



Transcript

Yemen: The Way Forward

Atiaf Alwazir

Blogger, Activist, and Consultant in Yemen

Husam Al Sharjabi

Cofounder, First Chairman, and Spokesman, Civic Coalition of Revolutionary Youth

Maysaa Shuja al Deen

Journalist

Rafat Al Akhali

Executive Director, Resonate! Yemen

Chair: Kate Nevens

Manager of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

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Kate Nevens:

Good afternoon everybody. Thank you ever so much for coming. I'm Kate Nevens and I'm the manager of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham house. I also run one of our largest research projects called the Yemen Forum and we are here today as part of the Yemen Forum.

Today our invitation went out saying that this is under the Chatham House Rule but due to popularity everything is on the record so you're very welcome to take photos, film or quote us on the event.

I am delighted to introduce our visiting speakers today. We have Maysaa Shuja al Deen. Maysaa is a writer and a journalist currently based in Cairo and she is working on some social networking projects for Yemenis. We have Atiaf Alwazir. Atiaf is also a writer and a researcher. You may know her as 'The Woman from Yemen' on Twitter and on her blog. She also works as a consultant for social justice projects in Yemen. We have Husam Al Sharjabi. Husam is founder and chair of one of the largest youth coalitions in Yemen, The Civic Coalition of Revolutionary Youth. He also works as a consultant for most if not all of the major donor agencies in Yemen. Lastly, we have Rafat Al Akhali. Rafat is actually one of the Yemen Forum's project partners in Yemen. He is the executive director of an organisation called Resonate! Yemen, which works with youth in public policy and youth in leadership.

Thank you all very much for coming. Husam, would you like to start us off?

Husam Al Sharjabi:

Thank you very much everybody. I will just give a quick background about what is happening now in Yemen then I will give the floor to my colleagues. Afterwards if you have any questions we would be happy to answer them.

Everybody probably knows the previous year, 2011, was an interesting year in Yemen. A lot of events and all of these events culminated at November 2011 with the signature of the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] initiative. Whether we like it or not, it was the only solution on the table at the time. The GCC initiative was divided into two phases. Phase one was focussing on the transfer of power or the start of the transfer of power. At that stage the focus was on diffusing the tensions between the different factions fighting in Sana'a and Ta'izz and other places. To some extent that phase succeeded in doing so and with the election of Mr Hadi – if you want to call that an election – on February 21, 2012. Phase one of the GCC initiative has finished.

The second phase which has started a couple of weeks ago is focussing now on a few things and we have two years to finish the tasks of phase two. The first thing is the national dialogue which has started right now. Then we're supposed to have a committee that will rewrite or amend the constitution, followed firstly by a referendum, then by general elections. This is the sequence of events there.

The focus now is on two parallel tracks. The first track is on the political side, which is the national dialogue, the constitutional reforms, etc. The second track, which is very important, is focussing on the stabilization of the country, meaning the security aspects and expanding the control of the state all over the country, which is not the case right now. You have a lot of parts of the country that are not governed by the central government. So that is the second priority, is security.

The third point is the stabilisation of the economy and putting it on a growth track. In 2011, as you probably know, a lot of people lost their jobs. We estimate unemployment at around 50-60%, going up from 35% at the beginning of the year. We are facing a lot of challenges economically from a fiscal standpoint, from an economic standpoint and from an unemployment standpoint. We are facing challenges as well when it comes to water and government revenues. As you probably know around 75% of our revenue comes from oil.

So I will leave it at that. Would one of my colleagues want to add something?

Atiaf Alwazir:

Sure I will try and build on what Husam has already said. This past year has been the most amazing time of our lives. No words can really do justice to the amount of joy, sorrow, hope and fear we felt and continue to feel, not only in Yemen but in the region. It is a really critical moment for Yemen. We can either move forward or really regress. Therefore, it is vital to take this moment into consideration.

I will begin by telling you a story. Two days after this one man election that we had in February I was on the bus, early morning, and a young boy about nine years old got on the bus. He was really tired, you know, so I asked him if he was late for school. He told me, 'No, I'm on my way to work'. I asked him where did he work and he replied 'At the [incoherent]. I go there in the morning, beg all day, and collect the money and go back home and I give that money to my family'.

The bus driver immediately looked at me and said, 'See, what did your revolution do to this boy, what has it done for him?' This was only two days after the election.

So I think what this story really represents is two of the many challenges that we face. One is this immense expectation of people that things are suddenly going to get better. Another one, a clear indication of the problems facing Yemen... child labour, the lack of rights to education, the humanitarian devastating humanitarian situation, high poverty rates, women dying every day from child labour, etc. All of these problems are incredibly immense and like these problems the expectations are immense too. So the transitional government has a big job.

What I think is really important to remember is that while President Saleh has now become former President Saleh, which I think is a great first step, the actual system has not changed and will not change overnight. We need to remember that this system really is engrossed in every aspect of society. It is a 33 year dictatorship and the Saleh regime is really like a tree with deep roots and branches in every aspect of society and that will take years to really change. And we need to remember that.

We also need to remember that where we are today is a product of two parallel processes: one is the political process, which is what Husam discussed... you know the Joint Meeting Party – the opposition coalition – entered into negotiations with the regional and international powers. And mainly it's the product of mass people movement. It is this pressure that made the JMP move on fast forward. The people on the street really pressured and demanded change. And I think the interplay between both of these processes has led us to where we are today and is the only solution if the transitional government is to succeed, we really need to focus on both. The government needs to be efficient. The civil servants need to know how to do their job, they need capacity building, etc.

The civil society can really do a lot during this period. We need to monitor what the transitional government is doing to make sure that people in power are not abusing their power. They come from the same system so it is not going to change overnight. We need to be there to make sure that they are not abusing their power. We need to push for legislation such as the right to information. My hope is that this civil society, and when I say civil society I don't just mean NGOs, I also mean the organic groups that developed during this past year will do this. During this whole year, for example in Sana'a, we were in Change Square for one year, people from different parts of society

were all gathered in one place. For the first time they were speaking with each other. The Houthis speaking with the tribesmen, the women with the men; everybody was interacting. It became a tent city. The tents are not just tents, they are now wooden tents because people have decided they are going to stay until they see real changes. Many people are still in Change Square. They want to see the military restructured. They want to see constitutional reform; not just replacing someone with someone else.

More importantly it was an incubator for change. By that I mean groups emerged to discuss different topics, such as federalism, which was very sensitive. The academic tents – tents were named by different names – the academic tents gave daily seminars at 7pm on different issues. Women took a leading role in the revolution in various aspects; one woman's group gave literacy classes.

So all of these different organic groups will be part of this expanding civil society and we should really take this opportunity as a great opportunity and build their capacity. Give them the skills they need. Push them to really help the government in terms of being a watchdog.

These groups in the square – many of them were led by the youth – are now re-evaluating their role. Some are staying in the square as a symbolic entity to say that we are still here to demand real comprehensive change. Others have decided that they need to think of other ways to protest. Some have started new political parties and have joined these parties. Others have become watchdog entities with the hope of putting pressure on the government, monitoring the budget, for example, and doing video advocacy. Others are there to promote values of democratic principles, such as tolerance, political participation and of course some are working on the humanitarian situation.

I think what the UK can do for this transitional period is continue the aid – humanitarian aid specifically – and on the condition that it is well-managed and efficiently spent. Monitor the money and make sure that it is being channelled through the right places and is going to where it is supposed to be funding. Expand beyond the capital – rural areas are key in Yemen. And really talk to the Yemeni diaspora here. There are really great groups emerging here that have links to both Yemen and UK. Talk to them and form contacts to know more about Yemen.

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

I would like to add to my colleagues Husam and Atiaf to talk about the national dialogue, which is included in the GCC initiative. As a basic step or as a key first step to rearrange the political life after the Ali Abdullah Saleh period especially after that the GCC didn't include many political parts such as the Southern Movement, the Houthis and the independent revolution. So it's a good step to involve all of these people and the political life in Yemen. The GCC didn't clarify any mechanism to this dialogue. There is no committee now to arrange or coordinate this dialogue between the different parts, to set the timetable that we need and the issues that we should discuss.

I want to emphasise about some principles of this dialogue that we need to take care of. This dialogue must be transparent because the media must cover decisions. We view that the politicians meet each other in closed rooms and we don't know what they do. Another principle is inclusion. We should include everybody, because if we exclude anybody they will return in more aggressive ways and more radical ways. This inclusion is very important. It is very important that there are no red lines, no preconditions. Any issue should be discussed because this process is important by itself regardless of the results. It is the first time that Yemenis have sat at the table and listened to each other. It is the first time that these discussions will take place so it is very important to discuss everything and listen to each other.

Also I want to emphasise the importance of youth and women participation in this dialogue. Every part must involve women and youth in some percentage, like 40% of youth or some part like that. We need to expand our political elite. We need to renew its blood because most of them are aged people, above 70 years. They come from a different period, the cold war, and this is a different period now.

Thank you everybody.

Rafat Al Akhali:

I'm just going to try and build on what my colleagues are saying. I'm going to share some of the areas that we're constantly trying to balance and trying as youth and civil society organisations to advocate for the right kind of balance between these issues. One area that maybe wasn't delved into enough was the restructuring of the military and security forces, which is one of the top concerns right now in Yemen. As far as civil society and as youth are

concerned the major issue is that there is no transparency again. So nobody has any idea of what that means, where that leads, how that happens or who's going to be involved. For some people that means we just move individuals from their positions. For other people they are looking for widespread restructuring, rebuilding the whole military and security forces, starting with identifying what their mandate is, and what they should be doing.

There are always these compromises that need to be made because are we able to make the changes that we want right now and at the pace that we want them? Or are we going to be faced with a security vacuum in many areas and are we already seeing that? So is it realistic, is it possible to make these changes happen and what timeline we are looking at? So we are always trying to look at these things and try to identify where we should be standing.

Another area that is not focussed on as much in all of these political discussions is the humanitarian situation in Yemen, as well as the economic situation. So in terms of the humanitarian situation, I mean we were looking at the humanitarian response that OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights] and the UN are developing. The numbers there are very scary. I will just choose a few numbers as a reminder I guess for people that know Yemen. There's over 2 million severely food insecure. Over 400,000 people internally displaced. Over 115,000 conflict affected people. And we're looking approximately 450,000 children under 5 years old with acute malnutrition

This very quickly highlights the problems. The numbers are scary and they are increasing. As Husam also mentioned, the unemployment rate is spirally. Where do we go with the humanitarian aid? What we are looking at is most of the humanitarian aid is delivered by the international community and international NGOs but then we're faced with limited presence on the ground, mostly due to issues with security. So how do we make sure we can balance the need for increased humanitarian aid with the lack of presence on the ground? So that is one area that has been giving us a lot of difficulty.

On the economy side, which is probably the area least focussed on and not even just by the new government. We are looking at minimal change with how the economy is run. The new government which is split between the traditional opposition and the previous ruling party does not seem to be going anywhere different in the economy than it was going before that. What is needed to fix the economy is tough decisions, and these tough decisions are not a welcome thing at this point. So no one in the government wants to talk

about reducing the fuel subsidy because that is not a decision they want to take right now; because all the political things are taking priority. And nobody wants to talk about restructuring the civil service and fixing all the inflated numbers in the civil service and also in the military service. If we quickly look at the numbers, just the fuel subsidy and the salaries for the civil [servants] are already 53% of the budget in 2010.

So whatever other reforms anyone wants to do, what they are going to be working on if they are not working on these two issues? There is nothing basically in the budget besides these two issues and capital expenditure which is about 15% of the budget in 2010. So unless they start addressing the key issues – the key flaws in the structure of the budget – then nothing is going to change. If we are not willing to take those difficult decisions now then what are we doing, we are just delaying them for another two or three years. That is the same cycle that we have been going through anyway; the economy is just going to keep going down.

And the major issue in the economy right now is we need a capable government apparatus in place to do any of these reforms. We can come up with all the plans with the World Bank and IMF but it never gets implemented because we do not have the bureaucracy needed to get these reforms implemented. And we are now faced with new ministers with not necessarily enough executive experience in the government and a very weak bureaucracy under them that does not know how to carry out their work.

So what do we do there? We want to fix the economy but we do not have the necessary capacity. How can the international community help with that, how can Yemen help with that, how can we sustain pressure on the government to make sure that the economy still has priority and to make sure that they are at least thinking of these things? Do we do it now, or do we delay it for two or three years?

So these are all of the balances that we keep facing in Yemen and trying to make decisions on where we stand and what we need to be advocating for. I'm not going to give any specific stand on these issues but I'm just throwing these out there for discussion when we start the questions and answers in order to better understand where we are.