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Bringing Peace to Yemen by Having Women at the Table *What the U.S. Must Do and Why It Matters*

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In March 2017, the Yemen war entered its third year. Close to 10,000 people have died, and over 40,000 have been injured since the war began.¹ In addition, by June 2017 cholera had spread throughout the country, overwhelming an already fragile health care system.² The war and the blockade imposed by the Saudi-led coalition have trapped millions of Yemenis inside the country, exacerbating an existing humanitarian crisis. The United Nations estimates that 70 percent of the population urgently needs humanitarian aid.

Manel Qayed Abdalrahman, a researcher with the Mwatana Human Rights Organization, describes the dire conditions: no water or electricity and daily bombardments, supposedly targeting militias but in reality killing civilians. “The children are turning into skeletons.... Most [people] can’t afford to flee,” she writes. “All of us Yemenis who hate this war are imprisoned here. The Houthis imprison us, and in this prison the coalition kills us.”³

Although the blockade targets the flow of weapons, it impedes food imports as well, as Yemen imports 95 percent of its essential food commodities. The blockade has left two thirds of Yemen’s 26 million people living the reality of famine, with 7 million severely food insecure⁴ and nearly 3.3 million acutely malnourished, including 2.1 million children.⁵ A child under five dies every 10 minutes.

Despite being among the world’s poorest nations, Yemen has a distinctly vibrant, vocal civil society, the bulk of which is made up of women-led organizations.⁶ They have become the

de facto safety net, providing food and medical relief, caring for children, the wounded, and the elderly, and serving as a voice to the outside world. These groups are also mobilizing to initiate a bottom-up peace process, rooted in their communities.

They are critical frontline actors in the conflict, risking their lives to bypass checkpoints in order to get food and medicine to besieged areas or to initiate local peace agreements. But unlike the warring parties, Yemeni civil society fights for the country’s future—and without weapons.

Yemeni women and youth civil society movements are a critical part of the solution to this metastasizing conflict. They have a vision and commitment to an inclusive peace that will ultimately prove more sustainable than that which the long line of discredited politicians proffer. Many of the women have a depth of knowledge, practical expertise, and commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflict that the belligerent parties have yet to demonstrate. Yet despite eight UN Security Council resolutions and UK and U.S. commitments to support inclusion of women in such contexts, Yemeni women continue to be sidelined from formal processes.

It is not just a matter of rights. These women, their organizations, and their networks have pragmatic solutions and are willing to hold the belligerent parties to account. Research shows that half of exclusive peace processes fail within the first five years, but when civil society and women in particular are included, the failure rate drops by over 50 percent.⁷

Conditions in Yemen today were unimaginable just three years ago, when Yemen held an unprecedented, inclusive national dialogue conference that offered the prospect of a pathway toward a democratic state. Plenty of finger pointing attended the subsequent outbreak of hostilities,⁸ and the UN has brokered several on-again, off-again attempts to bring key parties to the table. But thus far the parties have not demonstrated the political will needed to reach negotiated, compromise solutions to end the war. And long-suffering Yemeni civilians have lacked a champion at the talks.

Women's absence at the peace table is due to a persistent notion of women as passive victims in wartime who lack agency, expertise, or capacity to engage in peace processes. The reality in Yemen, as in other countries, is far more complex. Many Yemeni women are already engaged in the political struggles. Some are actively engaged as combatants, carrying weapons and supporting fighters, many of whom are their relatives.⁹ But most women who have become active are involved in relief and recovery, peacebuilding, and prompting the development of local security plans, as documented in a nongovernmental organization's 2017 report.¹⁰

The United States plays a critical role in this conflict. In 2013, it opted to back the Saudi-led coalition, which has since bombed Yemen daily. The campaign was meant to last just a few days, but early on it became evident that the military approach was not anchored in a coherent strategy. The conflict continues. And as the humanitarian crises grows, so too does the presence of radicalized, violent extremist forces in the country. As a critical member of the coalition supporting Saudi Arabia, and with its global diplomatic reach and influence, the United States has the capacity to take decisive,

life-saving actions to end the war. Moreover, it can propel negotiations to reach a sustainable peace by encouraging, enabling, and modeling an inclusive approach that draws on the expertise, commitment, and strengths of all actors: those using violence and those brave enough to wage peace.

This brief examines and reflects on existing efforts to enable the participation of civil society voices, notably women, in Yemen's formal negotiations. And it provides practical recommendations to the U.S. administration and Congress on steps needed to reach peace in Yemen.

The Course of Yemen's Avoidable War

Inspired by the Tunisian revolution, Yemenis took to the streets in January 2011 to join the Arab revolution. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Yemeni women and young people led the charge for an end to the 33-year rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh's corrupt regime. Alarmed by the turn of events, the nations of the regional Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) convened to secure the removal of Saleh but avoid a political vacuum.

Their solution was to negotiate Saleh's departure and hold symbolic presidential elections in February 2012, with one caveat: only the presiding deputy president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, could run, and thus in "winning" gain the legitimacy needed to move the transition forward. Hadi did win, and with the backing of the GCC and the international community, Yemen initiated a two-year National Dialogue Conference (NDC) with the concerted support and technical assistance of the UN.

Who are the Houthis?*

Houthis are a Zaidi Shia group from Saada, northern Yemen founded by Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi. Zaidis make up 45 percent of the Yemeni population and they ruled North Yemen for 1,000 years up until 1962. Al-Houthi Zaidis are estimated to be about 30 percent of the population, and began as a moderate theological movement that preached tolerance and held a broad-minded view of Yemeni people. By the 1960s the movement had become more conservative and a popular revolt against them culminated in an 8-year war, with Saudi Arabia supporting the Houthis.

In 1990, North and South Yemen merged to form one state, but the fundamental differences remained. The North was religious, conservative and economically more capitalist in nature, while the South was more secular and socialist.

Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi led the group's first uprising in 2004 in an effort to win greater autonomy for their heartland of Saada province in North Yemen, and also to protect Zaidi

religious and cultural traditions from the perceived threat of Saudi-influenced ideologies in Yemen. After Al-Houthi was killed by the Yemeni military in late 2004, his family took charge and led another five rebellions before a ceasefire was signed with the government in 2010.

The Houthis participated in the 2011 Yemeni Revolution, as well as the ensuing National Dialogue Conference (NDC). However, they rejected the provisions of the November 2011 Gulf Cooperation Council deal on the ground that "it divided Yemen into poor and wealthy regions" and also in response to assassination of their representative at the NDC. In 2014–2015 Houthis took over the government in Sana'a, which led to the fall of the Saudi backed government of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, and gained control of significant parts of Yemen. In May 2015, Houthis declared an alliance with Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Source: ICAN, *What the Women Say - Yemen Report* (Winter 2016)

But tensions remained. Many of those in South Yemen who had started their peaceful movement for change as early as 2007 boycotted the elections and were skeptical of the NDC. Ultimately, only one faction represented southerners at the conference to present their vision of self-determination and a two-state solution.

While regional powers such as Saudi Arabia hoped the NDC would be window dressing for governance as usual, Yemenis themselves and the UN recognized that it was a critical opportunity to set the country on the path toward economic, political, and social transformation. They also had more sobering reasons: In a country awash with weapons, tribal disputes, and an increasing presence of Al Qaeda affiliates, the NDC was the only means of resolving disputes through negotiation, reaching consensus, and, most important, preventing all-out violence and chaos.

The demands of women and youth who had been at the forefront of the revolution could not be ignored during the NDC. Thanks to pressure from women and youth and with UN support, each delegation was required to have a minimum of 30 percent female participation. Women fought to participate in every stage of the NDC, held from March 2013 to January 2014. Women made up 25 percent of the political body created to prepare for the NDC and 28 percent of overall participants. Yemeni women established their own delegation and a quota for female representation in other NDC delegations. Women also led three of nine NDC working groups, were 9 percent of the judges on the Order and Standards Committee, and made up 25 percent of the Consensus Committee.

Throughout the two years of the NDC, Yemenis representing every political party, tribe, sect and region negotiated with each other. As a result of their active participation in the conference, Yemeni women informed NDC recommendations for the new constitution, including a landmark 30 percent quota for women in parliament.¹¹ The Houthis, who later became the target of the Saudi-led coalition, also participated in negotiations and endorsed the recommendations, even as Houthi militants advanced toward the capital.

By January 2014, compromises were reached and an agreement signed, with recommendations that were to form the basis of a new constitution.¹² Concerns of the south and the wars in Saada were discussed at the NDC, with a focus on the need to build trust and confidence. Recommendations involved reparations, the release of detainees, and compensation for injured and martyr families. However, apart from President Hadi apologizing for the war, none of the recommendations were implemented.

When President Hadi selected the members of the constitutional drafting committee in February 2014, many warned of its biases. In the months that followed, tensions continued to rise, peaking with the assassination of the Houthis' representative to the NDC. By September, the Houthi movement had taken control of the capital, Sanaa, to oust President Hadi.¹³ When the draft constitution was released in January 2015, the Houthis rejected it because it divided the country into six federal regions, some with little prospect for economic development. In particular, they refused to accept a redrawing of boundaries that cut their heartland's access to the waterways. Southerners were also displeased, as they had proposed two regions based on the 1990 geographical borders of the former two states in preparation for self-determination and disengagement.

Conditions deteriorated rapidly in the ensuing months. Daesh (the Islamic State) launched attacks on Yemen. The Houthis moved south toward Aden, where President Hadi took refuge after he was put under house arrest by the Houthis in Sanaa. Saleh-backed militants sent aircrafts to bombard the Presidential Palace in Aden.¹⁴ President Hadi called on Saudi Arabia to defend against the advance of the Houthis, who were deemed to be acting as Iran's proxy.

With support from the U.S., UK, France, Egypt, Sudan, and some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 to push back the Houthi advance and reinstate Hadi (who had by this time taken shelter in Saudi Arabia).¹⁵ Internationally, the operation was billed as a short, targeted action, but it has proven to be neither. Three years on, the strategic goals of the continued bombardments remain unclear.

While the UN is now monitoring the Saudi embargo, with verification mechanisms to ensure that food delivery is not obstructed, there are delays. The Houthis are responsible for many of them. In Houthi-controlled areas, landmines on the beaches obstruct local fishermen's access to the sea. The Houthis had earlier taken control of Al Hudaydah, a critical port on the Red Sea and the source of nearly 80 percent of Yemen's food imports. Houthis have also blocked humanitarian aid from entering Hudaydah and Taiz.¹⁶ The Saudi-led coalition plans to take Hudaydah in order to stop illicit arms transfers to Houthis through the port, but such an action would have a catastrophic humanitarian impact. Both sides have been accused of violating international humanitarian law, as when the Saudi-led coalition used cluster bombs.

With famine and cholera spreading, there is an ever-greater need in 2017 for a ceasefire, a peace process, and a negotiated solution. But the UN-facilitated talks have been non-representative. “The UN did not invite southerners to the table while it invited the Houthis to the table,” says one Yemeni peace activist. “Their excuse was that southerners don’t have a unified leadership.”¹⁷ Women and youth have also been excluded.

The Impact of the Crisis on Yemeni Women

As in all contemporary wars, Yemeni civilians are caught in the crossfire, women and children included. More than 5,700 civilians had been killed from the war’s start in March 2015 to November 2015, and 830 of these were women and children. According to UNICEF, 3 million pregnant or lactating women and children suffer from malnutrition. Lack of access to medical support and maternity care has hurt mothers and infants, and anxiety about airstrikes has led to an increase in miscarriages.¹⁸

The war has also increased economic pressures on women, as fathers, husbands, and brothers are killed in the conflict. Female-headed households have increased from 9 percent to 30 percent, with women heads facing greater difficulties accessing aid and other resources needed to care for their families. These challenges stem in part from widespread illiteracy among women and an extremely wide pay gap: Women earned 75 percent of what men earned in 2009.¹⁹ The 2009 Gender Gap Index revealed that 52 percent of Yemeni girls were married before age 18, and the rates have been even higher since war broke out.

The worsening economic situation has also sparked a rise in prostitution. Ashwaq Shugaa Addin, a member of Volunteers for Women’s Rights and Women Peace Partners, describes the war’s impact in her community: “Life in Sana’a has completely stopped. It feels like a ghost town. There is no electricity, no fuel, no water. There are no people on the street, and shops are closed.... Most men, women, and youth have lost their jobs.... What’s the future for my kids? They are killing our present and future.”²⁰

With more women adopting the traditional male role of provider, shifting gender roles have increased tensions within families, even resulting in domestic and gender-based violence. Furthermore, as women have become increasingly active in the public sphere in fighting for their rights and the rights of their fellow citizens, they have become targets of harassment, violence, and slander. Yemeni women whose reputations are damaged risk loss of livelihood, divorce, and banishment. Even as they take on heavier burdens, Yemeni women face restricted mobility and lack of access to resources and protection.²¹

Yemeni Women as Agents of Change

Despite the obstacles they face, women have played a key role at every stage of the Yemen conflict. In 2011, Yemeni women were the leaders of the revolution, taking to the streets to demand a better future and working tirelessly to maintain nonviolent protests. When the revolution devolved into violence, small numbers of women became combatants or arms smugglers and encouraged their husbands and sons to fight. It was not uncommon for armed groups to approach women in hopes of recruiting them to the cause. Most women, however, served in other ways, delivering food and water to fighters, caring for the wounded (fighters and civilians), and guarding checkpoints.

Still more have led conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, understanding that peace is as much about ensuring access to basic services as it is about ending the war. Women have, for instance, engaged in humanitarian relief efforts by mapping internally displaced peoples and war-affected households, smuggling food and medicine to besieged areas, and providing first aid and psychosocial support.²² Today, as the UN suspends efforts to dispatch cholera vaccines to the country, diaspora Yemeni women are organizing a shipment of vaccines. A group of women formed the Mothers of Abductees League, organizing frequent demonstrations in Sana’a to demand the release of arbitrarily detained civilians and kidnapped persons. Women in Taiz have helped negotiate release of detainees from all sides, and women in Aden have led programs to reintegrate child combatants. The social support women have provided to their families and communities has discouraged many from turning to violence and helped create a sense of safety and unity.

Yet women’s participation in the UN-led humanitarian response is limited. For example, internally displaced women have repeatedly indicated that income generation and livelihoods are their number one priority.²³ Ignoring these calls, the UN allocated only 3 percent of the humanitarian response plan to livelihoods in 2016 and reduced it to just over 1 percent in 2017. At a time when Yemeni women have been active in demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR), the UN suspended its own DDR programs, as it deemed them too risky in the absence of a political settlement.

Since the outbreak of the war, Yemeni women have been insistent that they be included in any peace process. With support from UN Women, Yemeni women gathered in Cyprus in October 2015 to once again express their concerns and demands. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the women formed a shared vision for their country anchored in nonviolence, peace, and better living conditions for all.

The gathering also led to the formation of the Yemeni Women Pact for Peace and Security, whose aim was increased women's participation in formal peacebuilding processes. Through this effort, seven members gained an invitation from the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, to peace talks in Kuwait in May 2016. These seven women conveyed the Yemeni people's priorities: 1) committing to the cessation of hostilities and reaching a comprehensive, fair peace; 2) opening humanitarian channels; 3) responding to the mothers' demands to release prisoners, detainees, and the captured; 3) protecting women and children, including ending the recruitment of child soldiers and rehabilitating them; and 4) guaranteeing the continuation of the education process and health services.²⁴ Yemeni women, including some members of the Pact, also developed a National Agenda for Women, Peace, and Security and shared it with relevant stakeholders, including UN Security Council members.

Yet much of the promise of these convenings has fallen flat, as women continue to be ignored and excluded from formal peace and transition processes. In fact, many women withdrew from the Pact, as they did not feel it prompted meaningful participation.²⁵

Within the last two years of conflict, only three rounds of talks have been held. The last, held in Kuwait, included only three women out of 26 delegates: two from the Hadi delegation and one from a delegation of Yemen's political party, the General People's Congress. The Houthi delegation had no women at all. Deescalation committees formed to contribute to a cessation of hostilities had no women representatives either. The seven women invited to the peace talks in Kuwait were limited to sideline meetings in parallel to the talks, separate from official delegate meetings. Among the delegates and sponsors of the talks was the U.S. Mission to Yemen.

In sum, too little is being done, and the persistence of conflict and the spread of cholera are clouding prospects for negotiation. Concerted action to reach a negotiated solution is imperative, but it will not happen if Yemen's civil society—those who are most committed to peace—are absent from the process. Given the active roles of civil society groups in the NDC and in community efforts, there is sufficient precedence to build on in identifying and engaging them.

Which Yemeni Civil Society?

In conflict settings, there are old and new civil society groups. For inclusion in mediation, a set of criteria can be applied to identify which civil society organizations can contribute to peace talks. The following sample criteria were derived from consultations with international mediation experts and peace advocates globally.²⁹

Core values and commitments to:

1. Non-violence and peaceful resolution of the dispute;
2. Human rights, women's rights, and peace;
3. Gender sensitivity in security and governance issues;
4. Political independence and/or non-partisanship; and
5. Representation/inclusion of diverse sectors such as women, youth, minorities, and marginalized populations.

Competencies in at least one of these areas:

1. Practical experience and gendered understanding of ground realities;
2. Strong record of representing women/civil society;
3. Provision of aid, early recovery, or alternative livelihoods;
4. Access to armed groups and/or prevention of recruitment into militias;

5. Disarmament/rehabilitation and citizen/community security;
6. Experience in mediation/peacemaking—particularly among communities;
7. Promotion of social cohesion and a culture of peace;
8. Focus on justice and reconciliation issues and working with victims; or
9. Resource issues, including national resources and land rights, with an understanding of local communities and women's needs.

Nature of constituents:

Organizations may vary in the depth and breadth of their constituency, but it is useful to include organizations that have:

1. A connection to a constituency "on-the-ground;"
2. Feedback mechanisms to inform and hear from local communities including marginalized groups;
3. Capacity to mobilize and influence public opinion; and
4. Diverse representation of women, youth, minority groups, and/or geographic/ethnic areas/religious communities.

Conclusion

Yemen urgently needs the violence to end. Militarized responses have led only to retaliation among fighting groups, fragmentation of armed actors, and the proliferation of extremist movements in the country.

While the complexity of the conflict is undeniable, the United States has a unique capacity to encourage and enable a sustained, inclusive peace process. Yemeni civil society—particularly women’s groups that have already demonstrated a deep commitment to peacebuilding and assisting war victims in their own communities—can effectively participate in this process. They can help generate momentum toward a negotiated, sustained solution to the conflict. After two years of deadly war and embargoes, the people of Yemen deserve a real chance for an end to war and a vision of a just, inclusive peace.

Recommendations in Line with the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security

The following recommendations are derived from consultations with Yemeni women peacemakers. They are in line with U.S. priorities per the U.S. NAP on Women, Peace, and Security.

1. Support the UN’s humanitarian aid effort.

Instead of cutting funds to the UN, the U.S. administration should provide the necessary assistance and press the UN to implement an inclusive humanitarian response strategy that achieves the following:

- involves women’s groups and other local civil society and community mechanisms, from initial design to implementation, and enables them to distribute at least 50 percent of the aid to communities to which they have access;
- ensures fairer regional distribution of aid so that the south also benefits, given that some 70 percent of aid is now focused on the north and supports civil society organizations and women’s rights organizations that exist beyond Sanaa; and
- ensures that the UN implements mechanisms to address humanitarian diversion to armed groups.

2. Stop fueling the war.

Stopping the war is the key priority for Yemeni women’s organizations and is in line with U.S. NAP’s prevention and conflict resolution commitments. The United States provides arms to Saudi Arabia and refuels jets for the Saudi-led coalition. It also provides technical and intelligence assistance to the Saudi bombing campaign in Yemen.²⁶ Recently, the U.S. government has been contemplating an increase of its military involvement in Yemen.²⁷ But a bipartisan group of congressmen have demanded an end to U.S. support for the Saudi campaign.²⁸ The U.S. administration should heed these demands. It should stop the flow of arms into Saudi Arabian hands and help ease the suffering of the Yemenis by urging Saudi Arabia to take a more humane approach to the blockade on Yemen:

- expediting the flow of humanitarian aid, food, and medicine to the people of Yemen and ensuring that any arms trade deal includes a humanitarian tax;
- opening the Sana’a airport and other domestic airports for commercial international and domestic flights;
- ensuring a rigorous monitoring and verification system to prevent the flow of foreign fighters into Yemen and the trafficking of Yemeni women and children abroad;
- ensuring that the Saudi-led coalition and conflict parties adhere to international humanitarian law; and
- supporting revival of the Mutual Accountability Framework and its decentralization into the regions and ensuring mechanisms to combat corruption and improve transparency.

3. Call for and support robust, inclusive, sustained peace talks and related processes.

- The United States has already initiated efforts to include women in the de-escalation committees, with a focus on women in the security sector. It should also ensure a fair regional and local representation of competent women in those committees and a transparent selection process. Their participation should be supported and sustained widely.
- The inclusion of women and youth should become a priority for peace processes in Yemen at all levels—from track 1 to community-level track 3 efforts. Actors should sustain the precedent set in the NDC and ensure continued implementation of the minimum 30 percent quota of women participants, 20 percent quota for youth, and 50 percent for southerners.
- The United States should facilitate visas, travel, security, and passes for civil society delegations to peace talks, and it should seek commitments from all warring parties to respect these representatives and ensure their safety in Yemen as well.

- Peace talks should incorporate gendered briefs so that the impact of war and key agenda items are understood from the standpoint of women and men. The United States could request that the UN produce these briefs in consultation with Yemeni women's groups.
- Any transitional government and its related committees must also reflect full participation of women, with a minimum 30 percent representation.
- The status of President Hadi and other political leaders who are implicated in the war, as well as the previous dictatorship, must be addressed as part of a transitional justice process, recognizing that their fear of impeachment may be propelling them to continue the war.
- The United States should channel funding into community peace initiatives and recovery, including healthcare and education. Also paramount are support for local stability and recovery plans and revival of the legislative system, especially in the south, with the condition that women are fully involved.

4. Support gendered security sector reform, especially in the south, and support initiation of nationwide disarmament and demobilization efforts, as there is a growing militarization of women and increasing child recruitment, in large part due to the humanitarian crisis.

5. Fund information sessions and consultations with civil society regarding the key sectoral issues such as provision of humanitarian relief, security/ceasefire compliance, transitional governance, and economic recovery. These sessions can raise key solutions and insights from the ground up. Inclusion of civil society, especially women's movements, improves the accountability and adherence to agreements of belligerents.

6. Change the strategy of attacking Al Qaeda and other extremists, instead taking a more comprehensive approach to preventing and countering violent extremism. For many years and through the Obama administration, the United States has used drones to target extremists in Yemen. But the attacks, which also harm civilians, fuel anger against the United States and do nothing to prevent radicalization. Meanwhile, women civil society activists in Yemen have interviewed displaced women who are reporting signs of radicalization among their sons and relatives. Funding for local organizations that provide alternatives to youth at risk of being lured into extremist movements will do more to end extremist violence long-term than drones can.

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ABOUT U.S. CSWG

Established in 2010, The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a network of civil society organizations with years of experience working on issues involving women, war, and peace. The U.S. CSWG informs, promotes, facilitates, and monitors the meaningful implementation of the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security.

