



Transcript

Yemen: The Way Forward

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Kate Nevens:

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

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

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

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

Husam Al Sharjabi:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Atiaf Alwazir:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

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

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

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

Thank you everybody.

Rafat Al Akhali:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kate Nevens:

Thank you very much. We now have about 45 minutes to have a discussion with some questions and answers.

Question 1:

I wanted to ask you... the particularity of the Yemeni case compared to the rest of the Arab uprisings, was that you already had to deal with the two regional movements in the country with the Houthis in the north and the Hirak in the south. I wanted to ask you what were the answers of the stance that the youth movement was prepared to give to these questions? Have you thought about addressing the problems that these movements were raising? And whether the youth movement in Sana'a had any affiliation or connections to any of these movements and how you managed to do that?

Husam Al Sharjabi:

I'll start by answering the second question. Yes, the youth movement in Sana'a had connections and coordination mechanisms with the youth movements in other parts of the country, including in Aden, including in Hadramaut, in Shabwa, and in other places and of course in the rest of the governorates particularly in Ta'izz and Ibb. That's the second part.

As for the first part I think the focus of everybody during the revolution was on changing the process. We did not get into issues which could divide us, details which could divide us – we parted that until this stage. So the focus at the time was of changing the regime, on achieving certain demands which everybody agreed on, including the Houthis, including the Southern Movement as well. Our message was always as follows; that all issues – as Maysaa was saying – would be on the table for discussion. If you wanted to discuss national unity, let's do that; if you wanted to discuss federalism; if you wanted to discuss grievances related to the six wars in Saada. Now is the time to discuss all of these issues without any redlines and without any preconditions. That at the time – and is still our message – gave assurance to our colleagues in the Houthis movement or in Hirak.

Kate Nevens:

Would anyone else like to come in?

Questions 2:

I think you talked about the economic difficulties but without any real proposals about how Yemen could face a challenge of economic difficulties. I think it is very important that we shift the discussion from the politics to the

economics because the economics is what affects everybody in terms of electricity, roads, hospitals and the services which people don't get. That mental shift needs to happen very quickly, otherwise Yemen will be so shattered that we're not going to be able to put it back together.

The second issue is clearly the political exclusion of the south – I think this is a significant point. I wanted to hear a proposal about how Hadi is going to be supported by the international community to engage the south in the political discussion because I think at this stage now when we're talking about a month's time when these discussions are going to happen, it isn't going to happen. There needs to be a proposal about how people from the south are going to start discussing among themselves their grievances. Then being able to elect or nominate a committee or a group of experts that will be able to identify their grievances in the main national conference. I think if we don't have that then we're playing politics with the south. We mustn't let that happen because that could be the next major problem.

My third point, which is my last point, is that I chair the free zone in Aden and I think Aden has a great opportunity in terms of becoming attractive for investment, capital investment particularly, both internally from local investors and internationally. I think it is critical that the new government... I agree with my colleague who talked about the deficiencies of the government in terms of expertise and in terms of being able to deliver a programme, and economic programme. I think Aden needs to be the focus in terms of creating thousands of jobs, maybe tens of thousands of jobs through the port, the airport and the refinery. These three areas are critical areas of an economic nucleus for Yemen. So I think it's very important about how the government is going to do that. There's a lot of talk about politics, a lot of talk about revolutionary change but we seem to have the same thing of the old; there needs to be something of the new and that hasn't come through yet.

Kate Nevens:

Ok. So we have solutions for the economy, solutions for the southern question and solutions for Aden. Good work.

Rafat Al Akhali:

Ok sure, I don't think we have any solutions. For the economic situation – you touched on this as well – there could be a lot of solutions and I think any technical expert could come up with all of the solutions in the world for it but

again we are always faced with the implementation. Who is going to implement all of these plans and the economic reform priorities? That is again what we're really calling for. Let's try and get together and work for the international community to put pressure on the government and have the civil society put pressure internally on the government to try to make sure that this is resolved. To come up with a solution about how we're going to deliver these reform plans economically speaking. Are we talking about setting a different structure or are we talking about working with key ministries? I don't know, maybe start with the finance ministries and start with the key ministries and make sure that they have the staffs that are needed to deliver?

But other than that what we have been crying for is the principles of inclusion and transparency. So let's open the door up and include as many people as we can in addressing these issues and let's make sure that everyone has a chance to contribute towards it.

Atiaf Alwazir:

I just wanted to comment on both of your points. Of course I have no solutions. And I can't speak on behalf of Hadi because your question was, does Hadi have solutions to the southern movement? I don't know. But I can address some of the issues that you brought up which are important. Yes, I agree that we should focus on the economy but I do think that we cannot separate it from politics in Yemen. Those who have the power economically are also those who have decision making [power] in Yemen. I think we will see a power struggle right now between people who want to protect their economic interest. Some of the people in opposition have joined this reform movement not necessarily for change but really as a power struggle to protect their economic interests. I think that's key and we need to keep that in mind.

As for the Southern Movement, I agree. I think that it is a priority and we need to address it immediately. It is already too late – well it is not too late but we should have addressed it a long time ago. There are many grievances that have been forgotten or ignored and people need to know that these grievances are heard at least. I think that job creation is key but I also think we should focus on local governance and giving people the power to use their resources as they please. We have heard many indications of decentralisation, etc. but words are not enough – we need action. If something is to happen we need it now. We need to give more authorities to the local councils and really, they should use the budget as what they see as necessary.

Maysaa Suja al Deen:

About the southern movement, I think the main issue in the national dialogue is that there is no representative of the South, which is a big issue. There are some leaders who don't recognise them and they are typical leaders. It's a very big problem because there is no one to talk with. But I think they can do something like what Maysaa said, like decentralisation, there is also the suggestion of federalism so we can go with these things.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

I think that the first point is crucial and I totally agree with you. We like to talk about politics a lot because it is fun and more interesting. Getting to the real work, which is lying ahead, is very important. I think there are very specific solutions to our economic problems. It is a matter – I agree with Rafat – that it is their implementation. A lot of our economic plans, even from the Saleh era, are still relevant. We talk about the five year plans; we talk about the ten point plans, whether you like it or hate it there are still some points there, it is a matter of implementation now. With internal and external pressure we can move in that direction.

One more thing we need is to instil in people like yourself and the Yemenis here to support [the country] because it's a matter of capacity. No matter how plans are good, if we don't have the right people to implement them, you know very well that nothing will happen. I just wanted to add this.

As for the dialogue – nobody knows. We have our own ideas; we can tell you about what we think should happen but I think we need to sit together and agree on a process for dialogue. This has not happened and it could be a time bomb.

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

Actually the dialogue is many countries' fault because the process is not clear. It is important to create a very clear mechanism that satisfies everyone. No one has a clear vision and no one talks about this. Maybe it's good to discuss this issue and suggest some things to be applied, maybe it's good.

Kate Nevens:

And who do you think will be able to lead the national dialogue process?

Mayssa Suja al Deen:

That is the main issue. There is no committee to organise, to coordinate between or to talk to the different parts so I suggested before that we elect a committee – a legitimate committee – and this committee, based on the results of this national dialogue, will write the constitution. Because, as it was mentioned in the GCC initiative it is based on the results of the national dialogue, it will be the base of the constitution. So I think if there is an independent body to work on this issue its very important.

Atiaf Alwazir:

I also agree, I think an independent body seen as more or less objective is important. But I think the process needs to be Yemeni led; it should not be imposed for legitimacy purposes. I also think that who leads is less important than setting standards. This could be part of who is really moderating this initiative; making sure that all people are included. It has been mentioned before but really inclusion here is key. Having... the Southern Movement really needs to be there, the Houthis need to be represented, the youth need to be present, because in the past they have been neglected from the GCC talks, from various initiatives, and like she said, all of the meetings have been behind closed doors.

I think we just really need to focus on that. If we are speaking openly there is international pressure on whatever country is in charge of the national dialogue; now we hear rumours that Russia is going to be in charge on national dialogue. Whatever country is going to be in charge of putting on the pressure, they need to make sure of this key point of inclusion.

Question 3:

Talking about the different transitions that have already been happening for 20 years as part of Europe, I'm looking at the role of civil society in transition and what I see from my analysis is that there are a lot of problems from a weak civil society, in the values that the post-totalitarian countries share. It is a weak state and a weak civil society. Some people are saying that it is faked democracy. We also saw massive mobilisation in this part of the world such as in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. We also saw how after that people went back home. How NGOs who were active during this time could not translate this mobilisation into any meaningful participation. I want to ask you how do you see this happening? Mostly this question is to Husam, because you were saying that you proposed to work with these groups? That's one question.

And if you have some examples that you want to study to look at some other parts of the transition, what other examples are appealing to you where you could be learning something? Because I think there needs to be more learning about what worked, what could have worked and maybe replicating something.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

It is very interesting that you mentioned these countries: Georgia, Ukraine and the others. We always look at the UK, France and the US, and we always say that it takes time. Major changes always take time. In the US it took, I don't know, maybe 100 years or 150 years. The same for the UK, probably, and for France. So these things take time but we need to take a step forward.

There are going to be a lot of challenges, yes, the ones that you mentioned and also other ones as well, but we are, I think, at the beginning of major change. It would be naive that we will not be faced with these challenges.

As for the example I think in the region we need to look at our experiences and in Eastern Europe there are a lot of examples – you can learn the good, the bad and the ugly there. In our region, most recently in Tunisia, we need to look at what is happening there and in Egypt – again some good things and less than good things. We can learn about transitional justice in particular the lessons learned from countries such as Rwanda, Liberia and South Africa – there are a lot of lessons there too.

Rafat Al Akhali:

If I may, I think there is a lot of awareness of the need to sustain the momentum of especially the youth groups. There is significant work being done to try and take these youth groups and institutionalise them. My organisation is working with the EU, for example, on a project just to do that. We are taking these youth groups and saying to them that they cannot just continue to be a mass movement on the street: you have to institutionalise your efforts. So whatever you want to become, do you want to become a political party? Then build your capacity to become that and have an official role in the political process or you want to become an NGO or a watchdog or advocacy group, or whatever; it has to have an institutionalised framework. So there is that awareness based on previous experiences thankfully and there is some work to be done there.

Maysaa Suja Al Deen:

Just quickly if I could add to that, one thing you said was that everybody was in the street and then they went back home and nothing happened. On the day of the election I was really worried that everybody was just going to go to the election and feel like they have done their civic duty, relax and then leave the government to do everything. That was, and still is, a big fear I have.

However, yes, many people did feel that way but not everyone. The indication is that people are still on the streets. People went to vote but are still on the streets because they realise that what they want is something bigger than just changing personalities. So I think I have hope that this year has really changed some things. It is not just political or just economic change but really social change as well.

Question 4:

Two questions: one is about the Gulf initiative and the other is about foreign presence in Yemen. The first question is that, the Gulf initiative for it to be successful, a successful implementation would mean that the current powers would lose a lot of their authority. At the same time the implementation of the initiative is going to be done by the current powers. So how will that work?

My other question is that we know that there are many foreign powers playing now in Yemen: the Americans, and the British. Some are doing it formally but you have also some informal powers like the Gulf countries and Iran. How will that also complicate the politics?

Atiaf Alwazir:

I'll take your second question first about the international and regional players. That is a key concern for many people because if you look at the GCC implementing mechanism there is really no guarantee. It is a contract, or a plan, that has some excellent stipulations that we could use really to our benefit such as, constitutional amendments, national dialogue and restructuring of the military. There are some really good stipulations but they are vague, first of all, and second, they lack a guarantee. If Hadid dies then there is no alternative plan. What happens? There is no guarantee except international pressure, which can be positive but also can be international meddling. So where do we draw the line between the expertise, and the help and the pressure from the international community is providing, and where do

you say, no, this is meddling? Maybe I should ask you whether to be diplomatic or honest, I'll ask you. [Laughter]

I will be honest. Personally, I am quite worried about this potentially being really international meddling. We hear a lot about different countries maybe with the right intentions helping Yemen and for now we have heard rumours that the Russians will be helping with the national dialogue, the US with the military restructuring, etc. If we look at just the concept of the US helping with the military restructuring, we know that the US already has their own intentions in Yemen and their focus, unfortunately, is very narrow in terms of only focussing on counter-terrorism. It is very short term and leads to a lot more problems in Yemen. Hence, the military restructuring will really be based on US interests rather than Yemeni long term interests. That is a big concern. In addition, of course, the US would like to keep [inaudible]. Saudi Arabia would like to keep [inaudible]. It means that they are both are going to stay.

The onus is on us. We need to keep pushing; we need to keep speaking out; we cannot just complain that the international community is doing this if we're silent. They are not to blame. You know, it's politics; everybody does what is in their best interests.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

Expecting anything other than that from these powers internally or externally would not be realistic. So it's a fact, we have to deal with it. We have two options: either we can whine about it, or we can do something about it. For all of these processes, I think they should be led by the Yemenis themselves. For example, the restructuring of the army, we must lead it. If we need any technical support from any other countries we can get that. The same thing goes for the dialogue. If we don't lead it, we shouldn't complain about it.

Maysaa Suja Al Deen:

The biggest problem in Yemen now is that the challenges are very big and the political elite are very weak. They didn't change and there is no alternative, so it's a big issue. But we can, step by step, involve new people from the youth, from the south and from the Houthis so there could be some change after a while but not now, not right now. It depends how we work with them.

Question 5:

You, the youth of Yemen have succeeded in bringing a very important change. What matters in politics used to be dealt with vocally in the market and forgotten about that and the decision was left for the government. Having made such important change I would like to focus on what the issues are.

My first one: are you, or some of you, planning to make a career out of politics or pursue your own careers by being active in public affairs? My second one is, how are you going to deal with the weak ineffective political elite? Are you going to deal with them as advisors, elder statesmen who may be listened to but not necessarily their advice taken and pursue it your own way? The third point which is extremely important, have you been exposed to corrupting attempts in order to spoil your purity, and how would you guard against that?

Kate Nevens:

I like the fact that at any point any of you might have been pure.

Husam Al Shajarbi:

Just to attempt to answer these questions. First of all the youth are not a homogenous group, let's keep this in mind. Some of us are interested in having a career in politics; we're starting for example new political parties which can have the right structures to help us further our own agendas that have specific programmes, specific decision making mechanisms, etc. So some of us will go in that direction.

Others chose not to. Others are more interested in civil society, humanitarian work, human rights, media freedom and some of us are interested in getting into watchdogs or think tanks. So different people have different interests but, yes, to answer your question some of us are going into politics and will focus on having a career there.

Which leads to my second point: we think that you can do a lot of good and you get good advice remotely or within civil society. But I think enough of us need to have critical mass in the political arena to bring about very tangible change. So staying at bay from the politics will not serve our purpose.

Third question: one way or the other, yes, but again, these things will continue to happen. I think instead of focussing on what others are doing, we need to focus on what we are doing. Instead of complaining about what other politicians are doing or what the old guard are doing by creating new political

parties by trying to attract some of the youth to their current political parties or new political parties or other organisations. I think we need to focus on what we can do, not worry much about what they are doing.

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

I will just answer the last part about the old political elite. I am against excluding anybody and I wouldn't advocate exclusion of, let's say GPC. I don't want the GPC to be dissolved. It's not a personal battle. We want change, you can reform but once you exclude an entire group it's going to come back to haunt you. We have seen that in Iraq. So I wouldn't advocate for exclusion of anybody. So, yes, we should take people's advice and we should remember that nothing is black and white. Even people that were corrupt, they have maybe experience in politics [and that is] something we don't have. We don't really want to repeat their experience in politics but I think there is something you can learn from everybody.

Question 6:

I just want to make a quick comment about the fact that so many people are hinting or suggesting there is such a level of weakness in the Yemeni capacity, I think there is a lot less weakness and there is a lot of very competent people in all kinds of fields.

But the question I wish to ask relates to the economy. I think we can all agree that the economic situation is very, very bad and that there have been a lot of solutions proposed and also that we have about 70% of the population in Yemen that are rural and have very specific needs. But I was a little bit surprised to hear that only the proposals that have been discussed here are the ones that have been proposed by the international institutions. And while we have had some clear criticism about the international interventions or sometimes interference, what I was really wondering is to what extent was the youth and other people in Yemen are thinking of other economic solutions other than the standard neoliberal policies which have failed in all the Eastern European countries that you mentioned, in the Arab countries, in any number of African countries, and which in my personal opinion are partly responsible for the unfortunate state of affairs in many places.

Husam Al Shajarbi:

To answer this question, as I said before, the youth are not homogenous. You have people on the left, the right and the centre. I happen to think of myself as centre, centre right so more towards the neoliberal policies. But not everyone thinks the same way.

Now, what will decide our policies going forward as youth will be, who will be better organised, who will have larger constituencies, who will have specific policies and programmes that can be implemented on the ground. I think those people will decide the discourse of the policy of the economy. What you see on paper right now is that everybody is talking about more of the same, new liberal policies. I don't think anybody is talking about any new economic policies there.

Atiaf Alwazir:

If I can just add, I agree with him in the sense that people from the left have not necessarily written it down. I consider myself more left than right. In theory people are talking about it. People from the Socialist Party, for example, have really amazing ideas but unfortunately that has not translated to really specific policy recommendations and that I think that is a problem. What you see now, all of these recommendations are all that are presented.

Husam Al Shajarbi:

Or, fortunately.

Rafat Al Akhali:

I think we have a challenge even to get to that point of bringing power from the traditional power centres of the tribal leaders, army commanders and the Saleh family into these institutions, into the political parties so we can talk about these policies and get them implemented. Because right now that is not even happening: you can have all the neo-liberal or socialist policies you want but in terms of implementing them someone, somewhere will stop them because it will be against their economic interest and it will all stop. We have to first work on bringing the power to the institutions and then we can talk about the other things.

Kate Nevens:

I'm going to start taking questions in groups of three now.

Question 7:

Thank you very much for your presentations today. You brought up the issue of Ali Mohsen and, speaking about the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has claimed that it has changed its ways; the Sultan has gone, and that era has passed; now it will act more respectful towards Yemen in terms of going through the government instead of other means. I'm just wondering do people really trust Saudi Arabia now in terms of the changes that it claims to have made. I know that's a bit of a facetious comment. But at the same time, I would be interested to know that when King Abdullah says things are different, how true is that now? I have heard a lot about meddling in the Yemeni military going on by Saudi Arabia. Is that true and how worried are they about that?

On the other hand the GCC has got very involved politically in terms of trying to solve the short term crisis management, so to speak, but I notice that they have avoided concrete measures in terms of Yemen's GCC membership for example or what they're going to do in the next two to three years to try to help the Yemeni economy by opening up their markets to Yemen. Is there any change there that I'm not aware of, are there any concrete measures? And what do you want to see from the GCC, institutionally, as opposed to crisis management?

Question 8:

I was wondering if I could ask the panel a bit about the current tribal dynamics in Yemen, how much support is there tribally for Hadi and how will this affect or not affect the government's policy towards militant groups such as Al-Qaeda? And if you could speak a bit about the tribal situation that would be appreciated.

Question 9:

I have two questions. Firstly you mentioned that several agencies were hesitant to work on the ground in Yemen principally because of security concerns, what would you say to them now about the security situation.

And secondly, you mentioned also that other countries including Tunisia, could be seen a model of how things might move forward. The interesting

thing about Tunisia is that the ruling party was very much discredited along with Ben Ali himself. That doesn't seem from what you were saying to be quite the case with the GPC. As part of that, are the GPC and their partners in opposition now going to be credible counterparts for the reform movement whether or not from international donors or from people outside government but within Yemen, even if you can find reform minded individuals in government?

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

About the GPC and the ruling party, it does not influence the political life in Yemen as big as we thought. Ali Abdullah Saleh lent on the tribe and the army so the parties as civic bodies are not that important – this is the problem. The GPC is very important for the northern governors, north Sanaa. If you say no GPC, those northerners would go to the Houthis which are more extremist so it becomes between the Islahis and Houthis so the GPC makes some balance. And we tried that before with the Socialist Party in the south, they tried to destroy it and we paid the price in the South. Now no one represents the south in the name of the south. If we keep the Socialist Party many problems of the south would not be faced now.

Rafat Al Akhali:

Just to go back to the GCC and Saudi Arabia, I don't think it is fair to only criticise their role. I think the GCC and Saudi Arabia did play a good role and I think that without their support we would not be where we are today. So of course there are some positives and negatives, but we have to acknowledge that there were a lot of positive things done as well.

In general in the street there is a lot of resentment for foreign intervention in general. Specifically the big players are always on the top of the list – Saudi and the US. That's at the street level. I think the onus again is on us to go to the GCC with better plans. As you said, on the economic side we should be going to them with clear programmes about what assistance we are expecting from them. I think it is very unfair to sit there and say, 'What are you going to do for us GCC? Come up with some plans for us please.' Anything easing the controls on labour movement, giving Yemen preferential treatment in terms of customs and taxes at the borders, any kind of that support can be done. I think there is a Friends of Yemen coming up in Riyadh and I think there are good prospects that could happen there. So I just wanted to discuss that.

In terms of just the question about what you would say to the international NGOs in terms of security, the situation is still on the ground for international NGOs very difficult. I am not saying security is better now so just come, what we're trying to say is that there are alternatives that people are looking into. If we cannot have enough people on the ground what do we do as international NGOs. Maybe rely more on the local people; even the private sector can play a role maybe there in distributing humanitarian aid. There are a lot of alternatives that we can start looking at.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

I would like to add one more thing if I may, when it comes to security, international NGOs focus on the most difficult areas and then either work there or do nothing – not all of them, some of them. Whereas what we need now, as well as in the main cities, when you look at Ta'izz, you look at Aden, you look at Apian as well of course, and Sana'a. There is a lot of need there. I think that the security situation there permits them to work to a great extent. You should not focus only on the most problematic areas.

There was a question about the tribes and how much support they have for Mr Hadi. I think the main configurations announced their support for Mr Hadi. However when it comes to the relation of the tribe and Al-Qaeda in particular and someone mentioned that, it's tricky, it's not about the support only. It's part of the equation but you need a combination, a multifaceted approach to dealing with that issue, not only with Al-Qaeda but with other extremist groups as well. Of development, which is going to be very important in the underprivileged areas; of defence, you need to have defence in the equation; and dialogue with some of these tribes as well. So a multifaceted approach is needed, not just strong faceted [approach].

Maysaa Shuja Al Deen:

I wanted to talk about Al-Qaeda and that US policy is very obsessed on the security level which sometimes led to negative consequences and the people become [sic] more angry. If someone is not with Al-Qaeda but he saw a US plane hit his village he will change his opinion and join Al-Qaeda. So I think we need some – like he said – development to take care of development and do many things to involve the people in politics so they feel that they can serve their interests through the legal methods.

Atiaf Alwazir:

If I could just add to two of the questions on the security situation, I agree with Husam that there are areas where international NGO workers and humanitarian aid workers can operate freely. In the areas where it is a bit more problematic, I think linking with local organisations that are already doing the job. Why stop? There are great people doing it already, just link with them and continue doing the work. In addition, there are some areas that, in the media sound like a gate to hell when in reality you really can operate – sometimes it's just an exaggeration.

I think on the question of the GCC and Saudi Arabia, I am the daughter of a historian. History is important, history repeats itself. We cannot just look at what Saudi Arabia is doing now but what has it done since the 70s and 80s. I think we know what the history is. Politics also, we are a neighbour of Saudi Arabia, it is in the interest of the Saudi regime to keep its neighbour weak but to support change in terms of replacing Saleh with someone else but comprehensive change will be blocked, and we see that. Real changes, real comprehensive changes that would lead to real institutions will be blocked. We have had many revolutions in the past, this is not our first. We had one failed one in 1948, we've had '55,'62 and in the south we had the revolution against the British occupation, we've had many. But what you really need is to build real structures and real institutions and not just focus on replacing people.

Question 10:

I would just like to ask you, UKAID have basically announced today that they are building a committee of private and public organisations here in the UK for rapid response. How would you think that would work in Yemen? Would the elite control most in business? Also, do they have the capacity to actually deliver aid all over Yemen?

The other thing I would like to ask specifically Husam on this because I know you are developing your own political party, on new political parties that are coming up from the youth, how do you think that would work and what do you see are their main visions when it comes down to the economy and development? Do you see a real far vision or a five year plan that is going to end tomorrow?

Kate Nevens:

May I add to that question, what do you see as the role of women in the new political parties? That is one question that has come up before.

Question 11:

Someone in their opening speech mentioned a referendum and you mentioned constitutional reforms. What kind of referendum are you talking about and have you considered constitutional reforms as bringing in international experts who form constitutions for other countries like Yemen?

Question 12:

We know that Saudi Arabia plays a big role and prevents the Yemen revolution from succeeding in a way that bringing half of the coalition government to keep them in the government they could have their hand in Yemen again.

Whereby, I think we know now that this revolution was based on the youth and the people of Yemen, on the corruption and that was one of the major reasons why we have been protesting on the street and escalation was going for almost a year. Could you tell me now on the national dialogue, what is your vision of how we can have a new government, a new constitution, maybe rewriting it or amending it, if half of the government who have been corrupted, and as an example, a very small example, we have the Aden Port. We all know who has been charged, some people who used to be living in the UK and used to be in the Yemeni community here and they went back and took part in this corruption. Can you tell us how can this national dialogue succeed if half of the government from the GPC Party are corrupted?

Kate Nevens:

So we had rapid response with the emergency aid, political parties, a referendum on the constitutional reforms and anti-corruption.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

I will talk about a couple of points that are directed to me and leave the other to my colleagues. When it comes to new political parties I think personally that it is important for the youth to put a political face to their movement

because without having political parties you will not have the right structures to drive the change forward so for me I think it is the right vehicle to use now.

When it comes to the political parties we see a couple that are actually being formed now. Some are initiated by the youth who were in the Change Squares for the past year. We like to think that we have a vision for Yemen that is not five years or ten years, maybe it will take us much longer than that. We want to see a democratic stable, secure and prosperous Yemen where everybody is equal under the law and where you have a cohesive society at the same time. And we actually lay down our plans five or six years at a time because you need to have specific actions that will get you there. So this is the approach that we are having.

The role of women in political parties is challenging. I will say a couple of words and maybe Atiaf will comment on that. But it is difficult to convince women to participate in political parties because – and I will be honest – because they want quotas and they want to be represented well but they want to stay in civil society and don't want to get their hands dirty as well. It doesn't work that way. That's one thing.

Rafat Al Akhali:

And that's based on real life examples. It's not hypothetical.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

It's not hypothetical. The second question is regarding the referendum; you directed that question to me. When I was talking about referendum; it is actually one step in the process. The first step must be the national dialogue. So we sit and discuss, do we have one country, two countries or five countries. If we decide to have one country, do we have a federal system or a unitary state? If we have a federal system how many regions, how do we divide them? All of these things should feed into rewriting the constitution and then the constitution will be put on a referendum for the people to say their words. That's what I meant by the referendum.

One thing about Saudi, people are talking about Saudi here and it is very tempting to criticize Saudi, and the US and the UK and all of these people. I would like to think about those people as friends more than enemies and instead of having a confrontation with all of these countries, which is not going to serve our purpose, I would try to find common ground with them taking into consideration the history as well with all of these countries, taking into

consideration that everybody is acting in their best interest and nothing is wrong with that so long as it is within reasonable values. That is what I would like to highlight and our relationship with the Saudis and the others. I will leave the rest of the questions to my colleagues.

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

I just wanted to comment on the role women in politics, not necessarily in political parties. I know it's true that Husam has been trying to recruit women – it is true what he is saying – and he is having a hard time trying to get women to join the political party. I think women have really been leading figures in this revolution and they have taken on leadership roles, not just part of the mass movement but they have taken on real roles. We have [inaudible] in Ta'izz, we have many, many women that have really been the driving force behind many of the events on the ground and I think politics is not just about joining political parties. People can be engaged in the political process whether it's political awareness, promoting people's political participation and I think women are key in that.

And just one other thing on the issue of quota, I do think it is important. There is an upcoming women's national conference on the 19th and 20th where women from various political backgrounds will come together to come up with a unified agenda about what is our priorities as women. What do we want from this government? I think the key here for women in the future is we should be part of the different committees, we should be part of the constitutional committee. Not a single woman was part of the drafting for the GCC, none. In the GCC implementing mechanism there was one line addressed to women saying that women will be 'appropriately represented', but what's appropriate to someone may not be appropriate to me. Behind the scenes when I asked people what was that about, because there was a quota – there was supposed to be a 20% quota – but that was removed because everybody, GPC, Islah, JMP, everybody agreed, 'Let's remove that'. One thing that everybody agreed on was excluding women. Hence we need to be in the constitutional committees, we need to be in the national dialogue in order for real reforms to take place.

Kate Nevens:

Thank you. I'm going to take two final questions.

Question 13:

The speakers gave a beautiful overview of the youth in Yemen and I'm really happy to see successful Yemenis taking the initiative and playing a role in the future of Yemen.

I think one of the biggest problems Yemen is facing is a great increase in population and especially in youth. And youth is going to dominate the future of Yemen and really this is also creating obstacles for the future of Yemen because it is being utilised in a negative way by some other political parties or extremists or some of those. There is an inherent problem to Yemen which is economical and political. My question is really to all the speakers, how in terms of young successful Yemenis, how can we mobilise the Yemeni youth positively and what is the role of the international society in playing a part? Because yesterday and the day after there was a massacre in Abyan. It makes me really sad that mostly youth are killed, either from the military or Al-Qaeda. My question is how can youth play a positive part and not be part of the crisis in Yemen?

Question 14:

How can we, the Yemeni youth, the Yemeni communities of the UK and other communities work with Yemenis on the humanitarian and development projects in Yemen?

Question 15:

I have basically an offer and a question: We have heard a lot of people talk about delivering aid to Yemen and actually some of them are struggling because of the security situation in Yemen. We can offer a good connection in Yemen to the local NGOs as a Yemeni organisation based in the UK, so you are welcome to contact us and we can ease that part for you.

The second part which is the question: As the youth from Yemen, you came here to the UK and you have a programme and you're going to be meeting a lot of British officials, what is the message that you're going to deliver? You have heard from all of us and you have heard probably from the people in Yemen, what is the message that you are going to deliver to the British officials about the Yemeni situation and how can they help in resolving the problems in Yemen?

Kate Nevens:

Ok I think that is a really excellent way of concluding. So could everyone just have 30 seconds to a minute each and then come up with a key policy point in the end.

Maysaa Shuja al Deen:

About youth participation I think this is the biggest challenge now because we want to keep this movement because without the youth monitoring the political process, without the youth pushing then everything will go. So we should encourage the youth and we should, I think that the previous year was a very good practice for them because many of them had never been involved in politics before so it was a good practice for them. So some people like what Husam did forming a new party, there are already parties on the scene like the Socialists, like Islah, like the JMP, they need to renew their blood because most of them, their leaders are very aged.

Atiaf Alwazir:

I will just quickly on some of the points that I forgot to mention before, the role also of Tawakkol Karman as a leading figure in politics and in the movement because as a woman really her role has been, well you all know.

I wanted to talk about what the Yemeni community here, the diaspora, can do and that is many, many things. One is, give us a voice here. Don't underestimate, we can send you information. Go meet with the UK representatives, we can send you information, go meet with them, write in newspapers, write a blog, just keep the voice alive. We can send you the information right now. We can write you contacts.

I think one proposition I gave to someone here was medical treatment, we have a lot of injured people in Yemen. If you can find an NGO here in the UK that could take some of these cases that need medical treatment abroad that could be something you could work on, for example, that is just some ideas.

And finally, just a policy recommendation for the UK government officials is to really focus on – since the UK is co-chairing the Friends of Yemen – we need to really focus on the importance of inclusion and transparency in the national process and also focus on humanitarian relief.

Husam Al Sharjabi:

Just a couple of points: Firstly to the Yemenis here in the UK, I agree with Atiaf. I think some of you might want to consider to go back home at the right moment as well because your country will need you. I think capacity is the most important constraint. No matter how much your plans are good you cannot do much if you do not have the right people. That is one thing.

The second thing is that some people have gone back before and tried to do whatever they could as well. If you try and go back and work in Yemen previously or now you will probably make mistakes, you will probably not achieve everything that you wanted but I think it's important to try it. This is to the Yemenis here.

To the international community our message to them is that we say a lot of things at these meetings – they are very long – but our concluding remarks are two: First, we need to keep the pressure on. It is unwise, foolish to think that the second phase of the GCC will sort itself out; we need the internal and external pressure on. The second thing is coordinate. You have a lot of international donors coming into Yemen but they don't talk to each other. We ask them to talk to each other, coordinate and move ahead fast.

Rafat Al Akhali:

I will just reiterate what Atiaf mentioned and that was a major point that we all stressed on and that was inclusion and transparency. We are just making sure that all international countries working in Yemen need to be aware of that, need to be aware of the importance and the priority of these processes as we're coming up to national dialogue, constitution reform. All of these processes need to be as inclusive and as transparent as possible. We are always saying don't lose track of the humanitarian side of things, that is what really matters to the everyday life of people on the ground so that should not be taken out of sight at any point.

Kate Nevens:

Thank you ever so much. That is us for today.