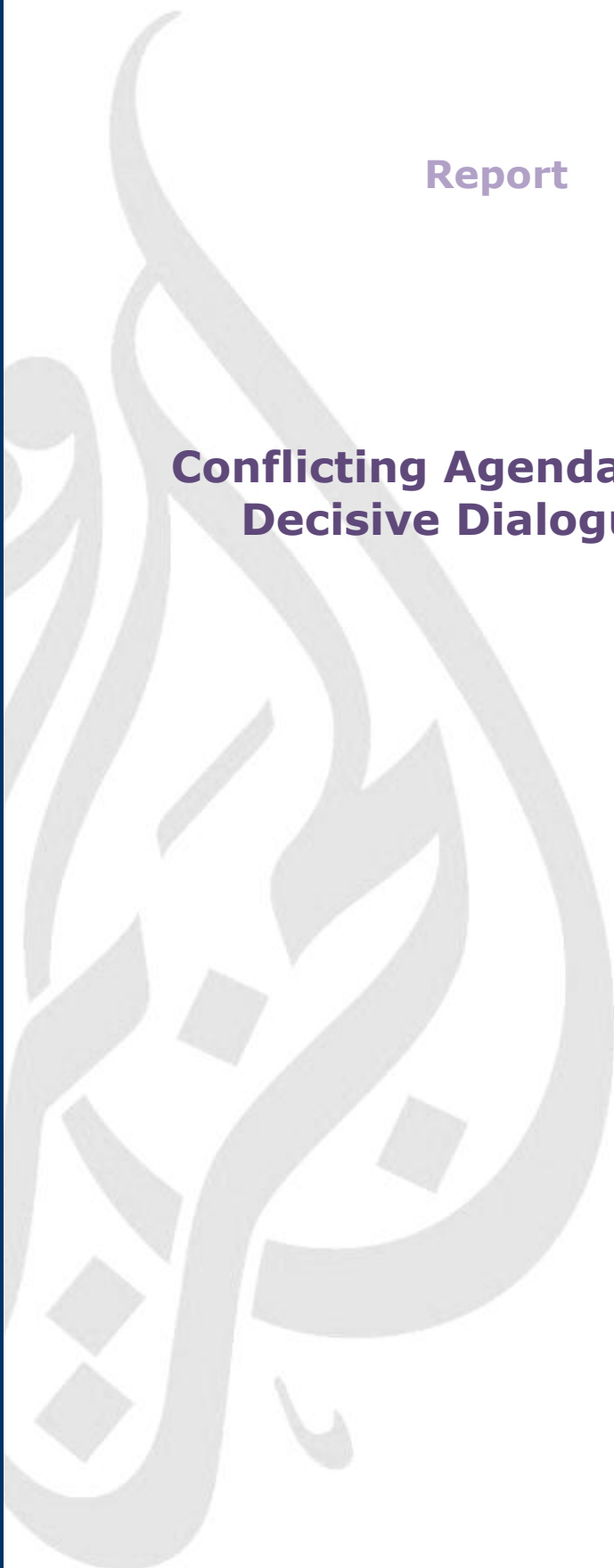




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Report

Conflicting Agendas Approaching Decisive Dialogue in Yemen



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The popular uprising in Yemen erupted in February 2011, and by virtue of the steadfastness and sacrifices of the country's youth the regime was overthrown and President Ali Abdullah Saleh was replaced. Despite this important historic achievement, the enduring previous regime and its socially-constructed society, as well as the role and the interests of regional and international powers in Yemen ensured that the revolution did not continue. The type of revolutionary activism that was stirred during the uprising could have led to radical and holistic change in all aspects of life for the people of Yemen – in terms of politics, economics, social issues and security. Instead, it led to a political settlement that reflected the existing internal balance of power and the influence of external parties. This has generated resentment among some of the revolutionary youth movements, and among unofficial actors such as the Houthi group in the north and the South Movement. These parties, as a whole, saw the Gulf Initiative as having betrayed the goals of the revolution, and considered it a settlement that does not represent change. The Gulf Initiative, for them, was merely a new mechanism for the re-distribution of power and leverage among the old political, tribal and military power centres in Yemen.

Using this premise, the political and security landscapes have been affected by the nature of recent events, as well as the conditions of the transitional process in its current stage. The political sphere, in post-uprising Yemen, has also become a place of conflict where several forces and political entities, official and unofficial, are all seeking to redraw the map of the political, partisan and tribal alliances so as to enhance their presence and their future roles in a new political order. Accordingly, this analysis will explore the dynamics of this conflict, its powers and the extent of its influence over the on-going political process through the Gulf Initiative and the two UN security-council resolutions pertaining to Yemen (Nos. 2014 and 2051).

Prominent Official Actors

Beyond the president and the national unity government represented by the council of ministers, official institutions with specific functions and authority as stipulated by the operational mechanism of the Gulf Initiative, this analysis will focus on the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) and the General People's Congress (GPC). These are the most prominent, active and influential political forces in the current political landscape and are key signatories of the Gulf Initiative.

Risks of the rise of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)

The Joint Meeting Parties is considered one of the rising powers benefitting from the process of change and the post-uprising political settlement. It is a conglomerate of oppositional political parties from different backgrounds: religious, nationalist and

socialist formed in the late 1990s. The purpose of the JMP has been to coordinate its disparate components in the parliamentary and presidential elections, but at the same time to confront the ruling party. The latter had been increasingly taking control of all the country's resources for its own political ends in order to stay in power and weaken any rivals. The Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) and Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah – which is the political organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen) are the largest and most effective parties among the JMP.

The Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah) party possesses both huge material power and moral power; it is the most orderly party with the strongest presence in Yemeni politics at this stage. It has played a considerable role in the popular uprising through its supporters and youth activists. Today it is well represented, whether in the national unity government or in other decision-making circles. The party is expected to play a more significant political role in the future – irrespective of whether the JMP survives the transitional process or not.

The other polar power of the JMP, the YSP, represents a considerable political and moral force at this stage and it enjoys the support of national cadres that have extensive experience in managing public affairs. In addition, the party brings a civic and modernist touch to the Joint Meeting Parties union and makes the latter more acceptable domestically and internationally. Yet the party suffers from organizational and financial problems and has seen a decline in its popularity and the numbers of its supporters in the southern provinces, especially with the region's growing separatism. The YSP's position on the conflict in the south has, among other options, primarily been the creation of two federal provinces. Hence the alliance of the JMP is at risk, especially in light of signs it is beginning to crack from within, and that restlessness exists among the smaller parties as a result of the dominance over political decisions of the major parties. The socialist party has also expressed their dissatisfaction, more than once, with presidential decisions which have to do with administrative appointments in important authorities and offices of the state. The party has also warned, in a statement issued by its secretariat on 12 September 2012, against the domination and exclusion of partners in these highly sensitive circumstances, saying that these unilateral moves could 'shake harmonic balances and distort the path of the peaceful process of change.' It has become clear that the YSP was referring to the domination of the Islah party and other traditional forces over the lion's share of the presidential appointments in the various state institutions.

The reality is that the JMP suffers from conflicting positions among its parties concerning certain central issues such as the issue of the secession of the south and the issue of the Sa'ida province. This is aside from the absence of a common vision regarding the political process and its future, or regarding restructuring the state apparatus in a way

that guarantees the objectives and demands of the revolution. But despite all of this, a number of leaders from both the Islah and the YSP have realised the importance of keeping this alliance alive for at least two or three electoral rounds, especially since the political settlement at this stage, and the democratic and developmental process at a later stage, will not grow naturally except if a heavyweight political alliance like the JMP is present.

The General People's Congress: The biggest loser

The official actor and the counterpart to the JMP in the national unity government is the General People's Congress. It has been negatively affected by the current political process underway in Yemen and is considered one of the losers to come out of the transition. Although the party survived the uprising in Yemen intact, unlike its counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, indicators are that the political role of the party is likely to undergo a state of decline in the future. The party is no longer running the state as it has for many years and it can no longer exploit the authority and resources of the state, nor utilize them for its own interest. Also, a significant part of the military institution which used to support the party and its president and direct their political positioning has adopted a different stance.

In addition, many of the party's key figures resigned after the eruption of the revolution, and as time goes by the party is losing a great deal of its popularity coupled with escalating conflict among its members. This is true especially with the previous president still holding onto his presidency, thereby hindering the process of restructuring and renewing the party from within.

Yet the survival of the General People's Congress as an active partisan force remains influential in maintaining the internal political balance in Yemen. Regional and international powers are keen to see the party progressing and to continue to be part of the political landscape in Yemen, especially as it is seen as a liberal party which includes active social groups and classes such as academics, businessmen, youth, women and tribal leaders. Consequently, the current state of politics in Yemen is an opportunity to continue its role as a political party with a national agenda, and not as an electoral tool which serves the interest of a particular individual, family or even tribe.

Unofficial Political Actors

There are numerous unofficial actors in the current political landscape, but this analysis will focus on the most prominent ones: the Houthis, the South Yemen Movement and the youth components of the revolution. The ability of these unofficial groups to influence the political situation varies according to the power each one possesses. But it is

noticeable that all of these groups suffer from different problems and challenges, and if these problems are not solved somehow they will undoubtedly result in a weakened political role for these actors that will only diminish further in the future.

The Houthis and their ambiguous position and uncertain role

The Houthi group which has been involved in six wars against the state, intermittently between 2004 and 2010, has as a result, gained the sympathy of several political and social powers. Today, the group is engaging in armed clashes of an ideological nature on more than one front: against the tribes affiliated with the Islah party, or against other tribes which reject the so-called expansion of the Houthi group and their militarized domination over the Sa'ida province and some districts of neighbouring provinces. The fact of the matter is that the Houthi group is today facing strong opposition from various political, civil and tribal forces and components, hitherto not a concern for the group.

Perhaps the desire to expand, and the surplus power which the Houthis gained through previous battles, has led to their controversial reaction. The group is expanding around the province of Sa'ida in a provocative manner, through violent action against not only the Yemeni state and local groups, but also in opposition to the interests of regional and international actors who are concerned with the Yemeni issue, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United States. There has been a sharp escalation recently in the official criticism of the political role currently played by the Houthi group in Yemen which is set to serve Iranian interests as opposed to the Saudi and American policies in the region. In relation to this, the Yemeni president Abed-Rabbu Mansour, during his recent visit to the USA has said in a statement to America's Foreign Policy magazine that Yemen is facing three undeclared wars run by: al-Qaeda, the pirates in the Gulf of Aden, and by the Houthis in the north. Despite the Houthis' rejection of the Gulf Initiative and their considering it an American-Saudi conspiracy against the Yemeni uprising, they have expressed readiness to participate in the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, begging the question, what exactly do the Houthis want? They appear to extend one hand for dialogue and carry arms with the other. Generally speaking, the Houthi movement is aware that its political manoeuvring is not sustainable and that refusing to participate in the national dialogue will make it a targeted group domestically and internationally.

The South Yemen Movement: To be or not to be

The first significant appearance of the South Yemen Movement on the political scene in Yemen was in 2007 in the form of mass protests and demonstrations organized by human rights associations of retired military and civilian groups. The South Movement has been demanding separation between the south and the north. Despite its strong presence and large supporter base, the South Movement is facing many obstacles

including internal divisions that have become more evident since the uprising. These divisions are no longer based on disagreements over the issue of separation of north and south or whether the best solution is the creation of two or more federal provinces; rather, it is a struggle for leadership and representation.

Worst of all is that some regional powers, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, have entered the battle in the south and the South Movement itself has become an axis of conflict used by both these forces. This will no doubt intensify the divisions and weaken the struggle of the south, which will reflect negatively on the on-going preparations for the National Dialogue Conference to be held at the end of November 2012.

The issue of the south is a priority at the conference, and therefore if division and fragmentation among southerners should continue and a clear, specific vision for the future of this issue and the mechanisms of addressing it remains absent, it will become the most important obstacle in the path to peaceful transition. Such a dialogue will be difficult to maintain in light of southern leaders' refusal to participate in the dialogue as it stands today. And this will mean the exclusion of, and the lack of real representation of, the South Yemen Movement.

Revolutionary youth: A force seeking a path

The Yemeni youth movements that led the revolution and sacrificed their lives for the change they aspired for are without doubt a rising power that cannot be ignored when discussing the future of Yemen. Yet it is important to note that the revolutionary youth are not simply one entity but belong to different coalitions and bodies, partisan and independent alike. These youth groups are divided on many issues: some reject the political settlement and deem it a betrayal to the martyrs' blood and an attempt to abort the youth's revolution. Others support a political settlement driven by their belief that it is the best option to guarantee a successful transition with minimal costs to the people of Yemen. Disparities also exist in the youth's attitude towards engaging in the political process, as some coalitions consider it important to form political parties and have actually formed them, whereas others prefer to maintain the revolutionary spirit, at least until the transitional phase comes to an end. Having the ability and stamina to revive revolutionary activism at any given moment is in fact one of the strengths of the youth groups, which can be used for applying pressure on the relevant bodies to speed up the settlement process. While the youth have differing plans and tactics, they are in agreement about the importance of concluding their peaceful revolution and achieving its objectives, which in turn depends on their unity and organizational capacity in the future. Nevertheless, some large youth coalitions are actually preparing to participate in the National Dialogue Conference, and are now crystalizing their vision for the future in

order to contribute to solving Yemen's chronic problems and aid in the formation of a new Yemen.

New powers and alliances

In light of the transitional period and the political developments it gave rise to, new alliances between different political entities that share similar interests and goals have emerged. Among the most prominent of these undeclared alliances is the coalition between components of the former regime led by Ali Abdullah Salih and his party, the General People's Congress, and between the Houthis and some of the South Movement factions which demand secession of the south. In this regard, press reports claim that former President Salih is leading intensive consultations and meetings with prominent figures in the South Movement and Houthi group aimed at forming a unified front supported by Iran to confront the growing influence and potency of the Islah (Muslim Brotherhood) party and its powerful ally, Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar the commander of the First Armed Division in the Yemeni army.

Other sources have reported that Salih has offered military aid to the Houthis including arms that were owned by the Republican Guard elite unit still commanded by his son. Perhaps what drew these powers closer is chiefly their discontent with the political settlement and its consequences that they believe would weaken them and strengthen their traditional rivals inside and outside Yemen. Therefore these powers have attempted to collaborate and work jointly to sabotage the settlement process supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia to return Yemen to the situation prior to signing the Gulf Initiative.

In opposition to this alliance, an exceptional conference promoted by Saudi Arabia was held in October 2012 in which many of the Yemeni tribal leaders took part. Participants discussed the establishment of a unified front to resist what they called the Iranian intervention in Yemen. Sheikh Sadiq Al-Ahmar, chief of the Hashid tribe who chaired the conference, demanded the retraction of judicial immunity granted to the former president. He warned the Houthis and the South Movement of the consequences of continuing to resort to violence and creating further conflict. This statement ignited fury in Yemen especially in the south and in Sa'ida, and was regarded by many politicians as a mark of the beginning of violent conflict that may cause chaos and disrupt the political process again. Hence it is clear that obstacles and problems that hinder the political process in Yemen are increasingly problematic and overwhelming the attempts at a peaceful transition.

In addition to the economic and security challenges that form a constant threat to Yemen's stability, there exists a state of distrust between the various political powers and

vigorous attempts by these powers to dominate and control political decision-making only add to the complexity of the situation.

The National Dialogue Conference and the future of Yemen

Considering the on-going political process, the future of Yemen depends on the success of the upcoming National Dialogue Conference, especially since the conference will discuss core issues currently dividing the various political forces. Discussing the issue of the south, for example, will be one of the most complicated debates especially as many of the southern powers are reluctant to participate in the national dialogue. There is a considerable divergence in the positions not only among the parties of the Southern Movement, but even among the JMP's parties as well, which still do not have a specific and clear vision on the issue of the south. It is not unlikely that internal variation in views for the south, the constitution, or the state's structure. This will exacerbate the disagreements, particularly between the Islah party and the YSP. It might also threaten the Joint Meeting Parties, a key player, as a whole and will therefore jeopardise the chances of the success of the National Dialogue Conference.

Regarding the issue of Sa'ida, the national dialogue will test the intentions of the Houthi group on the choice between war and peace, and therefore the Houthis will have to present a political plan addressing the issue of Sa'ida and resolving the psychological, political and economic effects of the previous wars, in exchange for giving up arms to the state. The Houthis' refusal to do so, for any reason, will complicate things further and lead to a portentous confrontation.

The revolutionary youth with their different affiliations will play a critical role in the national dialogue and will try to realise the remaining goals of the revolution. They are also expected to play a role alongside other civil forces seeking to prevent the policy of quotas between traditional and tribal powers and any attempts at reproducing the old political system in Yemen. The revolutionary youth will attain this only through adherence to establishing a democratic, civil and modern state.

Generally, and although it did not respond adequately to the demands of the revolution, it can be said that the Gulf Initiative signed in Riyadh on 23 November 2011 by the regime and the opposition, has laid the foundations for change through clear mechanisms and specific time frames; and has provided a fertile ground for political and social engagement from which new political forces and alliances have been born. Thus, the success of the Gulf Initiative depends today not only on the commitment of domestic and international powers to the full implementation of its articles, but also depends on the attitude of the other actors and their efforts to meet the objectives of the on-going political process.

In this context, the National Dialogue Conference, in spite of all its complexities and its problems, represents an important opportunity for Yemenis to formulate a new social contract. This new political structure would have to preserve all their rights and guarantee their share of power and wealth according to judicial and political regulations and standards that apply equally to everyone; and would only then ultimately maintain Yemen's security and stability. Yet if the attempts of the conference to reach a consensus over the salient contentious issues fail, Yemen will not escape the chaos of conflict, and will enter into a new cycle of violence and an increase in terrorism, possibly triggered by domestic chaos together with foreign intervention.

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