Yemen: Devising Sustainable Processes for Dialogue

Summary of Roundtable Discussion, 01 December 2017

Introduction

This report summarises the discussion at a roundtable on the war in Yemen and the potential for supporting peacebuilding capacity in the region. The event took place on 1 December 2017 at the Conflict Analysis Research Centre (CARC) at the University of Kent and was a joint event organised by CARC and Oxford Research Group (ORG). The roundtable took place under the Chatham House Rule, so comments are not attributed to specific individuals or the organisations they are affiliated to.

The roundtable was stimulated by an emerging consensus among analysts on the need for the peace process in Yemen to be inclusive and that the lack of local participation contributed in some measure to the failure of the National Dialogue Conference (2013-2014) and more recent UN-led peace talks. However, questions surrounding how to establish a viable political process in Yemen remain and this was the focus of discussion.
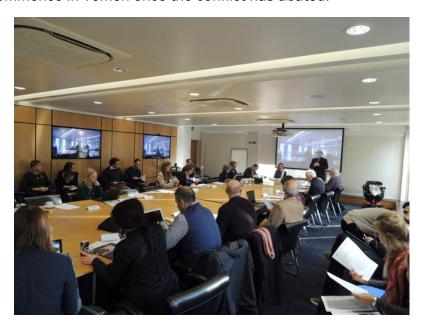
A range of academics and policy practitioners took part in the roundtable in order to explore the challenges presented by the current war and the potential for an effective process of political dialogue to be built over the medium term. This should provide a platform for civil society voices to engage meaningfully with national conflict resolution. Participants looked at the unique dimensions of the Yemen conflict and at some comparative examples from other contexts.

Session 1: Peacebuilding Capacity in Yemen – Key Challenges

The first session of the roundtable focused on the current political situation in Yemen and explored in particular the links between the Yemeni population and its decision-makers, discussing previous attempts to promote political dialogue, particularly at the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). This session also considered what was needed for viable dialogue to commence in Yemen once the conflict has abated.

Dimensions of crisis within the Yemen conflict

One of the central points made by speakers with direct policy experience was that there is a *three-level crisis* in Yemen today.

First, there is a serious **governance crisis**, with very few people at a local level having the capacity to control resources, as power has become increasingly centralised. This has in turn led to micro-level patronage at the family level from a small number of elite actors and influence from beyond Yemen itself, including from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. This process has affected the internal political dynamics in Yemen and increased corruption. It was suggested by a number of speakers that endemic corruption and tax havens have taken significant amounts of capital out of the country. It was asserted that more money has left the country this way than has entered it through humanitarian aid.

Secondly, a serious **resource crisis** was identified as the region is extremely water-stressed and experiencing declining oil production. Due to the global drop in prices, oil income has declined dramatically, which has led in turn to resource scarcity: a drop in public spending, economic crisis, electricity shortages and exacerbated disaffection among the wider population.

Thirdly, Yemen is experiencing a serious **gender crisis**, currently occupying bottom position in UNDP's world Gender Inequality Index. Over half of the population gets married before the age of 18, while economic resources go disproportionately to men and women's rights are steadily deteriorating. Practitioner NGOs have tried to address some of these systemic issues, e.g. by promoting the notion of women teachers in local communities, but it was

felt that much more work needs to be done to tackle endemic discrimination of women in Yemen.

State-Civil Society engagement

The point was underlined numerous times in presentations and other contributions that it was vitally important to involve civil society in future dialogue, including youth, women's groups, as well as the private sector in any attempts to build meaningful dialogue and political agreement.

Several contributions focused on the changing relationship between State institutions and civil society in Yemen and how this evolved between the 1994 conflict and the 2011 revolution. While initially civil society organisations (and trade unions in particular) performed a useful monitoring function with respect to governing institutions, over time the power elites established their own groups that were less of a threat to their power base. This replacement of independent civil society organisations capable of monitoring State institutions with groups that were co-opted or controlled by the political elites has led to a hollowing out of this sector in Yemen today. This has contributed to the crisis of governance in Yemen, where State institutions are dysfunctional and abused to serve the private interests of the dominant power-brokers.

Securitising the revolution

In terms of broader security issues, Yemen's 2011 revolution was popularly connected with the Arab Uprising across the MENA region and became militarised within a counter-terrorism agenda imposed and prioritised by external parties. As a result, local communities have been largely ignored and the energy from the revolution was quickly suppressed or dissipated, with very limited changes felt at the local level.

Several participants pointed to the international dimension as a key aspect of any future peacebuilding initiative in the country. There was considered to be a low level of interest in Yemen from an international community waiting for a stable government that could be trusted to take control; this is unlikely to happen.

Failings of the National Dialogue Conference

The experience of the NDC and the reasons why it did not prove successful in building a sustainable political agreement were analysed.

Timeframe – The NDC started in 2013 as a six-month project but went on for 10 months and was undermined by both its lack of transparency and its operational unwieldiness. There was insufficient time or space to allow it to develop and produce tangible results. After the revolution people wanted quick action and results. With insufficient time to organise a process of local level dialogue it was difficult for many people to have confidence that such initiatives would make a positive difference to their lives.

Expectations – The NDC's short remit, with a vast array of tasks to complete, was indicative of the unrealistic expectations that many people held over its capacity to succeed. Several contributors felt that there was a mismatch between public expectations of what the NDC would deliver and the reality of its (unclear) remit.

Mission-creep – This led to some operational mission-creep, with military spending for instance initially being thought to be beyond its remit and then being brought into it later on. This led to uncertainly and a lack of coherence.

Composition – The selection criteria for membership were quite arbitrary and seemed to overlap with those people who were loyal to President Hadi. It was asserted that a new process of dialogue must involve regional actors, notably the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and that local stability should be pursued as a precursor to national level negotiations. There was also a recognition that women had to be brought into the dialogue process but that this remains a problematic issue in Yemen where local level empowerment and inclusion of women is needed. The context is one where men increasingly want women to stay at home due to the dangers associated with the war.

Procedures – The NDC was also hampered by its own modalities and procedures. Decisions required a 90% consensus, which made it difficult to reach a sufficient threshold in order for progress to be made.

Fragmentation, legitimacy and inclusion

One of the key challenges for developing peacebuilding capacity in Yemen was seen to be the crisis of legitimacy and the emergence of rival voices with an 'official' government (partly in exile) and Houthi control of large areas of the North, including Sana'a. This is compounded by a rise in armed regional groups and other local actors acting independently of more centralised political factions.

There is a high level of political fragmentation in Yemen, and a blurring of regional, national and local levels of power. As a consequence, establishing a common agenda with such a diverse range of groups, and determining who should be engaged in dialogue or has a legitimate claim to share power in Yemen, is not clear. The Houthi movement, for instance, cannot be involved in power-sharing negotiations unless it becomes a political party, but it would be likely to lose power if it contested elections, which clearly decreases its incentive to make the transition from armed movement.

Corruption and the political economy of crisis

Several contributions also highlighted a key problem for the international community and for international NGOs wanting to contribute aid or other financial resources to Yemen. Thus, while the provision of aid and other resources is badly needed, the endemic corruption in Yemen makes it extremely difficult to channel this to the right people, or to ensure that such resources do not become part of the wider war economy. It was agreed that a gradual programme was needed to address corruption as part of a wider peacebuilding effort in Yemen.

Session 2: Building Peace in Yemen – The External and Comparative Dimensions

The second session of the roundtable focused on the extent to which lessons from other comparative contexts might be useful for peacebuilding efforts in Yemen.

Strategic thinking

This section of the discussion began with a broad conceptual overview of peacebuilding dynamics and highlighted three different levels where activity was needed: identity-group, State level and the international dimension. This posed the difficult question that those engaged in peacebuilding efforts had to address: what can be done when conflict resolution and dialogue does not work? The suggested answer was to work with the identity groups in terms of where they are, not where we would like them to be in an ideal context.

This approach suggested stripping back matters of process that may have been a feature of previous dialogue initiatives and getting down to some core questions with the respective conflict parties. 'Who are we?' Where are we?' and 'Where do we want to go?' Providing space for such fundamental questions to be considered is important as this is likely to produce discussion of core needs and values within the identity groups that might provide the foundation for future dialogue and negotiation. The task then is too look at how the identity groups connect with one another and the government. The key point here was the emphasis on producing collective thinking across the identity groups and establishing some common denominator concerning what each side really wants. This can then be separated out from the operational challenges about how that could be achieved.

Sri Lanka's experience

These points were taken up during further contributions that focused on other regions beyond Yemen – notably the conflict in Sri Lanka, where there has been a sustained effort to promote track II dialogue among the conflict parties. The challenges facing local level engagement in peacebuilding were a focus of attention here as, beyond the task of establishing some level of agreement over the basic needs of the conflict parties, civil society activists faced logistical challenges as well as personal attacks in these endeavours. In a number of track II initiatives in Sri Lanka, peacebuilders were physically threatened, while some students were killed despite the constructive dialogue that also

took place. The credibility of dialogue was highly dependent on local level participation and empowerment; if ordinary people are included in discussions, a peacebuilding voice can emerge.

Public attitudes to peacebuilding

Survey data concerning public attitudes towards peacebuilding was presented, highlighting that not only do people understand what peacebuilding is but that there is strong public support for it. The survey found that public support for peacebuilding was higher in areas that had experienced violent conflict than in areas that had not.

Lessons for peacebuilding in Yemen

Proper resourcing of civil society groups is critical to developing the peacebuilding potential of the region. A lot of micro-level activity is taking place in Yemeni civil society across humanitarian work, the arts, education and youth initiatives that is making a difference to the lives of many people who live there. These micro-level civil society activities can provide alternative options and visions to the polarizing binary views prevalent in war.

It is vital to maintain social cohesion in Yemen due a decrease in trust at the community level. There is a need to make connections and open up communication between communities and government agencies. Mediation is one area where this might be advanced with suggestions being made that externally driven and funded UN and international mediation efforts need to actively include more local level groups that have been excluded from the dialogue. This could make it more likely that local level ideas and grievances are included in future political negotiations and that these, in turn, would have greater credibility and viability in practice.

There is a paradox in that members of the international community are, on the one hand, ostensibly committed to end the war, while, on the other, they are involved in arms sales to countries such as Saudi Arabia. While practitioners may criticise the British government for its arms sales to Saudi Arabia, it is important to also go beyond the critique and find solutions to this that would make ending arms sales a more attractive policy for the UK government.

The Roundtable discussion concluded with several speakers making the point that any future peacebuilding efforts in Yemen needed to enhance capacity within civil society. While there was a general consensus that Yemen's current political and economic context was hugely challenging, it was also believed that local ownership of externally driven peacebuilding initiatives was an essential component of a credible and sustainable peace process.