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# Pathways Towards an Inclusive Peace Process in Yemen

**Policy Brief**

## Introduction & Objective

The expiry of the 6-month truce in Yemen further complicates the issue of if and how a more comprehensive peace negotiation process can be (re)started. Amid this uncertainty, the extent to which any subsequent ceasefire or peace process can be meaningfully inclusive is a fundamental challenge given the nature of peacemaking in Yemen over the past decade and the often marginalised, tokenistic nature of civil society involvement therein.

The overall aim of this policy brief is to provide practical ideas and options to inform the strategies and engagements of various stakeholders at this critical juncture facing the country. In doing so, Inclusive Peace seeks to facilitate exchange and reflection regarding concrete entry points for strengthening inclusion in ongoing peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts in the country.

The brief is informed by the key findings of a series of recent studies undertaken by Inclusive Peace, some specifically focused on Yemen, and others that are broader in scope:

- *Transfer from Track Two Peacebuilding to Track One Peacemaking: A Focus on Yemen and Syria*
- *Charting the Role of Women in the Yemeni Peace Process: Exploring Strategies of Engagement for the United States Institute of Peace*
- *Options for Women's Action to Advance Peace in Yemen*
- *Pathways to Perpetual Peacebuilding in Yemen (Inclusive Peace Research Paper Submission to the Conference on "The Conflict in Yemen: Current Situation and Future Prospects")*
- *Protection of Women Peacebuilders in Conflict and Fragile Settings in the MENA Region*
- *Reaching an Inclusive Truce: Gendering Ceasefires*
- *A Practical Guide to a Gender-Inclusive National Dialogue*
- *Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding*

These studies draw on a review of secondary literature and data gathered from interviews and workshops with convenors, donors, and participants in track two and track one peacebuilding and peacemaking efforts in Yemen and other contexts. The research was further complemented by ongoing engagements and interactions with a wide range of members civil society organisations and women's groups in Yemen as well as international stakeholders.

## Context

Certain recent developments in Yemen offer some promise. UN efforts to reboot the peace process were boosted by changes to the US policy towards Yemen announced by President Joe Biden in 2021. Regional actors have shown some signs of being more open to compromise, and the appointment of a new UN Special Envoy (UN SE), Hans Grundberg, created a window of opportunity for reaching a nation-wide ceasefire, realised in the ceasefire agreement that coincided with Ramadan in April 2022, which was subsequently renewed twice. The UN SE has continued to try and engage with a broader range of actors, but these are still nascent. This has also involved establishing or reviving mechanisms that enable greater interaction and engagement between the conflict parties.

However, the expiry of the 6-month ceasefire in October 2022, after the last-minute breakdown of an extension agreement, is the latest setback to efforts to end the ongoing war in Yemen. Following the escalation of the conflict in 2015, formal efforts by the UN and other members of the international community to promote peace have struggled to produce results and subsequently stalled. On the few occasions on which agreements have been reached, they have barely been implemented. The official high-level process since 2015 has been characterised by a problematic over-focus on a two-party process and two-party settlement, especially given that the two parties in question have proved intransigent and cannot claim a monopoly over hard power, territorial control, or political legitimacy in the country. Consultative mechanisms have been criticised as being superficial, and the array of unofficial peacebuilding initiatives which have emerged over the course of the conflict have struggled to influence the high-level talks.

## Inclusion

An analysis of peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts since the conclusion of the Yemen National Dialogue Conference (NDC) in 2014 reveals a series of structural barriers to the participation of civil society, marginalised groups, and women in particular (see below), in both track two and track one spaces. Civil society actors in the country feel that foreign diplomats and donors are unwilling to use political capital with the conflict parties to create space for civil society in and around the high-level negotiation process.<sup>1</sup> Many civil society actors also fear that enhanced visibility could lead to reprisals from the conflict parties.<sup>2</sup>

The experience of the Yemeni NDC demonstrates that the meaningful inclusion of actors marginalised for decades in shaping a (more) inclusive society is a long-term project that often encounters setbacks in the short term, underlining the need to focus not only on the process but also the political conditions (i.e. the power) for their influential participation. The lessons from the Yemeni NDC also underline that even a genuinely inclusive negotiation mechanism – in terms of both selection and decision making – will struggle to produce inclusive outcomes if included actors do not exert the influence afforded, and/or if the broader political transition process in which it is embedded and of which it can only be one part is not inclusive and does not address key adverse contextual factors. These include the lack of full cooperation and commitment of major Yemeni political elites, the political interests of supra-national regional actors, and diminishing public support over time. The focus on a highly inclusive National Dialogue was also not accompanied by attention to the dysfunctional and elite nature of ongoing government.

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1 International Crisis Group, *The Case for More Inclusive – and More Effective – Peacemaking in Yemen*, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°221, 18 March 2021 p.16.

2 Ibid.

# Women's Engagement in Peacemaking and Peacebuilding

Since the conclusion of the 2014 Yemeni NDC, the track one peacemaking space has been criticised for excluding and disregarding women's input on the dynamics of the conflict, the nature of any political settlement to the conflict, and the specific experiences, rights, and needs of women and girls.<sup>3</sup> The delegations to official negotiations have rarely included women, and all four UN Special Envoys appointed to Yemen thus far have been men. At the level of official talks, the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General to Yemen (OSESgy), in coordination with UN Women and Tawafuq (a track two network), formed a track 1.5 initiative – the Technical Advisory Group (TAG), a body of Yemeni women with whom the OSESgy has consulted during the rare occasions of negotiations. The extent to which such mechanisms are representative and inclusive of a broader spectrum of Yemeni women (and their perspectives) has also been called into question.

Women have been more present in track two spaces but still face barriers to their participation and influence. At the local level, women and civil society actors have found greater freedom and opportunities to work towards peace.<sup>4</sup> For instance, women have mediated local disputes, played instrumental roles in securing humanitarian access and in campaigning for the release of missing persons, and have formed networks and launched campaigns to achieve both women's rights and peace. This work has neither been recognised at higher levels nor been scaled up into meaningful participation in the track one space.

A significant number of barriers to the inclusion of women peacebuilders in peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts in Yemen currently exist, including economic hardship; physical and reputational threats and attacks in particular for women taking part in political spaces; apparent resistance by the Yemeni conflict parties and the international mediators to listen to women, and to capitalise upon their skills, experience, knowledge, and networks; a lack of recognition, and understanding, of Yemeni women's peacebuilding efforts; inadequate funding and lack of resources; a lack of access to information; severe restrictions on peacebuilding initiatives in Houthi-governed areas; discriminatory social norms; competition between women peacebuilders and women-led initiatives; and the overall blocked nature of the peace process. Certain opportunities can also be identified, including the legacy of the 2011 revolution and the NDC as well as the existence of strong feminist organisations and networks across different parts of the country and in the diaspora.

3 See, for example: ; M. Awadh and N. Shuja'adeen, "Women in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding in Yemen," UN Women (2019), <https://yemen.un.org/en/15853-women-conflict-resolution-and-peace-building-yemen> [last accessed: 16 August 2021], p. 17

4 See, for instance, "The Yemeni Women's Technical Advisory Group Plays an Active Role During the Sweden Consultations," UN Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (2018), <https://osesgy.unmissions.org/yemeni-women%E2%80%99s-technical-advisory-group-plays-active-role-during-sweden-consultations> [last accessed: 17 January 2021]. pp. 18–21.

## Transfer from Track Two to Track One

Within the multi-track model of peacebuilding, one of the principal aims (and underlying assumptions) of track two peacebuilding has been seen as influencing and/or supporting track one negotiations. The concept of 'transfer' has been developed to conceptualise the ways this could be done.<sup>5</sup> Two important characteristics of transfer from track two to track one in Yemen are that it is frequently long term and not a singular act, and that it can be either formal or informal (albeit it is mostly the latter).

Inclusive Peace's research identified a series of obstacles and barriers to transfer from track two to track one: the primary obstacle is the protracted nature of the conflict in Yemen and stalled formal peace process. Barriers to transfer also stem from the structure of track two, participants' perceptions of the superficial nature of track two initiatives, as well communication problems. Transfer is further hindered by sporadic funding patterns and insufficient coordination among track two convenors to convey joint messages. There are examples of effective transfer in Yemen, but they often lack detail and there are doubts about their impact. Overall, there seems to be a lack of clarity and precision about the concept. Danger to the safety of track two participants, particularly women, is another primary barrier to their participation. The research suggested that the concept of transfer from track two to track one needs to be rethought in light of the mostly stalled and complex peace and political transition processes currently ongoing, to make it more relevant and effective.

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5 Transfer can be divided into two categories: "upward transfer" through which ideas and outcomes from track-two workshops move to and influence formal, high-level, track-one negotiations; and "downward transfer" through which ideas and outcomes influence public opinion and impact the conflict-at-large. Thus, what is being transferred from track two can travel both "upwards" to track one and track 1.5, but also "laterally" into other track two initiatives, and "downwards" into track three programmes. Such "movement" can take place in different directions simultaneously or sequentially.

## Local Mediation and Peacebuilding

Diverse efforts have also been pursued at the community-level, including myriad women-led initiatives. There is evidence to suggest that the track three level tends to be a more productive space for peacebuilding in Yemen, including in relation to women's meaningful engagement and contribution. In Taiz, for example, civil society members have played a key role in negotiations in relation to access and movement of people, though this has been stymied by a lack of progress in the negotiations. Yemeni women have been engaged in advocating for and facilitating the release and exchange of detainees, including child detainees; mediation efforts in relation to "local" issues; securing access to basic services for their communities, and the negotiation of humanitarian corridors and the re-opening of roads and airports; and advocacy through national media outlets.

International organisations have provided support for many of these initiatives, and Yemeni civil society, including those in the diaspora, have also raised funds. Other initiatives are almost exclusively locally driven and sustained by civil society leaders in the country. They all demonstrate the ingenuity, creativity, and determination with which Yemeni civil society has sought to achieve a modicum of peace in their communities.

# Suggestions for a Pathway to an Inclusive and Sustainable Negotiated Settlement in Yemen

The space for an alternative, more progressive approach to peacemaking in Yemen can be developed incrementally and endeavour to build on the foundations of existing peacemaking efforts. Based on the findings outlined above, this section provides a list of suggestions to help Yemenis and their supporters to develop concrete ideas and options for fundamental change.

## Reimagining Peacemaking in Yemen

Many of the problems facing peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts that are apparent in Yemen are by no means unique to Yemen; in Syria, Cyprus, Afghanistan, Libya, Sudan, the Sahel, and Ethiopia, to name but a few contexts, international peacemaking is struggling to set societies on pathways to peace. Belligerents in peace talks remain locked in conventional, linear formats; negotiations have stumbled; and attempts at broadening inclusion are all-too-frequently shallow and cosmetic. The mediation and peacebuilding community as a whole is stuck in traditional approaches to peace and conflict that need a fundamental rethink. In this way, the challenges facing the extension of the truce in Yemen offer pause for thought and an opportunity for reconceptualising and reimagining the approach(es) to peacemaking beyond a linear, track-based model.

One of the questions for peacemaking in Yemen – as elsewhere – goes beyond not just which track can do what best or how the other tracks can support track one. Rather, it could consider whether peacemaking should not be exclusively – or even primarily – defined in relation to formal processes, and aim to identify approaches, ideas, or spaces for reflection on the stalled nature of the peace process and develop creative solutions to get it moving.

This could involve:

- Rethinking both track one processes and their primacy in the multi-track model.
- Reconceptualising the tracks to ensure that they are complementary coherent initiatives rather than separate and divided.
- An overlap of participants between track two and track one to bridge the gap between the two tracks.
- Better communication between the convenors of the two tracks, particularly on the way in which needs and objectives are conveyed.



- Deploying local mediation skills and mediators within the track one process.
- Making current and future track two efforts more goal-oriented, and less dependent on track one.
- Ensuring that all levels of the peace process are more inclusive.
- Expanding peacemaking and peacebuilding in Yemen from a narrow process focused on formal negotiations between the conflict parties to encompass an ecosystem of locally-owned, formal and informal processes that can include greater swathes of society together with a broader range of themes and challenges.
- An intersectional approach, which could help to recognise and circumvent the structural inequality, gender norms, and power dynamics that prevail in peacemaking spaces.

## Rethinking the Yemeni Peace Process

The following suggestions could give rise to a more flexible, participatory, home-grown and locally-owned peace process:

- Creating a network of participants common to both tracks, with the aim of building relationships between track two participants and track one conflict parties and mitigating communication challenges between the tracks. This could also facilitate possibilities for track two initiatives to inform and engage (both directly and indirectly) in track one or related processes.
- Enabling informal and formal spaces for exchange, discussion, and problem-solving amongst civil society actors, and integrating outcomes into the UN-led process to help shape options, strategies, and actions.
- Enhancing participation in the track one process by ensuring the sustained and meaningful engagement of local mediators, women, and civil society organisations, rather than ad hoc and tokenistic engagement. Engagement could occur within meetings held and convened under UN auspices, including the Military Coordination Meeting, Local Security Forces Committee, and the Payroll Committee. This could also involve expanding regional meetings conducted by OSESGY to include traditionally marginalised groups. All of this could help to promote inclusion in peacemaking efforts and generate more buy-in for the peace process.

- Working with existing national and local groups of civil society actors, including those involved in mediation efforts, to map out and reflect on ways of pursuing transfer that targets OSESGY and a wider set of stakeholders, including conflict parties and regional actors, both directly and indirectly.

## **Amplifying Local Mediation and Conflict Resolution Initiatives**

The following suggestions could help to amplify and learn from the work of bottom-up, community-focused approaches and initiatives, such as in Taiz where civil society members have played a key role in negotiations in relation to access and movement of people. This could help to solidify and build on existing work, generate further momentum and entry points for civil society and women's peacebuilding at the local level, which could be nurtured and supported to influence the national and regional levels, help to generate public awareness of this work, and build momentum to reinvigorate the peace process and overcome deadlocks, in combination with mass local mobilisation for peace to pressure conflict actors to negotiate.

- Identifying groups of local actors representative of all regions in Yemen and facilitating local spaces where OSESGY can engage with armed and civic actors in order to foster dialogue and build trust over time and scale up such efforts to the national level.
- Creating a partnership with local actors by establishing a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess and support local achievements and extrapolate effective strategies of inclusive mediation from the local to the national level. E.g. forming local mediation committees, which could develop localised indicators for peace for each governorate in partnership with Yemeni civil society and women peacebuilders.
- Building on local ceasefire initiatives to generate momentum for a nationwide ceasefire process, which could also serve as an immediate locus of civil society and women's coalition-building and advocacy efforts and also pave the way for broader formal civil society and women-led initiatives.
- Local initiatives can provide promising entry points for immediate action by focusing interventions at the community level and on actors that civil society and women peacebuilders either already have access to or can seek access to more easily than to regional or international actors.
- In addition, supporting women peacebuilders' efforts at the local level can provide a space for women leaders to build up track records of achievements, profiles, and respect for their work regardless of their gender, which can create a pipeline of future women leaders.

## Getting to a Sustainable Gender-Responsive Ceasefire (both at local and national level)

Broader inclusion of society within ceasefire negotiations and agreements could help to legitimise ceasefires, which, in turn, could support their implementation. Referencing and accommodating the differing experiences, rights, and demands of women and men within ceasefires could help to address the gendered dimensions of conflict in a responsive way. Meaningfully including women in the development of ceasefire agreements can both protect them and harness their experience and expertise. Finally, while peace processes do not follow a linear path, ceasefires often precede more comprehensive negotiations. As such, inclusive and gender-responsive ceasefire negotiations and agreements could help to pave the way for inclusive peace negotiations and settlements.

Suggested strategies to ensure inclusive ceasefire negotiation processes and inclusive, gender-responsive outcomes:

- Support civil society – particularly women peacebuilders – to collectively strategize to conduct targeted advocacy towards the conflict parties, and both regional and international actors.
- Create and/or support channels of communication between formal and civil society peace initiatives (track two and track three initiatives) and spaces to ensure that grassroots level needs, demands, experience and expertise are incorporated within ceasefire negotiations.
- Ensure mediation teams include a gender expert.
- Ensure 50 percent participation by women in mediation teams and in negotiating parties during ceasefire talks, for instance through the use of a quota.
- Establish a gender panel or commission to monitor the ceasefire negotiation process and advise the negotiating parties. Such a panel or commission could be integrated into an existing instrument body, e.g. the Military Coordination Meeting.
- Where necessary, offer gender expertise to members of negotiating parties, including training negotiating parties and mediation teams (both women and men) in the gendered aspects of ceasefires.
- Ensure the violence addressed in any future ceasefire negotiation and the scope of any future ceasefire agreement includes sexual and gender-based violence, and that the differing effects of violence upon women and men are accounted for.

- Ensure civil society and women’s participation in the monitoring of any future ceasefire agreement – e.g. through joint operation rooms – with gender disaggregated data collected by monitoring mechanisms, and regular public reports.

## Supporting Women Peacebuilders

- Supporting coalition-building between Yemen’s women-led peacebuilding organisations and networks, and individual women peacebuilders. Specifically, creating a unified national women’s network or a mechanism to coordinate among existing networks and initiatives, aimed at averting competition, improving communication, and building and sustaining alliances and partnerships amongst the myriad women’s groups in Yemen. The goal of the network would focus on ensuring coherence and creating coordination strategies, and developing a common, inclusive, and gender-responsive agenda that can be used as leverage to establish new entry-points into the peace process and secure public support.
- Coalition-building or coordination efforts should take particular care to ensure the participation of “ordinary” women in peacemaking/peacebuilding, not just geographical/political/social elites.
- Convene a working group with relevant international organisations and partners to coordinate international efforts on women’s participation in Yemen.
- Funding protection for Yemeni women peacebuilders and developing a code of conduct to safeguard women’s participation in the peace process across the tracks.
- Establishing a dense network of mutual assistance and solidarity among women peacebuilders within and across country borders.
- Working with moderate religious actors to counter religious hate speech and defamation of women peacebuilders.
- Providing psychosocial support for women peacebuilders.

This Policy Brief was written by Alexander Bramble.

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