

## Empower Yemen - Report #1

# Local Stakeholders, International Influence, and Civil Society

### **Key takeaways**

- The divide between north and south is probably the most salient factor in Yemeni civil society's views on the current crisis, although civil society figures in northern governorates outside of Houthi control tend to echo their southern counterparts on many topics.
- Civil society figures across Yemen see the role of the United States as predominantly negative and self-interested, although many favor the continuation of some form of US support for the Saudi-led intervention.
- The majority of civil society figures have a negative view of the United Nations' efforts in Yemen, particularly the work of the Special Envoy.
- Most regions of Yemen are experiencing significant suffering, and civil society figures see an end to the war as crucial to resolving the humanitarian crisis.
- Civil society figures have little knowledge of, and are not fully aligned with, the advocacy agenda pursued by humanitarian and pro-peace organizations in the US.

### **Introduction and context**

Yemen's internationalized civil war is ostensibly a struggle between the internationally recognized government of President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi and the Ansar Allah organization, more commonly known as the Houthi movement. But behind this dyadic facade, a multitude of parties, factions, and foreign states are involved. Since March 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have led the so-called Arab Coalition, a grouping of states intervening in Yemen against the Houthi rebels. The Coalition receives significant material support from the United States and the United Kingdom. Saudi and UAE aircraft conduct airstrikes in combat areas and within Houthi-controlled territory far from the front lines, while Coalition-sponsored fighting groups and military units operate on the ground.

For the Empower Yemen initiative's inaugural report, civil society figures from 16 governorates across Yemen responded to a questionnaire covering a range of topics relating to the roles of various internal and external actors the ongoing war and humanitarian emergency in

Yemen. The findings reveal a broad range of conflicting perspectives on the role of foreign powers in Yemen's crisis, and a patchwork of competing forces and institutions controlling territory outside of the Houthi-dominated northwest.

Yemen's political reality and the perspectives of the Yemeni people are increasingly defined by regional divides, most prominent among them the longstanding rift between northern and southern Yemenis. Regional identities have always been a powerful factor in Yemen, but the ongoing war, with its disruption of every aspect of life, has brought regionalism even more sharply into focus. The border that used to separate the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) from the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) does not correspond precisely to the current boundary of Houthi-controlled and government-controlled territory, but nonetheless the north-south paradigm seems foundational to the perspectives that civil society figures express concerning the current crisis. This tendency is most pronounced among southerners. For this reason, our first report focuses on the essential differences between the views expressed by civil society leaders in the government- and Arab Coalition-controlled south and their counterparts in the Ansar Allah-controlled north. The glaring exceptions to this geographic distinction are the governorates of Ta'iz and Ma'rib, both of which are historically "northern." While areas in the rural west of Ma'rib Governorate are still contested, the capital city (Ma'rib) has been under the control of a strong local governor, appointed by the Hadi government and supported by Saudi Arabia, since 2015. The city of Ta'iz is controlled by competing government-aligned militias; Coalition and pro-government forces control part of the hinterland, while Ansar Allah holds part of the perimeter of Ta'iz City and other parts of the governorate. Despite these peculiarities, we use the north-vs-south paradigm—rather than a Houthi-vs-government paradigm—because regional identity is a more salient factor than political/military authority in respondents' perspectives. Accordingly, responses to our first questionnaire from Ma'rib and Ta'iz are generally closer to those received from southern respondents than northern ones, but a different pattern is certain to emerge in future questionnaires that deal directly with the political future of Yemen (and the south in particular).

It should be noted, however, that internal regionalism is not the only source of the polarization that prevails in Yemen today. The prominence of foreign actors also has a marked impact. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the main sponsors of the international military intervention on the side of the government, but there is evidence of polarization between Saudi-backed groups and UAE-backed groups. While the Saudi/UAE-led Arab Coalition includes several GCC member states, the rift between Qatar and the rest of the GCC is felt in Yemen as well, as Qatar provides support to both Ansar Allah and the Islah Party, the latter being ostensibly on the side of the internationally-recognized government.

## ***Methodology***

The Empower Yemen initiative uses questionnaires to collect the perspectives of activists and civil society figures inside Yemen. Our team analyses participants' responses and produces materials like this report for policymakers and advocates in the United States. Participants are drawn from our team's existing contacts within Yemen, and from a wider pool recommended to us by our known contacts. Security is a major concern in nearly all areas of Yemen; participants from all governorates expressed significant fears regarding local security forces. For this reason, all participants are kept anonymous, and are referred to in our materials by aliases referencing their governorate of residence; in the text below, aliases are rendered in italics for clarity. The number

of respondents is also limited by budgetary constraints, as we pay participants a small stipend for each questionnaire returned, but this number will increase for each questionnaire. We received 27 responses to our first questionnaire; eleven of these were excluded from our final analysis due to incompleteness. Those included here represent 16 of Yemen’s 22 governorates. Respondents held a range of occupations, including journalists, CSO directors, political activists, party officials, and educators. The average age of respondents was 41, and the ratio of male to female respondents was 2.8:1.0. For subsequent questionnaires, our goal is to include respondents from all 22 governorates, with a gender ratio of 1:1 and an average age below 37.

<i><b>Governorates represented</b></i>	<i><b>Not represented</b></i>
<p><b>Northern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al-Mahwit</li> <li>Hajjah</li> <li>Raymah</li> <li>San'a (Capital Municipality)</li> <li>Amran</li> <li>Dhamar</li> <li>Al-Jawf</li> <li><i>Ta'iz</i></li> <li><i>Ma'rib</i></li> </ul> <p><b>Southern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al-Baydha</li> <li>Hadhramawt</li> <li>Lahij (al-Hawtah)</li> <li>Lahij (Yafa')</li> <li>Aden</li> <li>Shabwah</li> <li>Al-Dhali'</li> </ul>	<p><b>Northern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sa'dah</li> <li>San'a (Governorate)</li> <li>Al-Hudaydah</li> <li>Ibb</li> </ul> <p><b>Southern</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Al-Mahrah</li> <li>Soqatra</li> <li>Abyan</li> </ul>

## **Analysis**

### ***Power, influence, and control***

The first section of our questionnaire was designed to assess respondents’ perceptions of political power dynamics. Northern respondents, with the exception of *Ma'rib 01* and *Ta'iz 01*, all reported that Ansar Allah is the dominant force in their areas; only one (*Dhamar 01*) mentioned any other faction—the General People’s Congress (GPC)—as wielding power, but only in conjunction with Ansar Allah. This was the case even in northern governorates where Government-aligned forces have taken and held territory, like Sa’dah, al-Jawf, and al-Hudaydah. Southern respondents, however, pointed to a diverse array of powerholders. Most southerns told us that the “Legitimate Government” of President Hadi held control locally; a few cited local governors appointed by the Hadi Government. Respondent *Lahij 01* reported that the local branch of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) holds power in their district. The STC is a secessionist assembly comprised of powerful and popular leaders from across the south; it is explicitly opposed to the Hadi Government as well as the Houthis (though Southern Resistance Forces under the

STC's command have engaged in only a very few minor confrontations with Government forces), and draws support from the UAE. *Shabwah 01* told us that while appointees of the Government are in charge, various Coalition-sponsored militias have some overlapping authorities, and "the control of the Arab Coalition is very clear." Respondents in Ta'iz and al-Baydha, governorates on either side of the old north-south border, reported that control of their immediate areas is divided between Ansar Allah and the government.

Asked what stakeholders are present (rather than dominant) in their immediate areas, Southerners named even more groups, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the UAE-sponsored Security Belt paramilitary, tribal elders, and the Islah Party, while *Ma'rib 01* also mentioned the National Army Brigades. The question of "who is the most powerful actor on the ground in Yemen" yielded more complicated results; people answered with the Legitimate Government, Ansar Allah, a combination of both, or the Arab Coalition, without a regional pattern. The government was credited with being strongest in the most stable parts of the country, as well as having the most resources. Ansar Allah was perceived as having the most unified leadership.

### ***Governance***

In terms of governance and the day-to-day functioning of the state across Yemen, Northern and Southern respondents were inconsistent. Every Southern respondent said that they had valid institutions of the state in their province, and that the government was the provider of social services (excluding *Lahij 02*, who said that no one provided such services in their area). Northern respondents were split: some reported that Ansar Allah operated governmental institutions and services, while others reported no such institutions were present, and that international aid organizations provided what services existed.

### ***Civil Society***

Questions concerning the state of civil society in Yemen yielded perhaps the most complex results from this group of civil society figures. All northern respondents characterized civil society as weak, biased, and/or underutilized. Southerners were divided, describing civil society in their areas as either "good" or "weak." Most believed that civil society organizations should play a bigger role in the peace process than they do at the moment. People attributed the lack of such involvement to "bias," insufficient awareness, and lack of qualified personnel. This issue will be addressed in more detail by our second questionnaire.

Half of respondents reported women's involvement in civil society to be strong and positive, while the other half called women's participation weak (though commendable). Almost all respondents attributed the lack of women's participation to cultural obstacles, such as powerful Yemeni social norms and traditions. There was also a sentiment that men who rose to political power in wartime had not prioritized women's inclusion. These attitudes were consistent across Yemen without much of a regional pattern.

### ***Humanitarian situation***

In the humanitarian section of this survey, we sought to understand how the toll of the war differs across the various regions of Yemen. Northerners and southerners tended to report generally similar conditions. In the north, people reported the destruction of essential infrastructure

like roads and facilities, the lack of job opportunities, nonpayment of salaries, inflated prices, tremendous health risks, and potential for famine. In the south, Yemenis reported widespread destruction, high civilian casualties, health epidemics and widespread injury, lack of basic services, displacement, and psychological effects on civilians and fighters.

Participants perceived the response of INGOs to the humanitarian crisis as important but flawed; respondents saw a need for INGOs to be more transparent and less biased, and to increase their geographical reach. Other international actors responding to the humanitarian crisis were accused of serving their own interests without regard to the wellbeing or safety of Yemeni citizens. No northerners were aware of US humanitarian support, but half of southern respondents were. Interestingly, those southerners who knew about US support reported that it is biased toward Houthi-controlled areas (contradictory to the northerners' reports that there was no US support in their areas). The US was perceived across all of Yemen to have an extremely negative role in the humanitarian crisis; in fact, it was named by one responder as "the main element in the humanitarian crisis in Yemen."

### *International influence*

Respondents spoke with little consistency about international influence across Yemen, identifying Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States as the foreign states with the most influence in Yemen. The northern respondents tended to list more regional countries while southern respondents tended to list more states beyond the region. Actors mentioned with less frequency were Oman, the UK, the EU, Russia, Turkey, China, and Israel. Northerners reported that the Arab Coalition had a negative impact on their lives and tended to blame the Coalition for destruction of key infrastructure, the disruption of state services, the rise in prices and suspension of salaries, interrupted education, civilian deaths and health consequences, and widespread economic burdens. Some southerners spoke to the Coalition's weakening of local authorities appointed by the Hadi Government, thereby undermining ongoing development projects. One responder stated, "the coalition hasn't done its job as required, which is to liberate Yemen and achieve the desired peace." However, the Coalition was broadly perceived to be a positive force in the south; respondents spoke about improved security conditions, liberation from the Houthis, improved food supply and energy services, and increased humanitarian and development projects.

Only two respondents considered American involvement in Yemen to be positive. One northern respondent stated that US assistance to the Coalition "limits" civilian casualties by increasing airstrike accuracy and military restraint. Respondents who characterized US involvement as negative believed that the US is solely involved to protect its own interests, prioritizing profit from weapons sales over peace and safety for the Yemeni people. Respondents were split, with no clear north-south distinction, as to whether the US should continue to support the Coalition or sell arms to belligerents; interestingly, opposition to arms sales did not always correspond to opposition to more general US "support" for the Coalition. Only three respondents—all of them northerners, including *Ma'rib 01*—were aware of NGO and congressional efforts to end US involvement. Some southerners, while acknowledging and encouraging US support for the Coalition, accused the US of supporting or arming Ansar Allah. Northerners criticized the US for not employing its international sway to end the conflict.

Both northerners and southerners tended to perceive the efforts of the United Nations pessimistically. Respondents tended to lump all UN activities—political, military, and

humanitarian—together in their responses, though the UN Special Envoy’s efforts drew the most criticism, and were across the board considered weak and negative. Northerners focused more on the UN’s humanitarian role, while most southern responses centered around the Special Envoy. Southerners accused the UN of taking the side of Ansar Allah, being concerned about making money, and letting their bias influence their work. Southern Yemenis believed that the Stockholm Agreements “hindered the peace process,” were “failing,” and wouldn’t serve as a foundation for anything. Northern respondents implied that they thought the agreements did not live up to their potential. The sole exception to this trend was *al-Mahwit 01*, who praised the UN’s relief and peacemaking projects.

When asked what the international community should focus on, the north-south distinctions were particularly interesting. Respondents in northern governorates tended to cite humanitarian priorities, including opening San’a airport, expanding relief, combating disease and health problems, and reestablishing public utilities and educational services. Northern respondents also mentioned the need to address the repression of journalists. In the south, respondents most wished to “end the war.” They asked the international community to design a plan to end the Houthi coup, implement UN resolutions, and restore state institutions.

## Implications for US policy advocacy

The US advocates and policymakers currently focused on Yemen are all motivated by an urgent desire to mitigate the suffering of Yemen’s people and curtail the militarization of US policy in the region. A consensus has emerged among humanitarian and pro-peace organizations that ending America’s military support for the Saudi-led Coalition is the best course of action to achieve those goals. However, our initial findings indicate that Yemeni civil society is neither aware nor uniformly supportive of that agenda. It is clear that the civil society leaders we polled are far from satisfied with the international community’s current approach to the crisis in Yemen. It is also clear that they, like the advocacy community, see ending the war as an essential prerequisite to ending the humanitarian crisis. There is ample space for advocates in the US to learn from and coordinate with Yemeni civil society in order to shape new policy solutions, but doing so may require that US organizations develop a new theory of change that uses means other than the restriction of military assistance to achieve a political settlement.

Our second questionnaire will focus specifically on civil society perspectives on the UN-led peace process and alternative paths to peace. We hope to provide concrete recommendations for the advocacy community based on our participants’ responses. We also encourage advocacy organizations to take advantage of the opportunity our initiative provides to seek direct input from civil society stakeholders; we welcome suggestions for topics as we prepare future questionnaires, and we invite the advocacy community to contribute financially to Empower Yemen so we can broaden our pool of respondents.

This report is a product of Empower Yemen, a program of the Yemen Peace Project implemented in partnership with People Demand Change Inc. Written by Morgan Perry, Layla Picard, and Nidal Betare, based on research conducted by Nidal Betare. For more information about Empower Yemen, or to request permission to distribute this document, please contact Program Director Nidal Betare at [nidal@yemenpeaceproject.org](mailto:nidal@yemenpeaceproject.org) or Executive Director Layla Picard at [picard@yemenpeaceproject.org](mailto:picard@yemenpeaceproject.org).

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