

## Developing the National Dialogue in Yemen

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The National Dialogue in Yemen has been around as an idea since at least 2009 and was once more endorsed in the GCC initiative for Yemen in November 2011. It is an attractive concept to frame many of the difficult challenges that lie ahead of Yemen in this current transition period, and while there is some real optimism, at least in the broader international community, if not so much in Yemen itself, that it will lead to tangible and sustainable outcomes, there are also some significant challenges related to it.

Most fundamentally, there is a question about the precise goal that is to be achieved with the National Dialogue. Some of the more or less obvious choices include, in no particular order, peace, security, stability, democracy, prosperity, regime change, justice, or merely a sustainable status quo. Some of these potential goals are clearly complementary, and between most of them there is considerable overlap. Yet, complementarity and overlap only stretch so far, and at some point Yemenis (and their international partners) will have to make some tough choices about what their priorities will need to be, and these choices will inevitably privilege some goals over others, at least temporarily.

Connected to this are four other important issues. First, who is to participate in the national dialogue, who determines their participation, who do participants represent, and what capacity do they have to engage constructively in the national dialogue. Second, and closely related, what will be the role of wider society in the National Dialogue? Will Yemenis be consulted in some form, will the outcome of the National Dialogue be presented to them in a referendum, will they elect the participants in the Dialogue?

The question of participation does not end with Yemenis, nor does it perhaps even start with them. External actors will be involved in the National Dialogue—as mediators and funders, but also as stakeholders with their very own, national interests to look after. There is already an abundance of different individual external actors and a range of fora, such as the GCC, the G10, and the Friends of Yemen, in which they come together and interact among themselves and with Yemenis. What is clearly missing so far, however, is clear leadership (preferably to be exercised by the UN and its Special Representative), and a sense of coordination and coherence in the international community's approach to the National Dialogue.

On the more substantive side, it is as yet undecided which issues will be included in the National Dialogue, how they will be selected, sequenced, and agreed, and how any agreements might be implemented. This substantive dimension, in turn highlights the complex interrelationship between all these issues: specific goals will inevitably determine which issues will receive priority and they might determine which participants might be 'selected' for inclusion in the National Dialogue. In turn, if there is more of an inclusive, bottom-up process in which participation is decided first, a very different set of issues might emerge, determined by the participants themselves.

While these substantive and procedural issues are clearly important, there are at least three more general contextual factors that have a bearing on the National Dialogue.

First, this process and some of its participants struggle with a legacy of the National Dialogue being an ineffective instrument of achieving much needed change in Yemen, and instrument that is revived at a time when Yemen remains a highly volatile, tense, and insecure state with extremely weak public institutions marred by corruption and marginalised by far more powerful unofficial networks that are simultaneously subject to conflicting internal and external pressures.

Second, although it is broadly acknowledged that international support is vital for the National Dialogue to succeed, Yemen and the challenges that it has to confront are only one among several pressing international

security and humanitarian issues at a time when a prolonged global financial and economic crisis is far from being resolved and in a year in which the United States has a presidential election.

Third, all aspirations for an inclusive and conclusive National Dialogue aside, some issues simply cannot be addressed within it: Yemen's growing humanitarian crisis, the increasing threat posed by AQAP, and the conflicting agendas of external actors in relation to the National Dialogue and more broadly concerning the future of Yemen.

Against this background of instability and uncertainty, what, therefore, would be needed for the National Dialogue to succeed? First and foremost, clear national leadership within, and ownership of, the National Dialogue as an outcome-oriented process of negotiation of key issues whose resolution can ensure progress towards a better future for Yemen. Such leadership needs to be broadly based and legitimate to command the support of as wide a cross-section of Yemenis as possible, and it needs to be courageous in managing expectations of what can realistically be achieved and in what timeframe.

Second, there will be a need of facilitative, well-coordinated diplomacy to assist Yemenis and their leaders to avoid failure. This, third, will need to include real efforts to create capacity, inside and outside Yemen, to engage constructively with the often complex, highly technical issues involved in designing the legitimate, effective, and sustainable institutions of governance that Yemenis need and deserve.

There can be no doubt that the National Dialogue faces tough challenges ahead, but equally that it does have real potential to succeed and that there is now a significant (albeit perhaps already closing) window of opportunity for success. For all the problems and misgivings one might have about the National Dialogue, it is the only game in town and there is only one chance to get it right.