Building Stability and Democracy in Yemen

August 2011

*'The Arab Spring has shown that stability and peace cannot be attained through repression…
The young people I have met in recent visits to the region are motivated by the desire to
change their country for the better, and to live freer and more dignified lives... It would be
wrong to turn our backs on them. To support their aspirations is to be true to our commitment
to freedom, while being led firmly by our own enlightened national interest.*[1]*
William Hague, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*

Summary and recommendations

Yemen's current crisis poses many challenges, but it is also an unprecedented opportunity to
place the country's political system on a far more stable and inclusive footing. The majority of
Yemenis continue to call for an end to a political system dominated by a handful of elites,
governed by exclusive patronage networks, which has largely failed to respond to their core
grievances and has contributed to ongoing conflict and extremism in the country.

The international community has a role to play in facilitating this process and in encouraging
the emergence of a more inclusive political settlement through a transition process that sets
out a blueprint for lasting change. In the short-term, violent conflict is almost inevitable, but if
a peace agreement on a transition of power is to bring about lasting stability, it must begin
addressing the underlying drivers of conflict and radicalisation in Yemen immediately.

Saferworld recommends that the UK Government:

- encourages the negotiating parties in Yemen to broaden negotiations to include all key
  stakeholders, including representatives of independent political groups that have
  emerged in the current protests, al-Hiraak and the Houthis;
- resists the temptation to push for a quick transition process at any cost, and instead
  insists on a transparent process that Yemenis can perceive as legitimate, and that
  provides a framework for longer-term reforms towards a more accountable, legitimate
  and inclusive political system;
- addresses Yemenis' concerns that international support for the state security apparatus
  is strengthening abusive security forces and is too narrowly focused on counter-
  terrorism objectives instead of meeting the needs of citizens;
- uses the Building Stability Overseas Strategy, which provides an excellent framework
  with which to plan and carry out this engagement.

Crisis in Yemen: the current context

Mass protests calling for the resignation of President Ali Abdallah Saleh have been ongoing
since February, with varying levels of violence carried out against protesters by central security

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[1] William Hague, 'Helping the Arab Spring succeed is Britain's cause too', *Evening Standard*, 8 August 2011,
http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23976502-helping-the-arab-spring-succeed-is-britains-cause-too.do

forces in different parts of the country. While protesters are calling for the fall of the regime and the establishment of a modern, civic democratic state, President Saleh has shown no real intention of stepping down. Formal opposition parties, led by Islah, remain weak, disorganised and unable to capitalise on or represent popular sentiments. In many parts of the country, ongoing violence between a range of local actors continues to spiral out of control. Living conditions are steadily worsening; a fuel crisis, an unusually dry rainy season and food insecurity threaten to turn the fragile economic situation into a humanitarian disaster. Disputes over fuel and water shortages have been, and will likely continue to be, drivers of violent conflict in the coming months.

International attention has, understandably, been focused on bringing a cessation to the immediate crisis. In addition to scaling up humanitarian support, the international community has focused its attention on reaching a political settlement that would end the current deadlock and facilitate a quick and peaceful transfer of power. International facilitation was crucial in securing agreement in principle on the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) initiative, but President Saleh's repeated refusal to sign the agreement, combined with popular rejection of the initiative and a rapidly evolving situation on the ground, have made this proposal unworkable. As the context has evolved, stopping the violence and transitioning towards a peaceful political settlement has become more challenging.

The current crisis poses many challenges, but it is also an unprecedented opportunity to place Yemen's political settlement on a far more stable and inclusive footing. The majority of Yemenis continue to call for an end to a political system dominated by a handful of elites, governed by exclusive patronage networks, which has largely failed to respond to their core grievances and priorities and has contributed to ongoing conflict and extremism in the country. Yemenis may differ in the avenues they use to express their desire for change, depending on their geographical and cultural differences[2], however the majority are united in their desire to see a positive change in how their country is governed.

A sustainable approach to stability

'The stability we are seeking to support can be characterised in terms of political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all.'
HMG Building Stability Overseas Strategy, July 2011

Throughout the country, pro-democracy protesters in Yemen are bitterly disappointed with what they perceive as a weak response from the international community to the current crisis. While the UK, US and others called on Hosni Mubarak to step down in Egypt, imposed sanctions on the Al Assad family in Syria and intervened militarily in Libya, the killing of hundreds of protestors in Yemen, demonstrators argue, has elicited only expressions of concern and support for 'transition'. Many Yemenis believe this reflects a lack of regard for the needs, rights, and lives of ordinary Yemenis and associate this perceived lack of regard with the counter-terrorism agenda. A common perception on the ground is that the US and UK's focus on counter-terrorism has led them to continue to support repressive elements within the Yemeni regime and that it has provided aid, equipment and training that the regime uses against political opponents and ordinary civilians. More recently, this perception has even translated into hostility toward employees of international organisations perceived as 'Western', apparent even in well-educated communities in urban areas such as Sana'a and Tai'z.

In part, this is a problem of communication, but perceptions are based on real trade-offs and challenges and it is important to ensure that policy does not exacerbate the problem. As HMG's new cross-departmental *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (BSOS) sets out, it is vital "to

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[2] For example, whether youth join groups such as the Houthis, the youth-led protests, or the Southern Movement depends on their religious and geographical location.

ensure that work designed to build stability does not unintentionally make things worse."[3] Short-term advances in a militarily-conceived counter-terrorism effort in Yemen are currently in tension with the broader stabilisation agenda and the approach set out in the BSOS, and there is a danger that this work, designed to build stability, may unintentionally undermine it.

Unaccountable and abusive security providers continue to be a source of instability in Yemen. State security mechanisms are perceived by many in the local population as an aggressor that threatens their livelihoods and wellbeing – a perception which has only increased since the violent crackdown on protesters began in March. Abuses by the security sector and elite military units in particular have also been used by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) to gain support from local tribes in the south of the country.[4] Efforts by the international community, including the UK, to support the state security apparatus and to strengthen the state-level counter-terrorism efforts are therefore unpopular and feed the AQAP narrative that the 'West' continues to support unpopular 'apostate' leaders against their own citizens. Many Yemenis perceive Western donors to be prioritising counter-terrorism objectives over support for the pro-democracy movement. While the UK acknowledges the problems of Yemen's security sector and in the longer term security sector reform and engagement with the Yemeni security sector will be of crucial importance, currently there are very few safeguards to ensure these forces are not used for narrow political ends.

International support for Yemeni security forces without robust incentives to make progress towards inclusive political processes, transparency and good governance, also risks enabling the Yemeni Government to pursue separate and unrelated political objectives under the guise of counter-terrorism. The Yemeni Government routinely links the al-Houthi and Southern Movement to AQAP, and has used US and UK-trained commandos against the Houthis.[5] Currently, it is using almost the entirety of the armed forces under its control for regime survival rather than for addressing rampant violence and insecurity throughout the country.

While short-term measures to prevent acts of terrorism may be necessary, reducing the threat of terrorism in the long-term requires measures to promote longer-term stability in Yemen by addressing the root causes of conflicts. The UK can help promote such an approach by supporting a political settlement which addresses protesters' grievances and lays the foundations for creating more positive state-society relations.

Establishing the framework for long-term transition and reform

'It is… vital that international partners support inclusive peace agreements and political settlements that are more than just bargains between elites or armed groups and that help lay the foundations for tackling the full range of issues that caused and perpetuated the conflict.'[6]
HMG Building Stability Overseas Strategy, July 2011

The current protests in Yemen may have been triggered by the Arab Spring, but they are an expression of serious and long-standing grievances resulting from failures of governance and the political system to deliver economic and political security. Any political settlement or peace agreement, if it is to be sustainable, must reflect and respond to the grievances that have fuelled increasing levels of conflict in the country over the past decades and that have underpinned this most recent outbreak of violence.

The drivers of conflict in Yemen are well-understood. Yemen's exclusive political system ties access to resources and life opportunities to membership in a small elite circle around the President that includes close family members, key sheikhs within the Sanhan tribe, and select

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[3] HMG *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (2011), p 16.
[4] Amnesty International, *Yemen: Security at what price?,* 25 August 2010, www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE31/011/2010.
[5] Juliane von Mittelstaedt, "Operation Scorched Earth: A US Hand in Yemen's Civil War," *der Spiegel*, 12 March 2010 http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,732734,00.html. Ellen Knickmeyer, "Yemen's Double Game," *Foreign Policy*, 7 December 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/07/yemens_double_game?page=full
[6] HMG *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (2011), p 15.

military commanders. This has far-reaching implications in terms of unsustainable patronage networks, weak governance and corruption, abusive and unreliable security and justice mechanisms, unequal access to scarce resources and exclusion and marginalisation of large parts of the population. Donors have long understood that these underlying problems must be tackled in the medium-term. Now, however, even short-term progress in Yemen is impossible without addressing these issues head-on.

The GCC initiative - supported by the UK, US and EU - does not address these underlying issues. While the initiative may have some support from the governing General People's Congress and opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), it excludes key stakeholders such as the Houthis and Al Hiraak, does not answer the aspirations of pro-democracy protesters, and does not lay down the blueprints for a post-Saleh political system. In the context of political fragmentation, escalating local conflict and a budding war economy, a transition agreement that excludes these key groups will be unfeasible. Instead, the GCC plan threatens to entrench a political status quo that no longer meets the expectations of a politically mobilised citizenry that is demanding far-reaching change. Independently mobilised protesters do not view the JMP as being representative of their demands or able to negotiate on their behalf, and they contend that Islah, in particular, has attempted to co-opt the protests in illegitimate ways.

The BSOS notes that supporting inclusive peace agreements means 'supporting coalitions that include a wide enough cross-section of society to build confidence and begin the initial stages of institution building.'[7] Any plan that is to be 'good enough' and 'inclusive enough' to end hostilities and set Yemen on a trajectory towards positive change must be significantly more inclusive and far-reaching than the GCC plan.

The transition agreement must be not just a means of ending President Saleh's rule and quelling violence in the short term, but must acknowledge and address the deep and long-standing roots that underpin people's grievances. Specifically, the peace agreement must establish the framework for an inclusive political process, equitable distribution of basic goods and services and the establishment of responsive and accountable security services, which respond to local communities' security concerns while also reinforcing protections against more global threats of terrorism.

Pro-democracy protesters, while divided, continue to call for a parliamentary democratic system with strong administrative decentralisation that is better able to represent the country's diverse communities and demands. International engagement must take a longer-term approach that recognises that a more sustainable and inclusive political settlement must drive both short- and long-term approaches to stability in the country. For the UK, the BSOS provides an excellent framework with which to plan and carry out this engagement.

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[7] Ibid. p 15.