



BRIEFING NOTE: CENTERING CIVILIANS IN YEMEN'S FRAGILE PEACE PROCESS

May 2023

About Center for Civilians in Conflict:

CIVIC is an international non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting the protection of civilians in conflict. CIVIC envisions a world in which no civilian is harmed in conflict. Our mission is to support communities affected by conflict in their quest for protection and strengthen the resolve and capacity of armed actors to prevent and respond to civilian harm. CIVIC was established in 2003 by Marla Ruzicka, a young humanitarian who advocated on behalf of civilians affected by the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Honoring Marla's legacy, CIVIC has kept an unflinching focus on the protection of civilians in conflict. Today, CIVIC has a presence in conflict zones and key capitals throughout the world where it collaborates with civilians to bring their protection concerns directly to those in power, engages with armed actors to reduce the harm they cause to civilian populations, and advises governments and multinational bodies on how to make life-saving and lasting policy changes. CIVIC's strength is its proven approach and record of improving protection outcomes for civilians by working directly with conflict-affected communities and armed actors.

The conflict in Yemen has dragged on for more than eight years. Two-thirds of Yemen's 21.6 million citizens are in critical need of humanitarian aid and protection. Half of them are children. Civilians in Yemen are not only suffering from the effects of the armed conflict, but they are also enduring the effects of a severe economic and humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by the collapse of public services and critical infrastructure. These intertwined crises have been compounded by the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, which has greatly affected access to food supplies. Until the conflict is brought to an end, civilians will continue to suffer. Some will die, some will flee, and nearly all will be deprived of a safe future. While it's difficult to have an accurate death toll, it's estimated that several thousand civilians have been killed since the start of the conflict.

The security and humanitarian situations in Yemen require an urgent and inclusive process to bring a sustainable end to the conflict and, in the interim, provide optimal protections for civilians. The current peace talks between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Houthi officials is a welcome development. As these talks proceed, it is imperative that peace negotiations are inclusive of civilian communities that have borne the brunt of conflict. **CIVIC calls for a peace deal that not only brings about an immediate end to the fighting, but also leads to sustainable and inclusive peace for Yemeni civilians underpinned by the principles of inclusion, accountability, justice, and reconstruction.**

Specifically, CIVIC calls for the following:

- **Stop all fighting, including local hostilities, and secure a nationwide and inclusive truce:** Although no major military operations or offensives have taken place, some frontlines have seen escalations. Localized clashes continue to occur and civilians continue to suffer from the instability and insecurity. A truce, solely between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, will leave Yemenis at risk from other violence. CIVIC calls for a nationwide truce in Yemen, and cessation of hostilities. The talks are a good start and have raised expectations for peace, which has not been witnessed since the UN truce that was brokered last year and expired on October 2nd, 2022. The talks have not led to a nationwide cessation of hostilities and localized clashes were still recorded in some areas. It is time for all parties to the conflict to return to the negotiation table and work towards achieving a political settlement.
- **Peace negotiations must include the needs and perspectives of civilian communities:** A sustainable peace agreement must not only bring about an immediate end to the fighting, but also provide for inclusion, accountability and justice, and reconstruction. Without an inclusive process that elevates civilian and civil society needs and perspectives, any peace agreement will be unlikely to succeed in the long term, putting civilians at risk in the future. CIVIC calls for a peace deal that leads to sustainable and inclusive peace and a safer future for all
- **Peace negotiations must deal with the question of unrestricted access.** Civilians will want to return to their home and humanitarian assistance is essential for their survival.

The negotiations should prioritize this need and ensure that civilians can safely return to their homes and humanitarian assistance is not stymied by safety concerns. Beyond just a commitment by parties to the conflict to restore access, the lingering concern of explosive remnants of war (ERW) needs to be addressed. ERW, including landmines, unexploded ordnance, and improvised explosive devices, have resulted in thousands of civilian casualties throughout Yemen since the start of the conflict in 2015, many of whom were children. A key challenge in addressing the threat of ERW lies in the difficulty of conducting a countrywide assessment, especially in areas controlled by Houthis, to identify contaminated areas and prioritize areas that need to be cleared first. The confidence generated by the Houthi-Saudi talks could result in more confidence among the population, who may seek to return to their homes or agricultural plots and put themselves at greater risk of harm from ERW. Therefore, the talks should not focus solely on a political settlement, but should be accompanied by other interventions that are necessary for normal life to resume.

- **Reject detention without due process:** CIVIC welcomes the recent prisoner exchange and reminds parties to the conflict that thousands more remain detained, including prisoners of war, people who have been forcibly disappeared, and prisoners of conscience. Further arrangements must be made to ensure that no one continues to be detained without due process.



Background:

On April 8, 2023, high-level Saudi and Omani delegations arrived in Sana'a for talks with Houthi officials on a proposal to end the current conflict. In public comments about the meetings, Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammad Al-Jabir stated that the aim of the visit was to reinstate the truce, reach a lasting ceasefire agreement, support the exchange of prisoners, and explore ways to further talks between the Yemeni parties that will result in a comprehensive political settlement. As of publication of this briefing note, the proposal will reportedly begin with a nationwide ceasefire for at least six months, followed by a three-month UN-facilitated negotiating period between the Houthis and the Saudi government on the terms of the subsequent transitional phase, which is anticipated to last for two years, during which a negotiated solution to the conflict will be finalized. However, as of publication, full details of the negotiation process and the topics it will include remain unclear. UN-facilitated negotiating period between the Houthis and the Saudi government on the terms of the subsequent transitional phase, which is anticipated to last for two years, during which a negotiated solution to the conflict will be finalized. However, as of publication, full details of the negotiation process and the topics it will include remain unclear.

UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg called the talks “the closest Yemen has been to real progress towards lasting peace.” A follow-up meeting in Saudi Arabia is expected, where a framework deal is expected to be signed between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia. No further details have been made, although it has been reported that Saudi Arabia has informed the Yemeni government in Riyadh of the broad terms of the deal.

It is unclear to what extent the peace negotiations will include the voices and perspectives of civilian communities and civil society. **CIVIC warns that without an inclusive process that elevates civilian and civil society needs and perspectives, any peace agreement will be unlikely to succeed in the long term, putting civilians at risk in the future.**

Despite the negotiations, the frontlines of the conflict are still active and at times intensifying. The frontlines in southern Marib, western Al-Dhale, and Taiz continue to see use of force incidents almost daily as Houthi forces launch attacks. **Hostilities will likely continue to intensify or re-escalate if there is no agreement in the near future.**

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