direct selection of delegates as the most important:

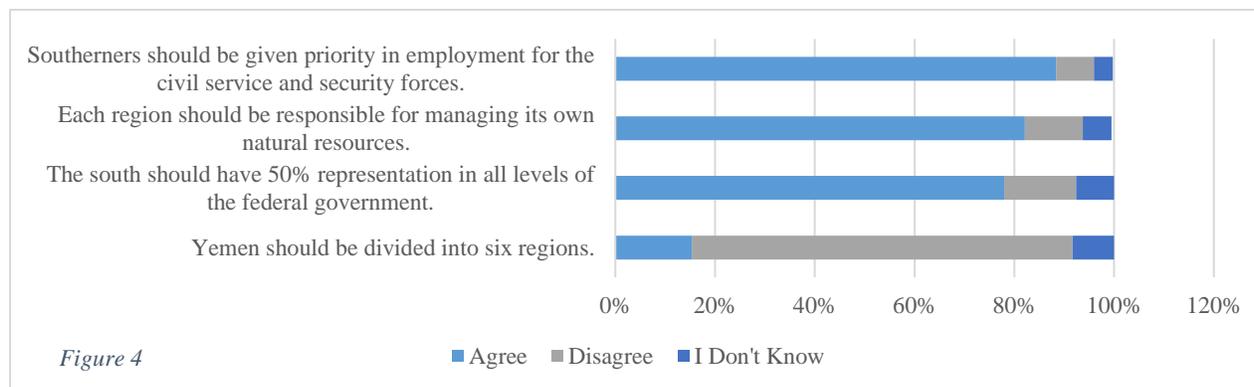
The NDC would have been better if...	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
Local citizens in the south selected their own delegates to participate in the conference.	64%	23%	13%
The delegates voted on all the final outcomes.	41%	35%	23%
The southern delegates consulted with my community before the conference began.	41%	36%	23%
The local government made a greater effort to communicate the outcomes to my community.	38%	44%	18%
The local government was responsible for implementing the outcomes, instead of the national government.	32%	46%	22%

Despite the importance of representation, the exclusion of Hiraak leaders did not appear to be a primary concern. While focus group discussants in Lahj, for example, acknowledged that Hiraak does often

represent southern interests, they criticized its internal divisions and its tendency to clash with other political groups in the south. As will be discussed later, Hiraak enjoys solid popular support, but it is far from the sole voice of the southern people. On the whole, focus group discussants did not mention the exclusion of Hiraak specifically when reflecting on the NDC, even when they spoke about the problem of representation. This is not to suggest that Hiraak’s lack of participation was not a major roadblock in the NDC process. However, it is important to recognize that many southerners had concerns over representation that were not specifically linked to their loyalty towards Hiraak.

### What about the Outcomes?

Unsurprisingly, the six-region federal system was generally unpopular among the research participants. However, disdain was not universal. Focus group discussants in Shabwa, for example, considered it the best possible compromise. When compared with respondents’ opinions of other recommendations from the NDC’s southern issue working group, though, it is undeniable that the opposition toward the federal system is remarkably high (see Figure 4 below).



Though many southerners feel that the six-state federal system would weaken the path to independence, there is another key reason to oppose it. Focus group discussants in Abyan and Lahj expressed frustration that such key decisions were made outside the formal dialogue process. Unlike the other recommendations described above, the six-region system was not approved by the southern issue working group or the NDC delegates. Instead, it was agreed upon by a small, hand-selected committee with little public deliberation. The opaque and undemocratic method for reaching an agreement further poisoned the idea. Regardless of the value of the six-region system, it had the appearance of being an imposition by fiat from the powers that be, rather than emerging from the will of the people.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which southerners disapproved of the six-region system at the time it was announced. Though it may have been the best possible compromise at the time, as some experts believe,<sup>27</sup> two key factors contribute to the challenge of assessing its viability and popularity, both then and now. The first problem is the lack of clear understanding among the populace. The 2014 Arab Opinion Index, which surveyed 1,500 Yemenis in February 2014, found that respondents collectively cited over 500 different definitions of federalism, the very basis of the six-region system.<sup>28</sup> The second critical problem, also revealed by the Index, is that support for the NDC outcomes may have been tied to a widespread hope that the dialogue would prevent a civil war. This expectation has proven to be a double-edged sword, as many participants in ICRD’s research justified their opposition to the NDC by arguing that it was quickly followed by the outbreak of the current war. All of these factors make it difficult to determine support for the idea in the abstract.

With so few other tangible outcomes from the NDC, it is also challenging to assess the level of support for less high-profile recommendations. As with the twenty confidence-building measures, it was easy to make promises, but far more difficult to actualize them. Nonetheless, across the focus groups and even the local dialogue facilitated for this project, individuals were far less concerned with developing new recommendations than they were with ensuring that existing recommendations were implemented. As illustrated by Figure 4, it has not been difficult to identify recommendations that garner substantial popular support. Enacting those recommendations, however, is another story entirely.

## Lessons Learned on Conducting National Dialogues

By examining the process and aftermath of the NDC, it is possible to identify a few key and highly transferable lessons for any country undertaking a similar process:

- *No single actor or institution at the national level has sufficient legitimacy to unify or represent all parties. Therefore, points of agreement must be generated first and foremost at the local level.*

The NDC struggled with public appearance problems at all stages of the process, particularly among the southerners. Some were concerned about representation, others took issue with behind-the-scenes deals, and still others were simply frustrated that nothing was changing in their communities. To some extent, these concerns could have been mitigated if the government had made a more robust effort to ensure that the citizens had a stake in the NDC. This could have been accomplished by allowing direct election of some delegates, taking steps to implement some of the easier confidence-building measures, or spending more time conducting outreach activities.

- *International actors cannot be effective guarantors of agreements or stability until they gain a greater degree of trust and legitimacy with the population.*

In the end, the issue of federalism proved too divisive to be resolved through the official channels of the NDC, despite an extended process of negotiation. Instead of allowing the discussion to continue on in a new format, however, Hadi rushed to achieve an agreement through an unelected committee—fundamentally contradictory to the inclusive principle behind convening the NDC in the first place. In so doing, he neither worked through the approved NDC channels nor allowed sufficient time for effectively resolving the issues that made federalism so contentious. In any wide-reaching National Dialogue, it should be expected that consensus will be harder to reach on some issues than others. In such cases, it is imperative to develop a contingency plan early on for addressing potentially intractable issues, which may require extending the timeline for further deliberation and community buy-in. Intermediate agreements, including simple procedural ones, often do more to advance success and build local buy-in than forced solutions. Foreign powers can play a key role in focusing attention on intermediate agreements to manage the pace of the transition and ensure that important decisions are given sufficient time and inclusivity, and in doing so, can build greater trust and legitimacy with the local population.

- *The complexity of actors at the local level, including militants, significantly increases the likelihood of spoilers destabilizing any macro-level process. Those engaged in facilitating a dialogue process need to prevent controversial issues from becoming a rallying point for spoilers.*

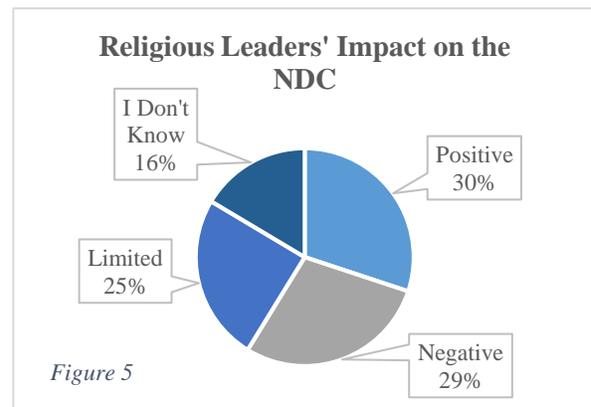
Though key Hiraaki leaders were resistant to the NDC from beginning to end, they did not ultimately succeed in sabotaging the dialogue by themselves. The transition process might have survived intact if the controversy over federalism and the government's missteps in governance did not unify the disparate spoiler groups—Hiraak and the Houthis—and undermine the entire affair. While it is important to secure buy-in at all stages of a national dialogue, particular caution should be exercised when dealing with issues that could unite spoilers.

## Further Reflection – the Role of Religious Leaders

Cutting across contentious political and geographic divisions, religious identity in Yemen maintains widespread significance—both positive and negative. The 2013 World Values Survey found that nearly 96% of Yemenis claim that religion is “very important” in their lives.<sup>29</sup> This high level of religiosity is reflected among survey respondents interviewed for this research, with half of all respondents citing their religious identity as more significant than any other form of identity (tribal, familial, political, etc.). At the same time, the current civil war has hardened religious divisions that had previously been minimal (as will be discussed later). For all these reasons, it is valuable to reflect briefly on the status of religion and religious leaders in the NDC.

Given the high level of religiosity, it is no surprise that religious leaders were heavily involved in the NDC proceedings. NDC delegate Amat Alsoswa, for example, observed that conservative religious figures seemed to wield a disproportionate degree of influence.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, according to scholars Laurent Bonnefoy and Judit Kuschnitzki, Salafi delegates were among the most active participants, and they mounted substantial opposition to decisions about the prominence of shari’a and the inclusion of women in politics.<sup>31</sup> Though only a handful of survey respondents identified as Salafi, many shared such conservative values—only 10%, for instance, believed that the laws in Yemen should *not* be based on shari’a.

At the same time, despite widespread religious conservatism and active representation from religious leaders, the NDC did not enshrine conservative religious values. Though they may have exercised a disproportionate influence, Salafi leaders ultimately lost the battles over shari’a and the inclusion of women. In reflecting on the roles of various constituencies in the NDC, less than a third of survey respondents perceived religious leaders as having a substantially positive impact on the dialogue (see Figure 5). This may be one small sign of the diminished influence of religious authority figures, which will be discussed further below.



In short, while religious actors, particularly Salafi leaders, continue to play a major role in shaping political discourse in Yemen, their influence did not prevail at the NDC. Other forces in civil society were able to prevail against the more contentious priorities of religious conservatives.

## Current Issues

Since the conclusion of the NDC, the situation on the ground has dramatically shifted for the worse for all Yemenis, especially those in the south. In seeking to map out a path forward, it is first necessary to reassess the current needs and priorities.

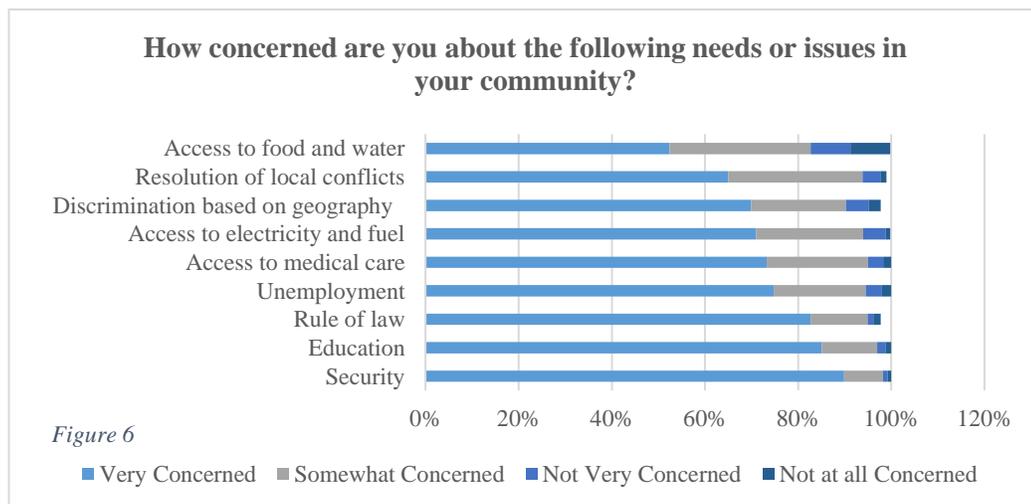
Overshadowing all else is the dire humanitarian situation. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 21.2 million people (82% of the total population) are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the past year, an active naval blockade and the absence of any effective ceasefire has made it nearly impossible to deliver aid on a large scale. Yemen was in urgent need even before the war began, and since then the situation has deteriorated to abysmal levels. While the

humanitarian issue poses a substantial challenge in and of itself, it is compounded by other key concerns that pose a direct threat to stability.

## Security

Across all four governorates surveyed, respondents identified security as their chief concern, as outlined in Figure 6 below. As noted in the beginning, these results are not intended to represent the priorities of Yemenis overall—the low level of concern for basic needs may suggest that respondents (who tended to be university educated and employed) were more affluent than the average Yemeni. However, in addition to the direct negative impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance, there is ample reason for security to be a principle concern for southerners, who face acute threats from all sides. At the time of this writing, Houthi forces still linger in nearby Taiz, Marib, and parts of Lahj, Abyan and Shabwa. Meanwhile, AQAP has expanded from its foothold in Hadramaut into Abyan, Lahj, Shabwa and Aden. And across the entire region, airstrikes continue to hit civilian targets and foreign mercenaries maintain an active presence.<sup>33</sup> In this chaos, many Yemenis are left with little choice but to throw their support behind whichever group can offer them the best protection, even if that group may also be actively contributing to general instability.

While there is no shortage of armed groups seeking to exercise control over the region, each comes with its own risks and rewards. To make sense of this complex landscape, it is important to focus on the three most significant ‘security’ providers: the Arab coalition, the Southern Resistance Movement, and AQAP. (Note: general disorganization within the state military renders it largely incapable of serving as an effective security force, at present).



### *Security Force – the Arab Coalition*

In partnership with President Hadi’s internationally-recognized government, the Arab coalition (led by Saudi Arabia) serves as the principle opposition force against the Houthis and Saleh. As such, the coalition has benefitted from the support of a number of different constituencies in the south who either continue to back Hadi, or simply fear the incursion of the Houthis. Respondents in this research largely celebrated Saudi Arabia and the coalition as a preferable alternative to the Houthis and Iran, while expressing cynical attitudes about the Kingdom’s motives. Many focus group discussants saw the conflict as a regional proxy war between Saudi Arabia and the Iranian-backed Houthis in which the Kingdom has been solely pursuing its own self-interest.

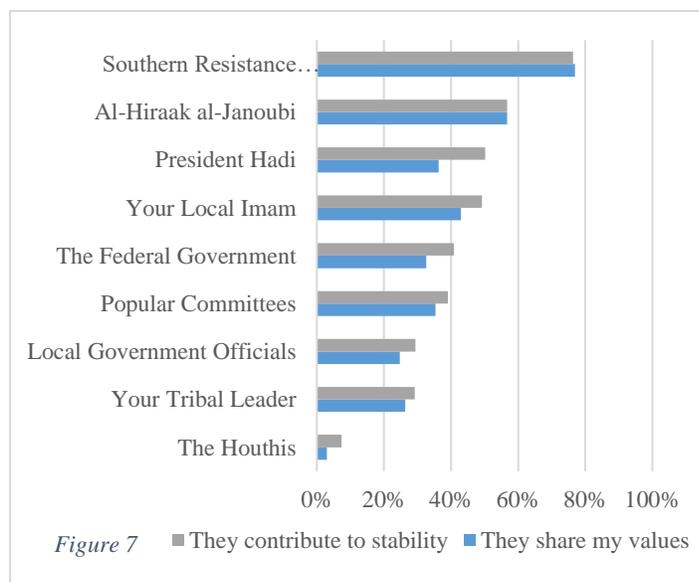
Despite this cynical attitude, antipathy toward a common enemy and the hope of post-war aid keeps support for the Arab coalition alive, even as the country is torn apart by its airstrikes. Of course, it is important to

acknowledge that there have been fewer casualties from airstrikes in the south than in the north. Focus group discussants in Shabwa and Abyan clung to the hope that Saudi Arabia would rebuild Yemen after the war, as it had promised. The lingering promise of rebuilding may explain why 68% of survey respondents agreed that Saudi Arabia should play a greater role in Yemen’s future than it has previously, as compared to 49% for Hadi. At least for the moment, imminent anxiety over security threats seems to have unified some to support Saudi Arabia to an even greater extent than the “official” Yemeni leadership.

That support may prove temporary, however, as the conflict dynamics shift. Discussants in Abyan, for example, noted with trepidation that Saudi Arabia does not want an independent south. This will undoubtedly prove to be a major point of contention if the Hadi administration attempts to restore governing control over the south. Perhaps in the hope of forestalling this potential conflict, the Arab coalition began to target a new enemy in March 2016: AQAP. At the time of this writing, it is unclear what will ultimately come of coalition airstrikes against al-Qaeda targets in Mukalla and Aden. The coalition may be looking to extend its presence in Yemen, but it is too early to tell.

### *Security Force – Southern Resistance Movement*

Complementing the activities of the Arab coalition, a group of disparate militia fighters, known as the Southern Resistance Movement (SRM), has acted as the principal ground force in many key battles across the south. While these fighters nominally fall within the umbrella of the Arab coalition, there is little evidence that the coalition exercises full control over them.<sup>34</sup> For the SRM, the primary incentives to partner with Hadi and his supporters have been a common enemy and the promise of financial compensation.<sup>35</sup> The basis for this partnership, however, has been tenuous, with salaries being substantially delayed in the fall and winter of 2015.<sup>36</sup>



This strategy of empowering local militias to address security crises had been employed in the south in the years leading up to the war, with mixed success. In 2012, local militias were mobilized in Abyan to push out AQAP fighters who had taken control of several cities. Hadi’s government promised these fighters that they would be compensated and integrated into official security forces.<sup>37</sup> These promises, however, never materialized, even though the militias were successful in defeating AQAP and continued to provide local security. While some of these so-called “popular committees” effectively maintained the rule of law, others exploited the opportunity for personal gain.<sup>38</sup>

Given this turbulent history, local opinions of the SRM have been mixed. On the one hand, the SRM fighters have helped win crucial battles, and embody the southern spirit of independence far more than the distant Hadi-led government. Survey respondents demonstrated far greater support for the SRM than any other local figures (Figure 7). On the other hand, loosely-regulated militias are unpredictable and could pose a serious danger to stability if they are not integrated into the official armed forces. Noting that the militias have been more constructive in some places than in others, some discussants worried that they would not relinquish control of key areas, such as Aden, once the fighting subsides.

While Hadi and the Arab coalition nominally acknowledge the need to incorporate militias into a more official security force, the experience of the popular committees provides ample reason to be skeptical that this will happen. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the government should welcome the more unruly militants. Dialogue participants touched on this concern, suggesting that all militants who were “loyal to the country” should be reintegrated into society, while those with questionable loyalties should be imprisoned. While the idea is simple in the abstract, determining who is loyal and who is a traitor could prove an impossible task in the midst of this chaotic battlefield. Furthermore, in the absence of a strong governmental authority, it is entirely unclear who would have the power to direct this process.

### *Security Force – AQAP*

Over the past few years, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has presented itself as a viable alternative to the state in terms of providing rule of law, social services, and security.<sup>39</sup> AQAP has amassed popular support in some areas more for their ability to govern than for their ideology. Thus, while the extremist group poses a serious threat to the stability of Yemen overall, to some Yemenis it serves as a protector. Furthermore, AQAP has long been a principle antagonist of the Houthis, even prior to the onset of the current war, which affords it substantial credibility with some in the current climate.<sup>40</sup> For all these reasons, AQAP is seen by some as a viable militant group on par with many of the other armed groups active in the south.

To ensure the safety of research subjects, no questions were asked about AQAP directly in the surveys or focus groups. It is thus difficult to gauge popular sentiment toward the organization. To complicate matters further, AQAP has long taken steps to mask its identity, in order to recruit foot soldiers who might not initially sympathize with its extremist ideology.<sup>41</sup> Participants in the dialogue facilitated for this research noted that AQAP members in Abyan have changed their flags and outward appearances, making it very difficult to identify them. Though the full extent of support for al-Qaeda is unclear and difficult to assess, it will no doubt continue to function as a wild card and undermine any potential peace process.

### *A Contested Capital – Aden*

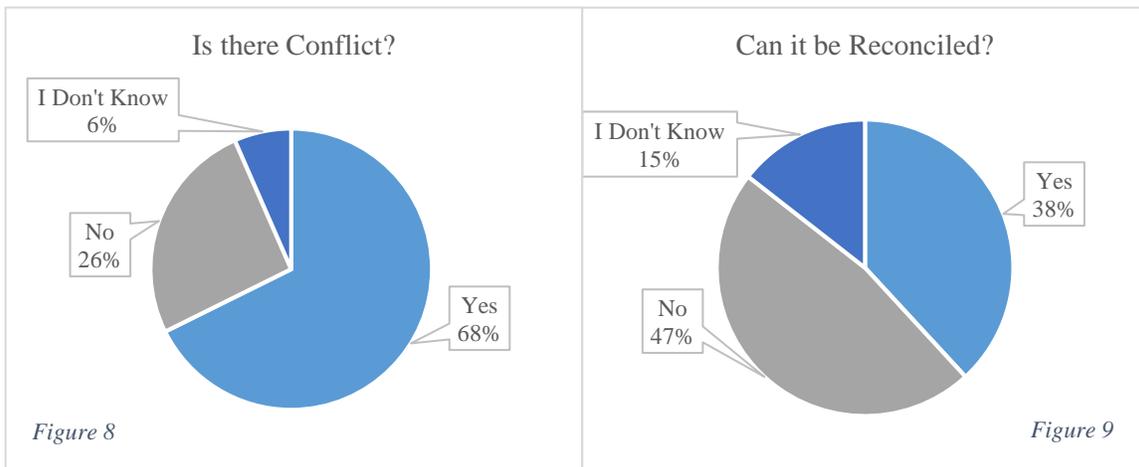
Amidst all the chaos, the city of Aden has emerged as a major centerpiece of contention. Aden is not only the historic capital of southern Yemen, it is also a key port city and economic hub. It is no surprise, then, that Hadi selected Aden to serve as a temporary base for his administration when it returned from Riyadh.<sup>42</sup> The city’s practical and symbolic significance make it a key prize for all of the many competing fighters. After the coalition forces retook the city in July 2015, the city has largely been run by disparate militia groups.<sup>43</sup> AQAP forces have since made inroads toward capturing the city, as well. If no serious steps are taken to improve security, the situation in Aden may prove to be a bellwether for the response to militias and AQAP.

### **Looming Sectarianism**

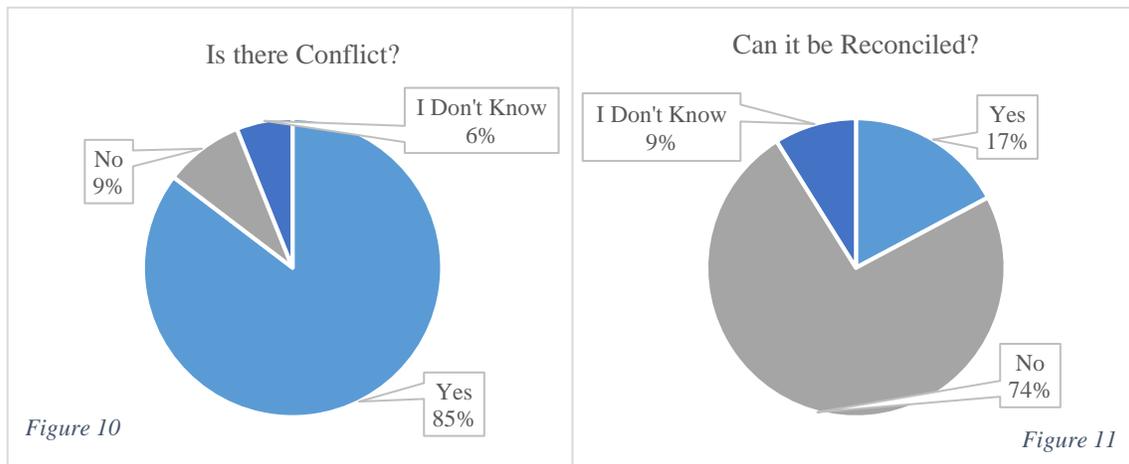
In addition to the challenge of security, another key obstacle to stability is the hardening of identity divides. Though Yemen maintains a substantial Shia minority population—nearly one third of the population—no avowedly “sectarian” conflict has erupted for generations.<sup>44</sup> Even through decades of tension between the state and the Shia Houthi movement, political leaders have refrained from invoking the same divisive anti-Shia rhetoric employed by their neighbors in the Gulf. Admittedly, the Houthis, for their part, have accused their enemies of being extremists and supporters of ISIS for several years.<sup>45</sup> Since the onset of the current war, however, key figures within the Saudi coalition, including President Hadi, have increasingly labeled their enemies as “Persians” in a bid to associate the Houthis with the foreign influence of Iran.<sup>46</sup>

This sectarian labeling of the Houthis may serve to stir up anti-Shi'a sentiment within the predominately Sunni south. While many focus group discussants insisted that the real conflict is with the Houthis and not with the Shi'a, they noted that sectarian intolerance seems to be on the rise in their communities. Once the fighting ends, they claimed, any tensions between Sunni and Shi'a will evaporate and things will return to the way they were before. However, survey data did reveal a surprisingly high level of belief that there is a conflict between Sunnis and Shi'a in Yemen, distinct from Houthi-southern conflict. Fortunately, fewer respondents saw the sectarian conflict as irreconcilable (when compared with the Houthi conflict). Nonetheless, it is important not to disregard possible implications of the spread of such divisiveness.

#### Sunni and Shi'a Yemenis



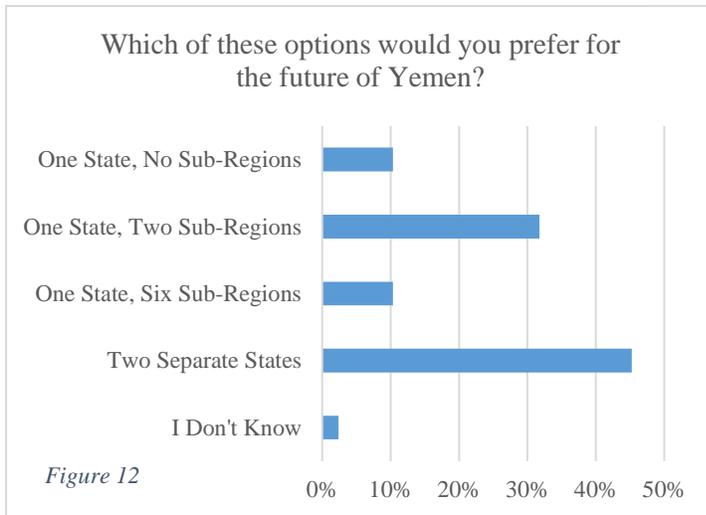
#### Houthis and Southerners



It is important to note that the problem of sectarianism is somewhat mitigated by geographic divisions. The south is predominately Sunni, with a few Ismaili Shi'a communities. The north, by contrast, is far more diverse, with Sunni communities intermingling with Zaydi Shi'a. This is one reason many respondents, who were entirely Sunni, were generally less concerned about sectarianism; even if there is greater suspicion of Shi'a, few southerners interact with Shi'a on a daily basis. Nonetheless, the rising sectarian rhetoric may still have lasting repercussions in the south, where AQAP and ISIS have gained significant traction. Both groups rely increasingly on sectarian rhetoric to justify their actions and position themselves as a bulwark against the Houthis. Allowing sectarian ideas to become normalized on the national political stage will only serve to further validate the AQAP and ISIS narratives.

## Separatist Tendencies and Lingering Grievances

As identity divisions further harden across Yemen, support for southern independence has only become stronger. For many southerners, in fact, independence is now a forgone conclusion. For various reasons, the current conflict has inadvertently reinforced the north-south divide. Different governing bodies occupy Sana'a and Aden while the SRM is actively fighting the Houthi militia forces along the north-south border. These conditions may explain why only 17% of survey respondents agreed that Yemen is currently a single country.



The sudden viability of independence, however, poses a significant challenge given the many competing visions for what an independent south would look like. Interestingly, when given the choice to express their preference for the country's future, a minority of survey respondents supported complete separation, as illustrated by Figure 12. The remainder were divided as to whether the country should be split into two, six, or no sub-regions. When pushed to elaborate further on their vision for the future, some research participants expressed concern over the implications of immediate separation.

Participants in the dialogue supported southerners' right to self-determination, but worried that complete independence would lead to chaos. The Abyan focus group noted that some southerners want immediate and complete separation, while others want to begin with a two-region division for a limited time so that the south can build up its institutions and infrastructure.

Immediate and complete separation would pose serious challenges, not only for the south's limited infrastructure, but for the intermixed population as well. After more than two decades of unification, the southern and northern populations have become thoroughly intertwined. Marriages, families, friendships, and professional relationships criss-cross the pre-1990 border.<sup>47</sup> More than 60% of Yemen's current population was born post-unification, meaning an entire generation has grown up never having lived in a divided state.<sup>48</sup>

Despite this generational shift, focus group participants in Shabwa still perceived a difference between southerners and northerners living in the south, and some even suggested that northerners should move out to avoid conflict. Indeed, half of survey respondents agreed that, apart from the political conflict, there is a conflict between *people* in the north and *people* in south. In some places, long-standing political grievances have manifested into interpersonal hostility; discussants in both Shabwa and Aden agreed that southerners often mistreat the northerners who live in the south. Some of these northerners have even been forced out of their homes and now find it difficult to return to the south.

Historic grievances still hold significant sway. While struggles over the control of resources have taken on new dimensions since the onset of the war, the idea that the government should "return" the natural resources (oil, land) that were "stolen" after the 1994 war resonated among focus group discussants. Similarly, 78% of survey respondents identified the confiscation of southern land after the 1994 civil war

as an “urgent concern” in their community. Given the fact that this has been a major rallying issue for Hiraak and very little has been done to address it, it is no surprise that it is still a point of contention. It is interesting, however, that the total political upheaval of the past year has not diminished the relevance of these concerns. Any path to peace and stability in the south will have to acknowledge the continued importance of perceived northern injustices.

## **A Path Forward**

After more than a year of active conflict, it may seem as though there is little hope for Yemen. There are no easy solutions to Yemen’s problems, and any steps toward peace largely hinge on the military and policy priorities of the Saudi Arabian government. However, recognizing these major limitations, the final section of this paper seeks to chart a path forward from the perspective of community-level actors in the south. At the time of the drafting of this white paper, it is unclear when or how Yemen will transition from active war to some manner of post-conflict recovery. When that transition approaches, however, ICRD recommends that the lessons drawn from the research, and outlined below, remain present in the minds of policymakers and community activists alike.

### *A Fractured State*

Regardless of the actions of external powers, internal unity remains one of the greatest hurdles that Yemen has yet to overcome. For decades, a multiplicity of competing interests were kept in check by the clever (albeit destructive) tactics of Saleh.<sup>49</sup> Since his fall from power, internal divisions have spiraled out of control. No one group or leader is powerful enough to enforce stability or unite a fractured society. However, there is no shortage of groups with just enough power to destabilize the whole system.

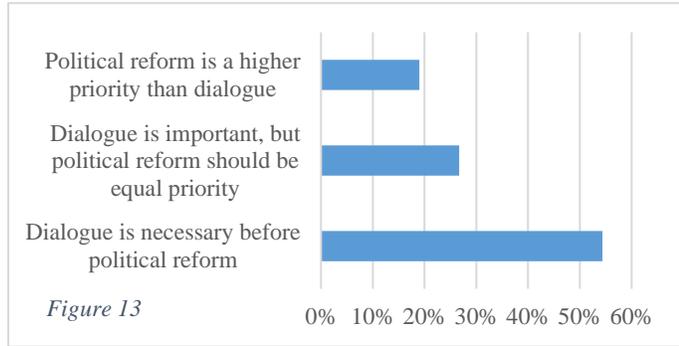
Despite many shared grievances and concerns, the south remains heavily divided. Hardline separatists clash with their moderate counterparts, leaders in Aden overshadow leaders in the other southern regions, and various militias compete for control of loosely-governed territory. The Gulf States look to Hadi to identify allies in the region, and have funneled money and support along those lines, further alienating the many southerners who reject Hadi’s legitimacy. The Saudi-led coalition has been highly effective at pushing the Houthis out of Aden and other critical areas, but has failed to establish formal security, thereby allowing disorganized militia groups to govern liberated areas. Meanwhile, AQAP is running amok, shifting allegiances rapidly in an effort to make the most out of the chaotic environment. All this will only serve to create new fault lines among southern communities.

As noted in previous sections, a shared opposition to the Houthis has temporarily united disparate groups within the south. Such unity, however, is largely illusory. No party in the conflict possesses the influence to unilaterally demobilize all local fighters. With no clear leaders or organizations to represent the interests of southern communities, it will prove difficult to chart a clear path to peace. With so many potential local spoilers, any high-level agreement could easily unravel in its implementation.

### **Facilitating Dialogue in the South – Strategic Recommendations**

Overcoming years, if not decades, of fracturing is no small task, and one that cannot wait until the fighting has subsided. One small but reasonable step forward would be to facilitate dialogue between southern community leaders. Though some may argue that dialogue is impossible, insufficient or even misguided in the midst of war and humanitarian disaster, participants in this research roundly defended its relevance. Even among the survey respondents who believed the NDC had a negative impact, a full 50% supported hosting a new national dialogue. The vast majority of respondents felt that dialogue among southerners was “very important” and most even prioritized dialogue over political reform (see Figure 13).

If dialogue is not an irrelevant matter, then, what subjects should be addressed? Survey respondents overwhelmingly identified security as a crucial subject for dialogue, followed by selecting political leaders, southern independence, and addressing basic needs. The preeminence of security comes as little surprise, for all the reasons cited earlier. Focus group discussants from Shabwa, Lahj, and Abyan expressed trepidation over the



future role of local militias, and most agreed that there should be some mechanism to integrate loyal militias into official security forces. Unfortunately, any such action would require substantial support and coordination from the federal government, which does not currently have the capacity or, perhaps, the inclination. While this may not be a problem that can be solved locally, it might serve as a basis for initial agreements among southern communities, leading to other collaborative problem solving.

At the same time, the tenuous security situation also poses a serious risk to anyone willing to participate in a dialogue on controversial issues. Participants in the dialogue facilitated for this project noted the challenge of organizing dialogues in places like Aden, Lahj, and Hadramaut, which are particularly unstable and unsafe. Unfortunately, moving community leaders to and from a more secure site (assuming one can be identified) for a local dialogue may prove to be prohibitively expensive and logistically challenging, and perhaps create greater risk in transit.

In addition to security, representation was a key concern among research participants. This issue has always loomed large in Yemen, where an entrenched political class in Sana'a has governed for decades with minimal input from the more marginal areas of the country. However, given the failure of the supposedly "all-inclusive" NDC to adequately engage delegates representing southern interests, this question carries added regional significance. While points of leadership within the south do exist, few maintain widespread popular support. Ultimately, any transition process must look to empower new leaders who have not been tainted by association with previous failed governing systems. However, any effort to identify these new leaders will, by necessity, be organized and influenced by the present stakeholders. This will make it difficult to break the hold of existing, competing self-interests.

### *Hiraak*

Of the major power brokers in the south, Hiraak presently maintains some of the broadest-reaching political influence. Despite this influence, Hiraak possesses some intrinsic limitations. Rather than a formal political party, Hiraak is a loosely-organized movement, and, as such, its lack of institutional capacity profoundly limits its ability to mobilize supporters behind a single, unified platform. According to one Shabwa focus group, Hiraak's amorphous and divided nature makes it incapable of managing a true dialogue or implementing a specific post-dialogue agenda.

Beyond its structural limitations, Hiraak also suffers from a negative public perception. While 84% of survey respondents agreed that Hiraak should be involved in any future transition process, only 57% thought the movement contributed to political stability. One focus group in Lahj put this tension in more direct terms, arguing that while Hiraak represents the aspirations of the south, it has been marginalizing many other groups by pursuing its own selfish interests. Dialogue participants went one step further by asserting that, under Hiraak's current leadership, the situation in the south is actually worse than it was under Saleh.

Its internal divisions and lack of credibility mean that Hiraak will not be able to fully represent the interests of the south in the coming transition. The movement must be included in any local dialogues, but it will not be able to effectively lead such a process.

### *Religious Leaders*

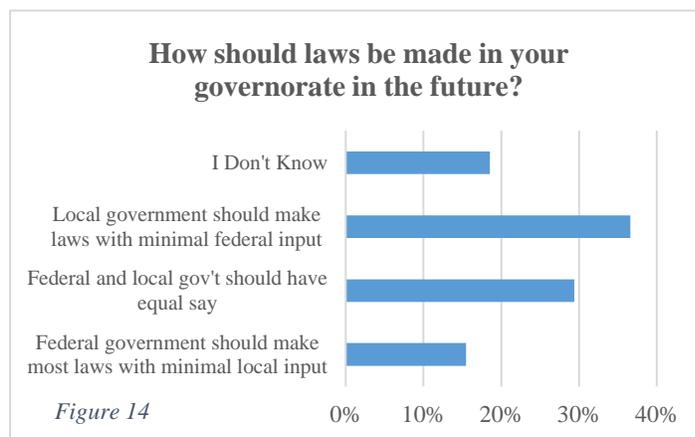
While Hiraak serves as a key modern source of authority, other, more traditional sources of authority still maintain substantial significance. Given the widespread support for religion playing a role in politics, as noted earlier, it would seem natural for religious leaders to similarly play a strong role in any social or political dialogue. Focus group discussants in Aden and Shabwa agreed that religious leaders should be called to engage in dialogue and support the political process. However, these same groups expressed concerns about the negative role local religious leaders have played thus far. According to these discussants, religious leaders across the country are fractured (like the rest of society) and ideologically divided. Some are even accused of exploiting their position to gain wealth or power. Nonetheless, other discussants argued that religious leaders have the potential to play an important role in combating corruption and violence, if only they can be united and mobilized to preach against it.

### *Tribal Leaders*

Respondents were similarly ambivalent about the potential contributions of tribal leaders. While one Shabwa focus group argued that tribal traditions and customs should be restored, most others rejected the relevance of tribes. Only 37% of survey respondents believed that local tribal leaders should be involved in the future political transition process. It is important, however, to acknowledge that support for tribes or clans varies substantially across Yemen, and may depend, at least in part, on whether people see any practical value in tribal governance.<sup>50</sup> The low approval of tribes and tribal leaders in this research does not indicate that they should be excluded from any intra-south dialogue. However, it is clear that they are unlikely to play a strong unifying role.

### *Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)*

Broadly speaking, civil society organizations may be best positioned play a constructive role in local dialogues. Participants in the research dialogue lauded the past efforts of Yemeni CSOs in providing basic services in the south in the absence of government support. According to them, CSOs could potentially strengthen collaboration within communities in the south. However, they can do little to combat political corruption without the risk of being considered traitors.



### *Local Government*

As no civil society constituency has the capacity to unilaterally lead local dialogues, it is little surprise that respondents emphasized the need for government support. In particular, respondents tended to favor the involvement of local governments over the federal government. Figure 14 illustrates that, in the abstract, survey respondents believe that strengthening local government is an appealing alternative to relying on the federal government.

In practical terms, however, existing local governments leave much to be desired. Only 29% of survey respondents felt that current local officials effectively contribute to stability, and the Aden focus group noted that the majority of local councils do not have direct communication with citizens, and are out of

touch with the citizens' suffering and basic needs. Discussants in other focus groups also seemed hesitant to endorse local officials, instead arguing that dialogue should be conducted through agencies at the provincial level. Nonetheless, some respondents acknowledged that local councils could play a major role in voicing the needs of the people, and thus should be empowered by the federal government.

### *New Leadership*

Frustration over the shortfalls of current leaders was a common theme throughout the research. Yemen has long been stuck recycling old leaders, whose primary interest seems to have been to remain in power.<sup>51</sup> Despite the obstinacy of old leaders, there are many passionate and capable youth who could help transform the status quo. Field research demonstrated a real hunger for greater youth involvement. When asked which groups of people should be involved in a dialogue among southerners, survey respondents' top two choices were youth and academics, far surpassing religious, tribal, or political leaders. One focus group in Shabwa further elaborated that youth play a critical role in contributing new ideas to the political process, and should be encouraged to be more active.

Replacing entrenched social and political leaders will be no small feat, and there are many good reasons to doubt that it will happen any time soon. However, the failure of the post-Saleh political transition should well demonstrate the great difficulty of reconstructing Yemen if the same familiar names are recycled through the various positions of leadership. While any intra-south dialogue must necessarily grow out of existing structures and leadership, the cultivation of new youth leaders must be at the center of any such process.

### **Impacting High-Level Talks**

At the moment, any local dialogue process or larger future transition will be affected by the outcomes of ongoing talks between the Arab coalition and the Houthis. At the time of writing, this process is still evolving, and may soon change for better or worse. Whatever happens, there is little reason to think that local southern leaders will supersede Hadi and his administration. Even if new local leaders emerge, they will have to balance their agenda with the interests of current national stakeholders.

Foremost among those stakeholders is President Hadi, who continues to serve as the internationally-recognized head of state. At the moment, Hadi sits in a precarious position. The Saudi coalition has united behind his claim to leadership, though there is little reason to suspect that they have a strong stake in his survival once the war ends. Meanwhile, he maintains very little support among the Islamist Islah party, Salafi militants, southern separatists, and even the bulk of the GPC.<sup>52</sup> To maintain his hold on power, he must rely on carefully-selected allies, such as Saudi Arabia and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. In such a divided context, however, certain alliances are likely to alienate others. In short, there is little reason to believe that Hadi will be able to unite the internal power brokers under his banner.

At the same time, he is not completely devoid of popular support. Half of survey respondents believed that Hadi contributed positively to stability and should be involved in the future political transition. Even with only a lukewarm base of support, it is likely that Hadi will continue to play a leading role until a more viable leader emerges.

Similarly, there is little doubt that Saudi Arabia and the UAE will maintain enormous sway. Their extensive influence is not only a product of their military presence, but also of the historical role they have played in supporting Yemen financially. Focus group discussants in Abyan and Shabwa, for example, noted that Saudi Arabia has been a boon to Yemen historically, and the country is now financially dependent on the Kingdom. As noted above, discussants expressed hope that Saudi Arabia would support the post-war recovery. With such a weak domestic economy, it is no surprise that Yemenis are cognizant of the need for foreign support and investment. Participants in the research dialogue similarly celebrated the fact that the

UAE has already begun focusing on infrastructure projects in the south, and participants enjoined the rest of the GCC to follow suit.

Despite the potential benefits of foreign aid and investment, the continued influence of the Gulf States will pose a serious challenge for southern leaders. Focus group discussants expressed concern that Saudi Arabia does not support the drive for southern independence. The Kingdom would rather see a Yemen unified under their ally, Hadi, than allow the country to split. However, if southern interests are ignored in any high-level process, it is likely that local allegiances will shift away from the Gulf and fuel substantial regional in-fighting. And with a powerful ally like Saudi Arabia supporting him, Hadi's motivation to embrace southern demands diminishes.

If Hadi and his allies in the Gulf want to avoid this disastrous outcome, they must look for ways to engage with representatives from across the south (including hardline separatists). There are many issues beyond independence—ensuring security, strengthening local government, economic investment—that could be addressed to build confidence among southerners. Viable mechanisms should also be developed to ensure that the local concerns of ordinary southern citizens are communicated to, and able to play a role in, any future national-level transition process. However, as long as the international community looks to Hadi and his supporters as the only gateway to Yemen, it is less likely that such progress will be made.

### **What Role for the US and the International Community?**

Since the onset of the war, the United States has played a back seat role, on both a military and diplomatic front. Militarily, the US has provided logistical support to the coalition campaign, while demonstrating little public reaction over the targeting of civilians.<sup>53</sup> Diplomatically, the US has played a part in negotiations with the Houthis and other key actors, but it is unclear to what extent it has shaped these discussions.<sup>54</sup> Tragically, US diplomats appear to be stuck in a geopolitical quagmire, unable to put pressure on Saudi Arabia for fear of appearing soft on the Iranian-backed Houthis. Perhaps because of these challenges, US policymakers have remained largely silent on Yemen. In fact, one of the only Congressional criticisms of the current US policy, from Sen. Chris Murphy, came nearly a year after the war began.<sup>55</sup>

It is little surprise, then, that research participants had few positive things to say about the US. Survey respondents were, on the whole, more supportive of expanding the political role of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the UN in Yemen than they were of the United States. Similarly, focus group discussants in Lahj considered US influence negative and destructive.

If the US has any vested interest in the long-term stability of Yemen—including preventing the expansion of AQAP and ISIS—it should look for ways to establish some level of local trust and credibility. It may be instructive to look at the example of the GCC, whose long-standing financial support for the region mitigates some of the negative perceptions of its military heavy-handedness. If and when the active fighting dies down, the US may have a key opportunity to improve its image among the populace by investing in rebuilding efforts and leveraging its diplomatic influence to ensure meaningful local involvement in the transition process. Of course, this will require allocating funding so that it is readily available, as well as identifying trusted non-governmental partners on the ground with the capacity to move quickly to respond to these needs.

The UN and the rest of the international community may also have a more positive role to play. The UN has already made a concerted effort to facilitate a peace process. While such efforts should be lauded, ceasefires and the disarmament of the Houthis mean little to the various communities that are struggling with rogue militants and the absence of basic social services and governance. The international community must give equal priority to laying the groundwork for a stable Yemen, which will require that substantial attention be directed at community-level problems. The international community has the capacity to mobilize a number of key resources that will be necessary to ensure that Yemen does not fall into further

disarray once the fighting with the Houthis ceases, including development assistance, governance expertise, and peacekeeping forces.

### **What Role for Religion?**

Religion in Yemen has the potential to both facilitate positive change and obstruct constructive progress. In recent years, religious discourse and ideals have been used to foster sectarian animosity and enhance the political prestige of ambitious sheikhs. Nonetheless, religious identity is shared across the south, and could be leveraged to lessen other political and social divides. Religious leaders, as noted above, have the potential to serve as powerful voices against violence and corruption, and could help to improve the validity of local dialogues. Unfortunately, with no centralized religious leadership, there is no easy way to reach or mobilize Yemen's various local religious authorities. As any transition process unfolds, governmental and/or civil society bodies engaged in the process should identify elements within their faith tradition that will support a stable transition, such as those that enjoin nonviolence and unity, and engage local religious leaders in collaborating on shared goals.

### **Future Roadmap**

Regardless of how the current conflict progresses, the next few years in Yemen will be difficult and fraught with problems. At the moment, it is impossible to determine the structure of the coming transition process. There may be further war, partition, a renewed national dialogue, or gradual democratization. Yemen's best hope for stability, however, depends on a concerted effort from top political actors, local community leaders, and everyone in-between.

The first step in this process should be the facilitation of local dialogue among southern communities. Such an effort should ideally be led by local CSOs in close cooperation with Hiraak and other major stakeholders. Religious and tribal leaders, along with the media, should be encouraged to promote participation in the dialogue and validate the process. The international community—including international CSOs, the Gulf states, the UN, and the US government—all have a role to play in supporting such dialogues, by providing resources, safe spaces, or training. These dialogues should be oriented toward articulating local needs and identifying representative leadership. Such leaders can then inform discussions at a higher level, whether that involves working through government agencies at a sub-regional level or directly engaging national policymakers.

At all stages in this process, it is crucial for local, national, and international actors to be sensitive to the issues that continue to fuel conflict and division. The grievances of Yemen's southern separatists have been well-documented yet widely ignored. While it is tempting to assume that the current civil war overshadows all else, it will be impossible to facilitate a constructive political transition if it appears that that process will only reinforce the power dynamics that have been roundly criticized by southerners. At the same time, new sources of division and conflict—sectarianism, disorganized militias, the humanitarian crisis—may prove to be ticking time bombs if they are pushed aside in a rush to arrive at a political settlement.

In summary, any future national transition process must recognize that Yemen's problems cannot be solved only from the top down. Particularly given the deep divisions that remain in the south, local dialogue is an important step toward both: (a) identifying common goals and interests along with strategies for achieving them, and (b) building relationships and cooperation across identity divides. Any national-level process is unlikely to be successful without such efforts to build social cohesion at the community level.

It will also be crucial to find ways to bridge these local initiatives with national-level processes, ensuring that (a) outcomes of local dialogues are communicated to national decision-makers, and (b) local citizens have a credible and inclusive mechanism for determining who will represent them in national processes. Meaningful dialogues should begin internally in southern communities, before working through existing

structures at the sub-regional level and eventually engaging with northerners and national policymakers. As local initiatives are incorporated into a larger national transition process, national-level actors may also build trust in the process by addressing some of the confidence-building measures that were not successfully implemented in the aftermath of the NDC but which remain important to southerners (e.g., military pensions and the release of prisoners).

## **Policy Recommendations**

To ensure that the ongoing peace process does not collapse into further chaos, and to maximize the potential for a successful future political transition, it is essential for national and international stakeholders to focus on building a bottom-up approach that complements and strengthens the formal process. Due to the complex nature of the current conflict, with many actors having overlapping interests and roles, ICRD has outlined the following recommendations along three key themes:

### *Build upwards from civil society:*

- Indigenous civil society organizations (CSOs) should bring diverse voices together to identify common values, needs, and those local leaders who can represent the interests of the community at a higher level. International civil society groups should look to support their efforts by providing funding, training, or strategic guidance as necessary.
- Civil society leaders should specifically focus on shared religious values that support non-violence, social unity, and collaboration, as religion seems to be one of the few commonalities cutting across other identity rifts in Yemen. Credible foreign powers that support the peace effort, like Oman, could facilitate the training of Yemeni religious leaders, to enhance their ability to support and lend legitimacy to community dialogues.
- Foreign stakeholders, such as the US State Department, should bolster non-military aid directed at relief and civil society dialogue in Yemen. Even if security concerns hamper large-scale relief efforts, effective dialogue among local communities could provide the collaboration necessary to open a channel for the delivery of emergency aid. Careful vetting of civil society partners will be crucial to ensure that extremist elements do not exploit external support.
- CSOs should help develop an avenue for Yemeni youth to take an active and constructive role in local politics and community affairs. Foreign powers should exert diplomatic pressure on current leadership to incorporate the diverse viewpoints of a new generation of Yemeni leaders.

### *Address security concerns:*

- The Arab coalition and Yemeni officials should work with local leaders of southern resistance forces to vet fighters for possible integration into official security forces. Regional and international allies should support security sector professionalization with training and technical assistance, with assiduous attention to the significant risk of identity-based spoilers.
- The Arab coalition and other foreign powers must prioritize the stability of Yemen over victory against the Houthis. This will likely require a short-term security presence to provide stability outside the frontlines, perhaps including a UN PKO presence.
- The Arab coalition and local security forces should establish secure channels for relief and development assistance to reach all areas, particularly those most affected by the conflict, emphasizing collaboration with a network of diverse local actors so as to increase buy-in.
- The international community should support the capacity building of local CSOs to apply traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in communities where they might resolve drivers of violence, particularly between armed groups.

*Respect the concerns of southerners:*

- Yemeni government officials should develop mechanisms that southern leaders and interest groups accept as a legitimate way to voice their concerns about the shape of any future state; key foreign powers should push top Yemeni leaders to prioritize these mechanisms. Yemeni civil society leaders can play an essential supporting role in advocating for these formal channels.
- Alongside any discussion of demobilization, ongoing talks must address the question of federalism. It should be assumed at the outset that the six-region system is a proposal that might need reconsideration, as intransigence on this point may well jeopardize any other progress.
- Yemeni government and civil society leaders should begin outlining a framework for enhancing local and regional autonomy. Some measure of decentralization will be necessary, and will require clear and reasonable intermediary steps that are designed inclusively.
- The Yemeni government should focus on local and regional officials as a place to begin building trust between communities and institutions. Currently considered very corrupt, most communities acknowledged the importance of these positions in any transition. Anti-corruption purges and the appointment of representative local leaders to these positions would be meaningful steps.

## Notes

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- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 6.
- <sup>5</sup> "Who's who in Yemen's opposition?" *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2011.
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