



مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الانساني
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

Final Report on the Academic Conference

The Conflict in Yemen: Current Situation and Future Prospects

14-15 February 2022

About the Conference: Between Academia and Practice

From 14-15 February 2022, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS), in cooperation with both the Arab Center Washington DC (ACW) and DeepRoot Consulting, organized a conference on “Conflict in Yemen: Current Situation and Future Prospects.”

The opening session began with welcoming speeches by Professor Sultan Barakat, Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS), Dr. Khalil Jahshan, Executive Director of the Arab Center in Washington DC, and Mr. Rafat Al-Akhali, Co-founder of DeepRoot Consulting. They all stressed the importance of this academic conference, and the importance of its timing in light of the current developments in Yemen. They also noted how the conference provides an exceptional opportunity to monitor and understand the latest analysis on the Yemeni crisis and the course of the peace process in Yemen - provided by a group of experts, academics and prominent researchers specializing in Yemeni affairs. In his speech, Professor Barakat welcomed the participants, noting that holding this conference is in line with the aspirations of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies - the first of its kind in the Arab world - working towards producing global knowledge, formulating policies in the field of conflict management and humanitarian action, and bridging the gap between theory and practice. It also supports the practical efforts of dialogue and mediation. Dr. Jahshan pointed out that the concept of this conference stems from the commitment of the three partners to support the peace process and the settlement of the conflict in Yemen, which has turned into the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Mr. Al-Akhali also stressed that this conference is unique due to the diversity of speakers and contributors to it, which enriches the ongoing discussions and enhances the search for solutions to end the conflict that has exhausted the country.

Due to the shared interests amongst the organizers of the conference in the interaction between academia and practice, in addition to their keenness to gather the widest possible range of viewpoints, the conference voiced the opinions from various involved parties and actors. The first day of the conference included a keynote speech delivered by Timothy Lenderking, the US Special Envoy to Yemen, followed by an opening speech to present the Yemeni government's perspective, delivered by the head of the Technical Office for Consultations and a member of the Yemeni government's negotiating team, Mohammad Al-Amrani. Additionally, two academic sessions were held that welcomed various distinguished remarks delivered by a group of researchers and specialists, who presented their academic papers that shed light on the conflict-map in Yemen, and on the developments of the Arab Gulf and the regional positions. On the second day, the opening session included a keynote remark delivered by the Deputy UN Special Envoy for Yemen Mr. Moeen Shreim, on behalf of Hans Grundberg, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen. The opening speech presented the perspective of the Sana'a negotiating delegation, delivered by Abdul Malik Al-Ejri, member of the political bureau of the movement "Ansar Allah" and a member of the national negotiating team. Following the introductory speeches, the third and fourth academic sessions were held to present seven research papers dealing with the prospects within the peace process in Yemen, as well as the future of Yemen in terms of recovery, reconstruction, and development. The speakers discussed several topics and raised pivotal ideas, some of which retained their paramount and renewed importance in the various stages of the conflict, while other ideas were extracted from recent developments and raised controversies and urgent discussions that should be paid attention to.

De-escalation and a Comprehensive Political Solution

The remarks revolved around several topics; the first of which was devoted to mapping the conflict and the involved actors and dynamics, while contextualizing the current crisis. The speakers stressed the importance of a comprehensive political solution in Yemen, and most researchers considered the military escalation a dead end that would only make the situation worse. In the same context, the participants detailed the successive crises that Yemen has experienced, noting the crisis within the active political elites, and referred to the structural problems that continue to generate conflict dynamics. These crises and resulting effects become the reason that the vast majority of citizens face difficult humanitarian conditions.

The speakers agreed that it is impossible to proceed further with any issue unless the escalation and hostilities are stopped. They highlighted the need to first deescalate tensions in order to pave the way for future negotiations, peacebuilding, recovery, reconstruction and development processes. Moreover, the continued hostilities only add to the suffering. The cost of this war will be borne by all, and will make any possible agreement difficult. The speakers cited recent cross-border attacks as an example that has complicated the conflict and the prospects for conflict-resolution, which are ultimately not in the interest of any party. Several participants justified the need to accelerate de-escalation by saying that the country is at a very critical stage and that this year is one of the worst in Yemen.

Mr. Timothy Lenderking emphasized the catastrophic situation and the urgent need to support the peace process. He noted that the United States of America does not support the military solutions in Yemen, yet demonstrates their will to support the recovery process in the region. This affirms that the US has no ideal solutions to the

conflict in Yemen. He also stressed that Washington supports the peace process led by the United Nations, while continuing to provide humanitarian and economic support alongside the international community. Mr. Lenderking further references Washington's commitment to international law and the importance of finding a political solution to the crisis. On the other hand, Mohammed Al-Amrani discussed the relative absence of the political process in Yemen since 2018. He explained that this was due to the deliberate and intentional absence of the Houthis (Ansar Allah) from the peace process, as well as the preconditions they put to sit on the negotiation table. Al-Amrani criticized the role of the former international envoys in Yemen, highlighting the ineffective course of the peace process they led, which he believes has been dominated by the meticulous fixation on the intricacies of addressing key central issues to no prevail. In this context, he discerned that the focus on the issues of prisoners and trust building, as well as the endeavor to escape from the essential and strategic issues, is an approach that conforms with the vision of the international community but not with the depths of the Yemeni crisis.

Mr. Abdul Malik Al-Ejri presented the perspectives of the Sana'a delegation, stressing the necessity of reaching a political settlement in Yemen rather than adopting a military solution, as well as pointed out the dire humanitarian crisis caused by the blockade, shortage of resources, and the closure of ports. He clarified that the "Ansar Allah" movement rejects the peace approach that imposes sanctions to pressure the movement in the negotiations. The movement, he added, requires the opening of the airport and the port and the removal of the blockade and economic sanctions, before entering into negotiations to de-escalate tensions. He also pointed out that the policy of using sanctions as leverage to pressure the movement in the negotiations causes primary harm to the Yemeni, undermines the peace process, and aggravates the

already difficult humanitarian situation in Yemen, which the movement categorically rejects.

Understanding Conflict in a Changing and Highly Complex Environment

The organizers indicated that the map of the conflict in Yemen was changing. Local, regional, and international developments affect and intersect with the conflict dynamics in Yemen, which makes it important to operationalize research, dialogue and joint action in order to develop an effective plan for making and building peace. All of this will not be possible without a deep understanding of the current map, which is what the participants tried to shape and contribute to. Salisbury identified four main trends in the conflict in Yemen. First, the de-facto Houthi/Ansar Allah authorities in Sana'a have strengthened their control over their lands and their military capabilities. The second is the continuous deterioration of the position of the Yemeni government led by President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, as a governing body and a credible military actor. The third is the remarkable rise in the military and political standing of the forces allied with the UAE, which fought the Houthis/Ansar Allah and the government. And fourth, the increasing importance of Yemen in the regional power struggles between the United States and its allies on the one hand, and Iran and its allies on the other. It was pointed out that these trends are reinforced by the recent escalation and have a high cost.

The issue of decentralization in Yemen was also discussed, as it is still a central issue within the country's political conflicts since 1994. Researcher Ms. Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen traced the evolution of the debate between intellectuals and political parties about the shift to decentralization in the Yemeni state. In an attempt to understand the context, Andrea Carboni explained the nature of the divisions and transformations within allied groups using the Ansar Allah movement as a case study. He examined

how divisions could explain the emergence of violence between allied groups by envisaging armed groups as competing networks among themselves. He also pointed out that by looking in depth at the horizontal and vertical relationships between the leaders of the different armed groups, we can see that these armed groups are based on centralized structures with horizontal communication mechanisms at the local level that enable them to impose decisions.

Notes on the Peace Process and its Characteristics

Some speakers noted that the peace process in Yemen has been marred by a series of flaws that have characterized it by a lack of inclusiveness during negotiations since the outbreak of the armed conflict, and subsequent agreements such as the Stockholm Agreement. Some participants stressed that there are challenges concerning the participation in Yemen, as this issue must be initiated by Yemenis themselves. Additionally, all actors should support the participation of all segments of Yemeni society during the negotiations, both in the preparation of the negotiations and in the subsequent periods of the preparatory process. Peter Salisbury elaborated on the Stockholm Agreement's achievements in terms of preventing a devastating catastrophe, however specified that it also failed to achieve the agreed redeployment between the parties, which would have had the effect of building confidence between the parties. Asmahan Alalas pointed out that the lack of flexibility on the part of the two parties in the conflict contributed to the failure of peace efforts.

Many participants also focused on the issue of mediation within the peace process. They felt that consensus must be reached based on the prioritization of the negotiation files, while at the same time avoiding the intransigency between the involved parties as to deter the disruption of the process. A number of participants also debated the controversial issue of federalism as a possible means for peace in Yemen, and the need

for it to be designed in a manner agreeable to all. Abdul Malik Al-Ejri pointed out the need to seek peace that puts an end to all kinds of war, at the surface level, in-depth level, as well as the military and economic levels. He added that it would not be possible to achieve peace without these considerations.

In addition, Majed Al-Ansari pointed out that Gulf mediation could resolve the situation. A number of participants, such as Thania Paffenholz, argued that the peace process is a process of a permanent nature that should include a series of negotiations on the drafting of the social contract to ensure that the peace process is strengthened, and that the past experiences of other countries should also be studied and utilized. They emphasized the importance of having international support for the process, in addition to local and regional support, as preconditions for achieving comprehensive and sustainable peace.

To recap the necessary conditions for a successful peace process, the most important tenets are inclusiveness and participation. The speakers emphasized that the local community's role is central to the Yemeni peace process, and that inclusivity within the peace process must be a priority, because the absence of one of the parties from the negotiations stagnates sustainable progress and demonstrates the lack of commitment to the entire peace process and a disinterest in upholding the interests of Yemeni society. This necessitates the determination to only proceed with implementing decisions and resolutions to the conflict when all parties involved are represented. The act of justifying the absence of any party from the negotiations seriously hampers progress and could create future obstacles to the entire process. This does not mean that the solution is to divide the pie, as that is not a real solution to resolve conflicts. Furthermore, one of the participants pointed out that the agenda for youth, security and peace must be translated on the ground and necessitates creating innovative

platforms to actualize the programs within local societies. Rafat Al-Akhali presented his joint paper with Barakat, in which they discussed the unique program titled the Hikma Fellowship Program as a model for youth representation. It is an innovative program designed to empower emerging public leaders in Yemen and provide them with the necessary skills for effective leadership at turbulent times.

They also noted the importance of local ownership and management of the peace process. Lenderking expressed the great opportunity to end the conflict this year. Some participants sent a message to external parties to allow Yemenis to have the necessary space to resolve their problems on their own, because the conflict is predominately Yemeni-Yemeni (internal strife), and therefore the solution must directly come from Yemenis. It is also important for the Yemenis to reach a conviction so they do not resort to militaristic options on the battlefield that are based on mutual concessions that help propel the peace process.

Some participants spoke of peace-related cultural aspects and social perceptions, saying that it was important to promote a culture of dialogue in Yemen and to emphasize the importance of sustaining a will to achieve concrete results. In addition, the speakers rationalized the discourse of the grassroots actors in the conflict when discussing the peace process and noted the lack of communication between youth leadership in Yemen and their counterparts in the Gulf, which is an important matter that needs to be addressed as part of the process.

In discussion of the gaps that marred the Yemeni peace process, it was pointed out that the failure to achieve the desired goals of the National Dialogue Conference was the responsibility of all parties. Ibrahim Jalal focused on the institutional design of the

National Dialogue Conference, and its implications on representation, negotiations, and outcomes. The selectiveness of choosing groups, and the grievances discussed during the conference, reveal significant gaps in the search for sustainable and comprehensive solutions necessary for the transformation process in the country.

Regional and International Policies Towards the Conflict

The crisis in Yemen called for the intervention of many regional and international powers that affected and were affected by the crisis. Some researchers - such as Ahmed Alshami - considered that regional and international powers played an important role, whether in the escalation of the military crisis, or the failure of the peace process in Yemen. The United Nations has played an active role from a diplomatic point of view, as the United Nations in collaboration with international and regional partners, sought to resolve the conflict in Yemen. However, the continuation of the military operations that began with the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition forces as well as the Iranian intervention, complicated the crisis. Nadwa Al-Dawsari, for instance, observed that Iran has seen decades of its investments materialize with the rise of Ansar Allah/Houthis in Yemen. She also discussed the stages of development of Ansar Allah/Houthis and their political ideology, in addition to the limitations facing the current diplomatic efforts as Ansar Allah/Houthis continue their escalation and military expansion. In her opinion, it was a mistake to deny or downsize the Iranian role and impact, but also clarified that Ansar Allah/Houthis are not puppets of Iran, thus Saudi Arabia cannot contain them with monetary mechanisms.

On the other hand, Kristian Ulrichsen indicated that the UAE played a major role in driving Ansar Allah/Houthis out of Aden. However, this was followed by persisting challenges on the southern borders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a change of policies, and the emergence of expectations in the form of military and political

success. There seemed to be agreement among the participants on how the changes in the regional involvement created many difficulties in the transition to a political solution in Yemen. Ulrichsen noted that he believed that the regional issues related to the conflict are currently dependent on putting pressure on Iran by the United States and by preventing strikes against UAE and Saudi Arabia. Dania Thafer stated that the Gulf countries have deescalated their involvement in Yemen and have shifted their focus on Yemen's economic affairs following the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, albeit that the fear of Iranian expansion in the Middle East still persists. She also added that the role of Joe Biden's administration is to deescalate the conflict. With regard to the diplomatic track, Majed Al-Ansari argued that the presence of a third-party mediator to advance a Yemeni-led and owned peace process does not preclude the possibility, or perhaps the necessity, for the process to be overseen by a UN international mediator.

Researchers emphasized that the détente of Saudi-Iranian relations may be one of the keys or opportunities for a solution. One researcher pointed out that communication channels must be opened between Ansar Allah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other neighboring countries involved in the conflict. The researcher furthers this argument by stating that the de-facto authorities cannot be ignored, even if they were not agreed upon. He added that there is a great responsibility on the shoulders of the Gulf states to pacify their intense involvement and support the realization of comprehensive and sustainable peace that is not limited to just a cease-fire. The speakers stressed the need to search for common international and regional interests, which aid in the process of conflict resolution. Moreover, the discussion proceeded to the importance of the Silk Road and its requirements of a secure and stable situation that is in the best interests of all involved parties, which is why the coalition must work towards restoring the security of the areas that the road passes through.

Yemen's Future in Recovery, Reconstruction and Development

The speakers unanimously agreed on the seriousness of the economic situation in Yemen and labeled it as one of the most important challenges for Yemen's future. Some researchers, such as Sabria Al-Thawr, criticized donors' focus on humanitarian aspects and their neglect of development aspects, because humanitarian aid does not replace development in any way. Others pointed out the need for the recovery process in Yemen to address grievances at the national level, as these grievances were neglected in the previous period by the international actors. Some participants argued that recovery should be a flexible, continuous and appropriate to the context, promoting the necessity to strengthen and empower local actors to benefit from their own capabilities in these processes.

The participants explained that it is important to address the problems of corruption, good governance, enhancing trust in government, transparency, institutional strength, and economic quality in order to be able to lead these processes smoothly and peacefully. Researcher Abdulghani Jaghman particularly focused on these points. It was also mentioned that the first step before all these operations, and perhaps even during them, is to start visualizing and writing a comprehensive and complete recovery and reconstruction plan, granted that all of this cannot be achieved without ensuring a minimum level of security first. By the same token, the speakers pointed out the need to pay attention to elements of reintegrating fighters and youth into civil society, as well as bolstering education even if these matters take a long time. On the other hand, Helen Lackner pointed out that the tourism sector holds promising prospects in development after a post-war Yemen is sustained. Amidst other discussions on the future, the participants noted that the aid provided to Yemen is currently still weak in quantity and quality and it is necessary to increase it because it is insufficient in

addressing the urgent needs of the Yemeni people. It was also highlighted that it is important to take a more accurate and applicable approach to identifying the priorities of IDPs both at present or in the post-war period.

Closing Remarks

The Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies, Professor Sultan Barakat, presented the concluding remarks of the conference. He thanked the researchers, attendees, and organizers of the conference. He announced that the outputs of the conference will include publishing the proceedings of the conference in a peer- refereed book both in English and Arabic. Professor Barakat also pointed out that the conference was organized at a very critical point of time in the conflict in Yemen, but also during a time full of multiple opportunities to accelerate and operationalize the peace process. He stated: "In the face of this, we researchers, experts and politicians must not hesitate to push for peace and invest everything possible to achieve it; as the humanitarian situation in Yemen cannot wait, and the results of prolonging the conflict will be disastrous at all levels, not only in Yemen, but in the region as a whole." Partners' representatives also had the opportunity to thank all the members, and to highlight several of the most important ideas that were discussed in the proceedings of the conference.