

*Viewpoints*  
No. 82

# Youth and Civil Society: The Missing Powers in Yemen

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Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, civil society organizations (CSOs) inside the country have significant capacity not only to mitigate the civil war but also to assist in rebuilding once the conflict is over. For historical reasons CSOs in Yemen have more space to monitor developments, advocate for greater accountability, and help the country grow and prosper.

*August 2015*

*Middle East Program*



Despite the ongoing conflict in Yemen, civil society organizations (CSOs) inside the country have significant capacity not only to mitigate the civil war but also to assist in rebuilding Yemen once the conflict is over. For historical reasons CSOs in Yemen have a higher status and greater capability than other organizations in the Middle East because they have more space to engage directly with local communities. This access allows CSOs to play an important role in a number of issues related to politics and human rights. Moreover, Yemen's governments have rarely suspended CSOs in the past because they welcome the role of international aid in CSO capacity development, particularly because Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the world.

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Yemen in 2011, women, youth, and CSOs have become agents of change on the Yemeni political scene. They were some of the first groups to publically call for political and social reform. This civil society movement was eventually co-opted by government forces, but the government could not completely exclude civil society agents from the political scene and even included some CSOs in decision-making processes. The international community and local organizations started to focus on women and youth capacity development to found new local organizations that could better meet community needs and improve daily life for Yemeni people. These organizations played a key role at the National Dialogue Conference, providing a link between conflicted parties and bringing local perspectives into the discussion.

Since March 2015, the conflict in Yemen and the accompanying factors— airstrikes, ground conflicts, funding shortages due to the closure of international programs, the increase in internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the air/land/sea blockade—made it more complicated for CSOs to perform their basic functions. Many local organizations lost their funding, and food, water, and fuel became increasingly expensive. Electricity and transportation shortages limited organizations' abilities to conduct meetings and execute activities on the ground. Most CSOs did not have the training or capacity to deal with such a catastrophic situation.

Despite these aforementioned challenges, the situation did result in the creation of new coalitions and networks to fulfill humanitarian needs such as delivering food and water, establishing remote clinics, providing shelters for IDPs, and filling water pools carefully to prevent malaria and dengue fever. These organizations relied on aid coming from international organizations and private sector groups in Yemen. Some CSOs succeeded in maintaining peace in small cities like Damt and parts of Ibb, Al Hudaydah, and Hajjah. On a small scale, some organizations have been able to conduct first aid training and develop courses in observing and reporting on human rights violations. Organizations continue to rely on social media to reach individuals inside and outside Yemen, using the Internet to promote peace through advocacy campaigns, request increased humanitarian assistance, and call for political powers to end the conflict. Some examples include Bike 4 Yemen, which promotes social change in Yemen, campaigns that use art to promote peace, and campaigns against rising food and water prices.

Growing tension across sectarian lines has also impacted the capacity of CSOs. Divisions in Yemen are determined by geography (South, middle, or North), clan (Hashemite or not), tribe, religion (Zaidi or Sunni), location (urban or rural), and political affiliation. Yemenis are

affiliated with their many identities, yet CSOs are often labeled according to the identities of their leaders. This can affect their ability to work in certain regions or conduct projects on certain topics.

There has also been an upsurge in youth recruitment to fight for the Houthis, the Popular Resistance, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's government. There are a number of reasons why youth choose to fight. Sources of income are currently limited in Yemen, and participation in these groups can provide a strong source of money, land, fuel, and food. Youth may also be attracted and mobilized by the religious or patriotic slogans these groups use to recruit new members. Because of their age and the high rate of illiteracy in Yemen, these minors may not know of alternative ways to advocate for their rights.

Yemen is also experiencing a substantial rise in its crime rate. One civil society activist said, "My friend has been shot and killed by a guy from the militia and when I called the police station to report [the incident] they told me, 'There are already thousands who have been killed and you want us to investigate over only one person?'" People have lost faith in the ability of the police to solve their problems, which has in turn produced significant chaos and mistrust. The government continues to remain very limited in its functions because of the ongoing conflict.

Finally, people – particularly children – have experienced deep psychological trauma from the conflict. There have been a series of disturbing images showing people killed by airstrikes and ground conflicts posted on social media and painted on streets. Some activists attempt to use art to promote peace, but there are relatively few peaceful images when compared to the more traumatizing ones.

CSOs need to start creating more networks that can facilitate their work in more places. Umbrellas of strong, local organizations can support more women and youth initiatives in their local communities. National and international organizations need to keep supporting and promoting small and short-term programs because of the high potential for immediate impact. Some examples include: street cleanings, painting murals that promote peace and equality, photo exhibitions, music competitions, and others. Larger organizations also need to fund technical support and advocacy campaigns at all levels, but with a greater focus on the community. They need to develop workshops and establish dialogues where people can share their grievances, identify their safety and security needs, and brainstorm local solutions.

In addition, CSOs need to work more with police stations to bridge the gap between the police and the community and to promote better, more efficient police action. They need to encourage the private sector to fund humanitarian and development programs, to use their experience and equipment to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid, and to support young entrepreneurs. Activists need to learn how to use social media and radio programs more effectively. Due to ongoing electricity cuts, these outlets have become the main source of information for most Yemenis. Local organizations must also work to support women and children who have been affected by the conflict. As one father said, "My three-year-old child stopped talking after experiencing trauma from an airstrike in Sana'a."

Yemen's history makes it clear that almost all political powers in Yemen are more comfortable during times of conflict than times of peace. While they usually struggle to develop tangible strategies for community development, CSOs have more space to monitor developments, advocate for greater accountability, and help Yemen grow and prosper. A greater focus on funding CSOs – so they can better monitor and support the security apparatus and government on local and national levels – is the only key to ensure long and lasting peace in Yemen.



*The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.*

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