

YEMEN SEMINAR REPORT

SEPTEMBER 2017



In May 2017 UN House Scotland held a seminar to focus upon the conflict in Yemen. Participants included key persons from Yemeni communities as well as those based in Scotland. All had a shared commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

This Report is a summary of the discussions and provides recommendations which emerged from the intense conversations. Our aim is to make a contribution towards bridge-building and conflict resolution. We confirm our commitment and our firm belief that only when civil society is included can avenues for peace be found.

We hope most sincerely that our readers take forward any possibilities they may have to play their part in ending this man-made conflict which continues to be a disgraceful humanitarian disaster.

Introduction

This is the third year of military conflict in Yemen. Since 2015, the United Nations Office for Human Rights has documented nearly 14,000 civilian casualties in the country; 7.3million Yemenis are affected by famine while nearly 19million are in need of humanitarian assistance. Throughout these three years, there has been an astonishing absence of proposals for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Maybe part of the reason for this is because the plight of the Yemeni people does not have the international attention it merits and deserves.

Our Seminar ‘Conflict in Yemen: The Forgotten People’ sought to redress that lacunae. It brought together Yemeni and international experts who provided views on the root causes of the crisis, its consequences and possible avenues to much-needed resolution.

The discussions were wide-ranging as will become evident in reading this Report. We heard about the historical background, the humanitarian and health crises and the varying roles of Yemen’s neighbours, the UN and the UK. Our attention was drawn to the importance and vitality of women’s groups and youth movements in Yemen. We took hope that civil society will become critical in developing a workable peace.



Deep Roots and Tangled Branches – an Introduction to the Conflict in Yemen

Yemen has been characterised by high levels of inequality between northern and southern regions. The North has historically dominated the power structures in the country. Both during the Imamate period (1918 – 1962) and after the unification of the South and the North (1990), political and military elites from the North have exercised control over most of the country. More people in the South have also experienced a drop in living standards after unification compared to their Northern counterparts. In 1994, a civil war erupted, where Southern leaders tried to reinstate an independent South Yemen. They were defeated, but oppression and disenfranchisement of Southerners continued after the war. There were also six wars between the Houthi movement and the government during 2004-2010. Discrimination against the South can also be seen in the current absence of humanitarian aid currently in most Southern provinces. Aid is primarily distributed to Northern provinces, further complicating the situation in the region.

In 2011, peaceful protests against then President Ali Abdullah Saleh started in Yemen's capital Sana'a. These were met with violence from government forces. Months of protest and violence resulted in 2011 with Saleh agreeing to and signing the Gulf Cooperation Council Initiative which demanded his resignation from the Presidency. Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi was elected as Saleh's successor in 2012. In 2014, Saleh formed an alliance with his former enemies – the Houthi movement. The Houthi-Saleh alliance is based on their common goal of fighting the Saudi-led coalition supporting Hadi and their ability to mobilise people's support. Saleh is still powerful – he is influential within the military and popular among many ordinary Yemenis. The Houthis galvanise the population with their Shi'a credentials. The Houthis staged a coup in September 2014, and took control of Sana'a. President Hadi was placed under house arrest and later fled to Aden before fleeing to Saudi Arabia.



A Country Starving – Assessing the Humanitarian Crisis

Yemen is highly dependent on imported food. With the Saudi-led coalition's blockade of Yemen's main port Hodeida, import arrangements have become increasingly difficult. Food imports are scarce, very expensive and slow to arrive when they are most needed. Food aid is primarily required in rural areas but has to pass through multiple checkpoints, thereby making it more expensive.

Access to food is further complicated by the lack of agricultural expertise among the local population. Education and training for careers in agriculture have been minimal during the last decade.

Yemen is experiencing one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. Nearly 19 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, while 10.3 million people are in acute need of help. The situation is worsened by the outbreak of cholera. Additionally, around 3 million people have been internally displaced.

There is a big funding gap for humanitarian aid and relief; the escalation of the conflict further complicates the provision of meaningful aid. To add insult to injury, Yemen is also receiving far less attention than it deserves from international media outlets and broadcasters.

Only about half of all Yemeni hospitals are operating and these are running out of money and medical supplies. The fact that Sana'a airport has been closed since August 2016 means that it is no longer possible to bring foreign doctors in or send Yemeni patients abroad for treatment. This has resulted in nearly 20,000 people unable to access life-saving treatment.



The Role of Yemen's Neighbours

Saudi Arabia has intervened with their military forces against the Houthi-Saleh alliance as part of a broader strategy by the son of the Saudi Arabian King Salman. King Salman's son, Mohammad bin Salman, who is also Minister of Defence, is using the conflict in Yemen to compete for the throne in Saudi Arabia. The war in Yemen also presents a threat to border security to Saudi Arabia, which means that a solution for Yemen also is a solution for Saudi Arabia.

The United Arab Emirates' crown prince, Mohammad bin Zayed, is a keen supporter of Mohammad bin Salman and wants to see him as the leader of Saudi Arabia. Thus, the UAE is a key backer of Mohammad bin Salman and his military intervention within Yemen. The intervention in Yemen is also associated with the larger goals of the UAE in the region, including its commitment to destroy the Muslim Brotherhood and the Yemeni Islamist Party, Al-Islah. Outside of Yemen the UAE seeks to exercise control over certain port and central regions of Africa and the Middle East. Hence, the UAE involvement in Yemen can be seen as an extension of that regional hegemony.

The Saudis and Emiratis support politically and militarily a range of groups in Yemen between them, such as Salafis, relatively secular anti-Islamist militias, secessionists, pro-unionists and tribesmen.

Iran has given material support, capacity-building and training to the Houthis. The goal of Iran in intervening is also about pushing back against Saudi Arabia and the US involvement in the conflict, while at the same time expanding their presence in Syria and Iraq.



The combined actions of each external actor is worsening the humanitarian crisis and deepening the tensions within Yemen. It has been suggested that Yemen and the value of Yemeni lives are just part of a game for regional leaders who want to obtain and maintain power.

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Failures of the International Community: the UK and the UN

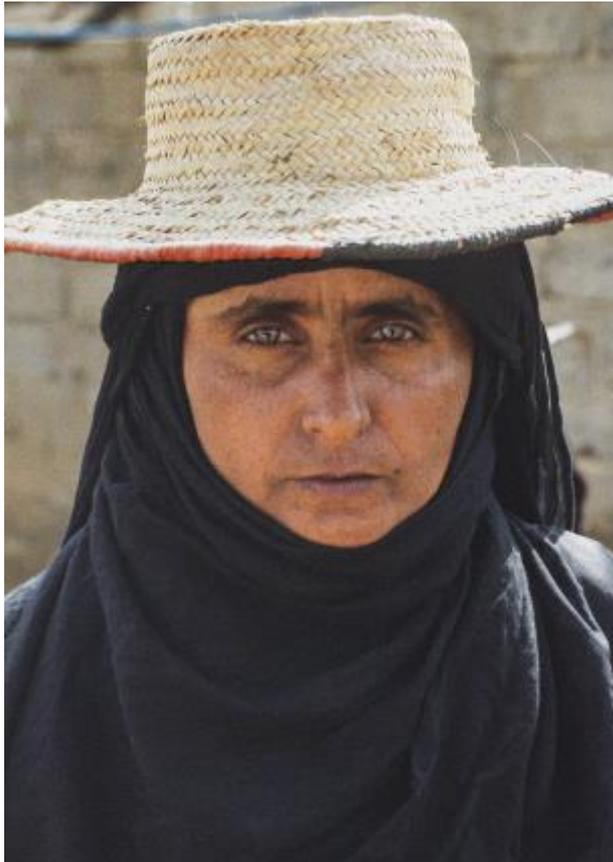
For both the UK and the US, the conflict in Yemen is not about Yemen but about Saudi Arabia, their key ally in the Middle East. The UK and the US are both competing in the Saudi arms market, as well as being involved in the purchasing of hardware contracts packages that are long term and require updates, and so consequently necessitate the guarantee of secure, long-term relationship with the country.

The main driver of UK Yemen foreign policy decisions is a desire to maintain a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, primarily with the objective of the fight against terrorism. At the same time, the Yemen conflict is subsidiary to a wider policy around trade and intelligence sharing with the Gulf.

Since March 2015, the UK has sold an estimated £3.3 billion worth of bombs and fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. There has also been a reassignment of bombs that were intended for the British air-force to Saudi Arabia, and UK personnel are present in air operations centres in Saudi Arabia.

Bombs made in Scotland are being used in Yemen against civilians in a grave violation of human rights. These weapons are being sold into a context where abuses are being committed on a huge scale by all sides. This is in clear violation of UK, EU and international law. Nevertheless, the UK government continuously rejects and dismisses the evidence supplied by the UN, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch which states that UK arms are being used in human rights violations.

Currently, the potential role of the UN is thwarted by the inefficiency of its institutions and staff as well as the lack of the mandate to act in a politically meaningful way. The UN is unwilling to discuss the opposing strategies involved in the conflict, especially in light of the fact that Ali Abdullah Saleh may come back into power and the fact that sanctions may have to be made.



Women, Youth and Civic Activism: Pathways to Peace

The two primary challenges affecting the work of civil society organisations in Yemen are the lack of adequate funding and limited capacity-building. Whilst organisations and activists in Sana'a have better access to capacity-building resources and training compared to those located elsewhere in Yemen, nevertheless, their role is inherently limited. Yet civil society groups have been the first responders during the conflict.

Yemen has seen a significant curtailment of women's right to free movement and an increased number of threats to security and personal freedoms during the conflict. Despite this, several women-led organisations have been successful in implementing interventions within their communities. For several years, there has also been a constant push for inclusion of women within the political classes in Yemen.

Many young Yemenis, on a daily basis, are arrested and killed with their vulnerabilities exploited by armed groups. Youth civil society organisations are facing the challenge of a constantly changing context of the conflict, thereby forcing them to re-orient their objectives and actions. They also face significant logistical issues linked to the safety of staff, travelling and access. However, youth-led groups still organise activities like trainings and workshops on peace-building and conflict sensitivity.

Concluding Comments

This Report has drawn attention to a number of key issues and concerns surrounding the ongoing crisis in Yemen. The most serious among them has been the worsening humanitarian situation. It has been argued that much more funding for humanitarian aid and relief in Yemen is needed in order to address acute food and fuel shortages and to combat unravelling cholera epidemics in the country.

The seminar attendees have also recognised that the deterioration of the humanitarian and security situation in Yemen has driven many Yemenis to join militant organisations and terrorist groups. To counteract these trends, peaceful solution to the crisis must be found and the basic needs of all Yemenis must be addressed, including fair access to food, shelter and provision of health services.

Civil society organisations have been recognized as one of the key agents capable of responding to the basic needs of citizens, promoting inclusive society and peaceful resolution of the ongoing conflict. It has been highlighted that the international community must increase its support for civil society groups within Yemen, including funding and improvement of capacity-building. This Report notes that the focus of the international community on the capital city of Sana'a is at the expense of Yemen's other regions. The plight of ordinary Yemenis outside the capital has rarely been presented. If the collective Yemeni voice is not heard today, the chances of resolving the ongoing conflict will remain dim. These efforts, it is argued, should take a more decentralised approach to ensure that the positive impact of civil society work is fairly distributed across the country.

This Report has highlighted the insufficient international media attention given to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the plight of the Yemeni population. The attendees of the seminar have called for the international media outlets to provide unbiased and regular coverage of the situation in Yemen to increase understanding of the general audience and put pressure on national governments to act.

The Report recognises the crucial role of Yemeni women and young people in promoting peaceful resolution of the conflict. At the same time, it has been noted that women and young people have been side-lined and silenced by the violent actors and hostile environment of the ongoing conflict, frequently bearing the largest brunt of the unravelling humanitarian crisis. Presentations at the Seminar highlighted the view that women and young people need to be allowed to play more active role in the ongoing search for peace in Yemen and their efforts must be supported not only by the local actors but also by the international community.

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Recommendations

To the Members of Parliament and the Members of the Scottish Parliament:

Continue to publicly speak about the humanitarian situation in Yemen and advocate for peaceful resolution of the conflict;

Continue to denounce the UK Government involvement in the Saudi-led coalition that has led to serious breaches of human rights of the entire Yemeni population;

Call for the UK Government to recognise evidence delivered by the United Nations and other international organisations which demonstrates that the use of UK-manufactured weaponry is violating the international conventions and human rights of the Yemeni people;

Call for the immediate halt of all arms sales to Saudi Arabia;

Call for comprehensive humanitarian aid to be delivered to the Yemeni population on a continuous basis and in collaboration with expert local and international organisations;

Support Yemeni women and young people-led grassroots organisations to ensure their voices are heard and respected in the peaceful resolution of the conflict

This Report has been compiled by a team at UNH notably Claire LeBlanc and Simen Jordsmyr

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