

Yemen's National Dialogue: The need for a contingency plan

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The final months of Yemen's much-vaunted National Dialogue Conference (NDC), aimed at resolving the country's substantial political, social, and economic issues through peaceful negotiations, have been marked by continued military operations – including a surge in US drone attacks – against Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). They have also witnessed the temporary closure of the UK and US embassies in Sana'a, as elsewhere in the Middle East, in response to a reportedly major terrorist threat. With regard to the political negotiations themselves – still underway despite the security threat – the NDC continues to suffer from high expectations, the lack of a concrete vision, and the conflicting interests of political elites and international stakeholders. As such, many argue that the NDC is now in dire need of a contingency plan to ensure the country's security going forward.

Following months of wrangling and a number of false starts, the NDC was officially inaugurated on 18 March 2013. Conceived within the framework of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) two-year plan for the Arab uprisings' only negotiated transition (which began with longstanding dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh ceding power in exchange for immunity from prosecution in February 2012), the six-month conference was sold as a mechanism for public consultation and reconciliation. As such, it was to be a national forum through which all local stakeholders, particularly marginalised groups such as youth and women, could shape elements of the political transition, including the drafting of a new constitution prior to elections in 2014.

A total of 565 delegates have been involved in the conference, which has been structured around three plenary sessions. These include representatives from the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), the main opposition party Islah, the southern secessionist movement Hirak, the Shia insurgent Houthi movement, and a number of representatives for youth and women.

During the first session, which ran from March to early June, nine committees discussed how best to address key issues in the new constitution. These included, notably, the Houthi rebellion in the north. This has seen the Houthis, a Shia movement that played a key role in forcing Saleh from power, continuing to challenge the government of his successor, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, over a range of grievances. Other committees, meanwhile, focused on the 'southern issue', namely the demands of Hirak for the secession of south Yemen, and issues relating to governance, state-building, national reconciliation, human rights, and the security sector. The resultant recommendations were presented during the second session, which began in early June. They will be finalised at the third session in mid-September, before being voted on by the delegates in advance of preparing the new constitution and the attendant referendum on 15 October 2013.

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While it is safe to assert that the NDC is the rubberstamp of legitimacy for an otherwise internationally driven transition plan – the international community having endorsed and invested millions of dollars in the process – the conference nonetheless provides Yemenis with a framework for widespread political participation that can contribute to the negotiation of a new social contract between citizens and state. The prospects of success, however, are complicated by two major considerations: first, the wide range of demands and expectations placed upon the process by Yemen's many diverse constituents, and second, the agendas and strategies of political actors both inside and outside the country.

On the first point, the problems boil down to three core issues: lack of vision, unrealistic expectations,

and incompatible demands. Perhaps most fundamentally, there continues to be a lack of clarity as to the country's immediate future, and this has hindered the progress and ambitions of the NDC. Indeed, many Yemenis feel that the objectives of the dialogue have been neither well-defined nor well-communicated, with national and international stakeholders deferring the resolution of a range of diverse issues to the conference. What is clear, however, is what the failure of the NDC would look like: a return to civil war and the fragmentation of the country.

This lack of vision has contributed, in part, to the unrealistic expectations placed upon the NDC. From spurring economic development to ending elite-dominated politics, and restructuring the state to increase government transparency, expectations of what can be achieved during a six-month conference have run high. Many Yemenis believe the dialogue will solve their day-to-day problems and raise living standards. Meanwhile, political elites see the NDC as a means of reaching a national power-sharing settlement and protecting their own interests.

Unfortunately for most Yemenis, the interests of political stakeholders are diverse and contradictory. While six of the nine committees produced recommendations during the first session that were taken forward for discussion during the second, some of the most important groups – including those focused on the restructuring of the state and the southern issue – failed to reach the consensus required to produce recommendations for further discussion. In particular, the deep divisions between north and south, and within the south itself, have made progress on crucial issues pertaining to the territorial reach and structure of the state near impossible.

The southern question, for example, remains a key sticking point. Amongst the southern representatives, a process of political outbidding has been taking place as they vie for popular approval, leading to increasingly radical demands. For example, during pre-conference discussions in 2012, Ali Nasser Mohammed, one of a number of prominent southern representatives, expressed willingness to compromise on the southern issue. But he was 'outbid' by Ali Salem Al-Bidh – another southern representative based in Lebanon and allegedly in receipt of Iranian funding – who remained intransigent in his demands for secession. More importantly, there are growing fears that southern representatives who have participated in the NDC have insufficient grassroots support, which risks rendering the NDC irrelevant to Yemen's southern constituencies.

Self-government is also a demand of the Houthi rebels in the north. And beyond divisions between north and south, there are even contests within Islamist parties, albeit quietly fought for now. There is, for example, significant antagonism between moderate and more radical elements within Islah,

compounded by pressure from Salafist participants in the conference.

Meanwhile, the success of the NDC as a forum in which to challenge the old politics of personal relationships centred on elite figures hinges on compromise on the part of all participants. Yet while the transition's international sponsors remain unwilling to consider the possibility that the process could fail, Yemen's political actors have already begun their own contingency planning, and a parallel process of competition and renegotiation is underway.

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Briefing the UN Security Council on the progress of the NDC in June 2013, the UN envoy to Yemen, Jamal Benomar, warned that despite participating in the political process, "key political factions remain armed and appear to be amassing more weapons, creating the conditions for further violence and instability". Violence and assassinations targeting key military and political figures are widely associated with political rivalries amongst elite actors, while both the GPC and Islah have recently moved to increase their control over key state institutions, military units and regional government postings, a process that is often violent.

Non-state armed groups have also continued their struggle to gain control of more territory, through both force and the provision of security and basic services for the local population. Hirak, the Houthis, and AQAP have each expanded their control over areas of land even as the NDC met. In the northern Sa'ada Governorate, the consolidation of Houthi influence continues with raids on mosques. Meanwhile, sectarian tensions continue to rise throughout the country, even in areas such as Ta'iz, in southwest Yemen, where this growing sectarianism is indicative of rising hostilities between Salafists and Houthi groups. Across the south, despite the recent suspension of the civil disobedience campaign by activists, demonstrations and attacks on government forces continue, indicative of a growing perception of the Yemeni state as an occupying force rather than a legitimate authority. Assassination attempts here have also continued, and protests, kidnappings, and threats of violence are the primary means by which citizens demand attention and services from an overstretched government focused on ensuring that the transition is a 'success'.

As such, it is clear that an increasing number of Yemenis are questioning whether the NDC is in fact the framework within which a historic renegotiation of power and political access can take place, or whether it is merely a superficial process designed to act as a

pressure valve to prevent further unrest while more powerful actors negotiate behind the scenes.

Chief among these are international stakeholders with a vested interest in Yemen's future. For both the US and Saudi Arabia, for example, Yemen is a strategic actor in the global war on terror, with policy dictated to a large extent by the struggle against AQAP. Yet the counter-terrorism lens through which both Western and Gulf approaches to Yemen have been formulated has come at a cost, shifting attention from what is essentially an issue of law and order towards short-term military solutions, such as drone attacks, that fail to place the presence of AQAP in a wider context.

Both Saudi Arabia and the US also regard the prospect of Iranian activity in Yemen with anxiety. While Western governments tend to regard Saudi allegations of Iranian interference as overplayed, they acknowledge the potential for the latter's influence to grow based on the outcome of events in Syria and Egypt. As such, with unconfirmed reports of connections between Iran and both Hiraq and the Houthi movement, which clashed with Saudi Arabia in 2009 when the Houthis killed a Saudi security officer, there is fear within Yemen that the NDC will serve as little more than a platform for external powers to battle for influence, at great cost to long-term domestic security.

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Meanwhile, various international policymakers have declared that their governments see the NDC as the only solution for the country at this point in time. However, the reality is that it can only be, at best, the very beginning of an ongoing process, rather than a solution in and of itself. Fostering legitimacy is complex, long-term work, and there remains hope that the dialogue will spur productive political competition that will deliver on promises of reform and decentralisation. However, as the NDC meets for the third time, it is essential that local and international stakeholders manage expectations around what the NDC can achieve, and begin, through contingency planning, to address wider elements of the transition process beyond the formal mechanisms of the GCC initiative. These include, most importantly, the country's dire economic and humanitarian situation, the need for the provision of basic services – including the establishment of law and order – and the violent power-plays taking place outside the halls of the NDC.

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