



Policy Planning White Paper: The Credibility of Local Actors

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**POLICY PLANNING WHITE PAPER:
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POLICY PLANNING WHITE PAPER: THE CREDIBILITY OF LOCAL ACTORS

Executive Summary

The purpose of this White Paper is to analyze Yemeni public perspectives on the credibility of political actors in governorates under the jurisdiction of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.

As the war in Yemen enters its seventh year the impact on Yemeni citizens is increasingly dire. Shuttle peace talks mediated by UN Special Envoys between the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) and Ansar Allah¹ have failed, and the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement between the ROYG and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) has been only implemented in part. The economy and standard of living of Yemeni citizens has continuously deteriorated, and has been further exacerbated since 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations estimates that in 2022, 75% of Yemenis will require some form of humanitarian assistance.² Further, dynamics between political actors have continued to shift, most recently with the transfer of presidential power in the ROYG from President Hadi to an eight person Presidential Leadership Council (PLC).³ This has raised the Yemeni public's hopes that it will be possible to end the war, while, paradoxically, Yemeni political actors' credibility has decreased.

¹ Ansar Allah is the political entity that currently controls much of northern Yemen. It is backed by the religious, political and military movement widely described by other Yemenis and international media with the generic term "Houthis," which is the family name of its late founder, Husayn al-Houthi, and his brother, its current leader. Because survey participants often refer to "Houthis," that term is employed to refer to Ansar Allah when it is contained in the survey data. In addition to these religious supporters, Ansar Allah is supported by allied tribes, former members of late President Saleh's party, the GPC, and political actors allied with Ansar Allah for practical reasons. For an overview of Houthi origins as a the Zaydi revivalist movement, see, International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb," May 27, 2009, available at <https://tinyurl.com/4xr3u4j4>.

² For information on this characterization and current humanitarian conditions, see United Nations Population Fund, "UNFPA Response in Yemen Situation Report Issue #1 (Jan - Mar 2022)," available at <https://tinyurl.com/y5yqe2gu>.

³ On April 6, 2022, ten years after taking office in a referendum, President Hadi transferred presidential powers to an eight-man Presidential Leadership Council. Significantly, the PLC includes Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the head of the STC. While the future success and the constitutionality of this transition are unclear, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have pledged to support it financially. For a contemporaneous announcement on Twitter, see <https://tinyurl.com/49yz7ff7>. For analysis of the PLC, see Gregory D. Johnsen, Old Wine in New Skins: The Yemen Presidential Council, The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, (April 7, 2022), available at <https://tinyurl.com/2z9fwjns>.

This analysis draws on the relevant portions of three years of data collection, including quantitative surveys, focus group discussions, and qualitative interviews with Yemenis living in areas under the control of the internationally recognized government (see Annex I for an overview of methods). Indicators of “credibility” include trust, public acceptance, and the belief that the party or actor represents the Yemeni public interest, including in peace negotiations.⁴

Over 80% of respondents, interviewees and focus group participants across all three phases indicated a preference for political parties to reach a negotiated settlement, rather than waiting for one actor to achieve a decisive military victory. However, what is less clear is how to achieve this in light of the low confidence expressed with the current slate of political actors.

The conflict is no longer confined to the ROYG (often referred to as the “legitimate government”)⁵ and the Houthis. Numerous armed groups with foreign support have played an important role in the trajectory of the war by aligning themselves with parties or factions within parties. Multiple parties have developed in southern Yemen.⁶ Yemenis are frustrated by the ever-changing geographical divisions and conflict parties’ inability to reach and maintain a peace agreement. Despite this complicated political context the data indicates the Yemeni public views only the Houthis, the ROYG, and the STC as the main Yemeni conflict actors, with some recognition of the role of regional and international parties.

In an open-ended question about credible actors, the ROYG was most commonly mentioned (52%), followed by the STC (14%), and Ansar Allah (1%).⁷ As discussed below, only 39% of quantitative survey respondents felt public acceptance of the ROYG had increased; this support varies across governorates. Uneven public support for the ROYG may be further affected by the recent transfer of presidential power to the PLC. Significantly, nearly a third of interviewees (28%) in 2021 reported there were no credible actors involved in peace

⁴ Credibility indicators were chosen for the Yemeni political context and are adapted from indicators employed in the “Quality of Governance” *data set available at <https://www.gu.se/en/quality-government/qog-data>* and the “Worldwide Governance Indicators” *dataset available at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>*.

⁵ The data includes many references to the “Legitimacy” (Shara’iya, Arabic شرعية) government. Because interviewees used this term instead of ROYG, this paper employs both terms to refer to the political group led by ex-President Hadi and the internationally recognized Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG). For a full analysis of the term, see Nadwa al-Dawsari, *The Role of Legitimacy, Hadi, and the Islah Party*, in *Global, Regional and Local Dynamics in the Yemen Crisis*, ed. by S. Day and N. Brehony, Springer (Palgrave Macmillan; 2020).

⁶ For a discussion of southern political developments, see PILPG-Resonate Policy Paper 4, “The Southern Question.”

⁷ Note that all surveys were conducted outside of areas held by Ansar Allah, so this data cannot be interpreted to represent attitudes of the Yemeni public currently residing in areas under its control. For analysis and discussion of AA governance, see PILPG-Resonate Policy Paper 5, “Governance under Ansar Allah,” forthcoming.

negotiations. Many reported concerns that these actors actually sought to prolong the conflict for economic gain and political advantage.⁸

Recommendations for local and international actors to bolster their credibility and reach a peaceful conclusion include:

- Engage with the PLC and other credible actors to facilitate peace and humanitarian relief throughout Yemen;
- Advocate for inclusion of women, youth and civil society organizations in peace negotiations;
- Conduct long term research on the perceived credibility of political actors including the new leadership council of the Republic of Yemen Government;
- Facilitate dialogue where useful,⁹ and build capacity through training and aid.

⁸ Output of in-depth interviews, phases II and III.

⁹ For analysis and recommendation for a successful national dialogue, see PILPG-APPY Policy Paper 8, “Intra-Yemeni Dialogue.”

Statement of Purpose

This white paper analyzes Yemeni public perspectives on the credibility of political actors in governorates under the jurisdiction of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.¹⁰ It employs trust, public acceptance, and the belief that the party or actor represents Yemenis, including in peace negotiations as indicators of credibility.¹¹ Relevant research questions include public perception of political actors; changes in perceptions of credibility over time; and preferences regarding how the war should end.

Background

Political actors' credibility is important to maintaining peace and ending conflict. The war in Yemen involves three putative governments, numerous parties, and a multiplicity of armed groups, yet only three national actors were identified as key to the conflict: the Houthis, the STC, and the ROYG. Trust in these political actors generally is low, and eleven interviewees from both phases of interviews expressed concern that parties had no intention to end the war, but were instead seeking to extend the conflict to maintain political and economic gains. As in Yemen, where the public perceives that a government cannot, or will not, fulfill its promises to the electorate, revolution and insurgency are more likely.¹² Such governments are less able to counter an insurgency, creating an environment ripe in which many can vie for power, often without protest from the public.¹³ While credible actors alone cannot end the war, their existence is a necessary condition for a sustainable and durable peace.

Perceived Credibility of Political Actors in ROYG-Controlled Areas

This section discusses the public perception of the credibility of the main political actors within Yemen, based on data from in-depth interviews and

¹⁰ Qualitative interviews and focus groups were conducted with a sample including political actors; social activists; community leaders; business and economic experts; governmental managers, directors, or supervisors; university professors, researchers, or trainers; IDPs; disabled people; and marginalized groups. The sample included 10% from each category, except for community leaders, who would make up 20% of the group. See Annex I for an overview of the data collection throughout the project.

¹¹ Credibility indicators were chosen for the Yemeni political context and are adapted from indicators employed in the "Quality of Governance" data set available at <https://www.gu.se/en/quality-government/qog-data> and the "Worldwide Governance Indicators" dataset available at <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>.

¹² Philip Keefer, "Insurgency and credible commitment in autocracies and democracies." *The World Bank Economic Review* 22.1 (2008): 33-61.

¹³ Francesco Petricone argues that citizens view political actors as credible when they are more competent at governance than themselves; Francesco Petricone (2020) *The Importance of Political Credibility Today*, Church, Communication and Culture, 5:2, 288-291, DOI: 10.1080/23753234.2020.1766364, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2020.1766364>

surveys. Beginning with the identification of who Yemenis believe to be the “main political actors,” the analysis covers how credible Yemenis see the identified actors over time, and how they hope these actors end the war.

Main Political Actors

The data show that Ansar Allah, the STC and the ROYG are considered the main domestic conflict actors. Interviewees were asked to identify main actors in the conflict and how their views of these actors have changed over time in 2020 and 2021. They identified the Houthis and the STC, followed closely by the ROYG, then external actors including countries participating in the Saudi-led coalition. The data reflected some confusion about how the main parties were understood by the general population, and a possible class divide. For example, a woman in Aden said that when she talks to people, they do not always recognize the party’s name, “yet there are [Yemenis] benefiting from what happens to internal and external parties.”¹⁴

While some interviewees grouped actors as either local (ROYG, STC, the Houthis) or external (regional and international actors), others indicated ties between these actors.¹⁵ For instance, a male interviewee from Sirwah in Marib and another from Hadibo in Socotra tied Iran directly to the Houthis.¹⁶ Interviewees seldom referenced political parties or other internal components of political actors. Notably, the Islah Party was regarded as within the framework of the ROYG, just as the General Congress Party, the National Resistance (Tariq Saleh’s forces and the Giants Brigade), and the Security Belt were regarded in the framework of the STC.

Markers of Credibility

A party’s commitment to peace and alleviation of its citizens’ struggles (as opposed to a commitment to its original goals or beliefs) emerged in the data as a key marker of credibility. While the percentage of interviewees who indicated there was no credible party decreased slightly from 39% in 2020 to 31% in 2021, interviewees had harsh words for the conflict actors.¹⁷ A female government worker from Sayoun in the Hadramaut Valley indicated that she felt that no party

¹⁴ XF01, Phase II.

¹⁵ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III.

¹⁶ MM09, Phase III, and SM02, Phase III

¹⁷ In both Phase II and Phase III qualitative interviews, the survey included the question “In your opinion, who is the most credible actor/party in the peace process?” *PILPG / Resonate Qualitative Survey*, Phases II and III (2020, 2021), on file with author.

was credible since “each party seeks its own position while abandoning the burdens of the citizens.”¹⁸ A man in Shabwa explained that “All parties want peace, but only according to what they want, without consideration of the miserable and tragic situation, the economic collapse and deterioration of services. Each wants peace according to his mood.”¹⁹ Many participants in the 2020 focus groups agreed there was no credible actor, with some women justifying their lack of trust in every party’s unwillingness to include women and civil society organizations.²⁰

Interviewees highlighted willingness to make concessions as a mechanism for enhancing credibility, although as discussed below, some saw it as weakness. A man from Lahj explained that each party seemed to want peace only if it preserves its rights, with “no concessions.”²¹ Unwillingness to concede on issues clearly impacts the public’s trust of the parties, but could also reflect a profound lack of trust between the parties that each group’s rights will be respected in a negotiated settlement. Interviewees pointed to the fact that the only deal implemented throughout the six past years was the “release of prisoners,” likely referring to the well-publicized prisoner swap in October 2020 in which over 1,000 prisoners were released.²² A man from the Hadramaut valley noted that the prisoner exchange was successful because the parties made “concessions that led to the realization of this agreement.”²³ Interviewees felt that this limited success demonstrates the conflict parties’ lack of will to implement agreements.

Commitment to pursuing peace was also important to credibility. Multiple interviewees in Abyan, Hadramaut, Socotra, and Aden governorates reported that the main parties’ participation in national peace negotiations was “not serious,” describing them as “mere tactics” and “maneuvers producing nothing on the ground.”²⁴ A male civil society member from Sayoun in the Hadramaut Valley noted that because they are economically dependent on foreign funding, “conflict actors are closely linked to external parties.” This could refer equally to the former president of the ROYG, who has resided in Saudi Arabia since 2015, or to the

¹⁸ VF02, Phase II.

¹⁹ WM01, Phase III.

²⁰ Output of focus group sessions.

²¹ LM01, Phase III.

²² For contemporaneous accounts of a “prisoner release” see United Nations, *Welcoming Mass Prisoner Swap in Yemen as ‘Airlift of Hope’, Speakers Urge Government, Houthi Rebels to Negotiate Durable Peace, during Security Council Briefing*, (Oct. 15, 2020), available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14328.doc.htm>; Aljazeera, *Yemen’s Warring Sides Complete Largest Prisoner Swap In 5 Years*, (Oct. 17, 2020), available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/17/yemens-warring-sides-complete-largest-prisoner-swap>

²³ VM02, Phase II.

²⁴ Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

STC, which relies heavily on the UAE for financial, military and training support.²⁵ The same interviewee added that he believed the most credible party is the “resistance on the ground.” “Resistance” could refer to the coalition of Yemeni forces fighting the Houthi militia on the ground, or the Popular Resistance Forces led by Tariq Saleh; either way, the interviewee clearly contrasted actors inside Yemen with political and economic elites, who he characterized as living in “palaces and hotels” and who “turned the war into a commercial business.”²⁶

Yemeni beliefs about credibility are complex which may explain variations in the data between the interviews and the quantitative survey. Individuals may have become more likely to express their own increasing trust in the legitimate government in interviews, but survey respondents viewed the general public as having less acceptance of actors and their intentions in negotiations. These conclusions, however, cannot be applied universally, as this study only reached individuals living in areas under ROYG control. The belief that there is no credible actor remains widespread. Further, the transfer of power to the PLC and its connection to the STC likely has impacted Yemenis’ views of both the legitimate government and the STC, a facet of their credibility that requires further study.

Credibility of Political Actors: “Each wants peace according to his mood”

As discussed above, credibility of Yemeni political actors is reflected in public trust, attributions of credibility, public acceptance, and perceived commitment to public interests in peace negotiations.²⁷

Trust

In the 2019 quantitative survey asked respondents to rate how much they trusted the parties to the negotiations²⁸ as well as which actors they hoped would

²⁵ BBC News, *President Hadi Leaves Yemen as Saudi-Led Raids Continue*, (Mar. 27, 2015), available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32078817>

²⁶ VM02, Phase II.

²⁷ Interviewees in all phases were asked which party they believed was most credible in the peace process, while focus group participants were asked only which actors they trusted more in negotiations. Respondents in the Phase I survey were asked to rate their trust of parties, and respondents in the Phase III were asked about public acceptance of military and political actors and how this has changed.

²⁸ “I’m going to read you the names of some groups and organizations that have been involved in the negotiations to end the fighting in our country. For each one, please tell me if you trust that group or organization a great deal, trust it some, if you don’t trust it very much, or if you do not trust it at all. If you don’t know, you can tell me that too.” Relevant choices included the official government, political parties, the United Nations, national CSOs, and local committees.

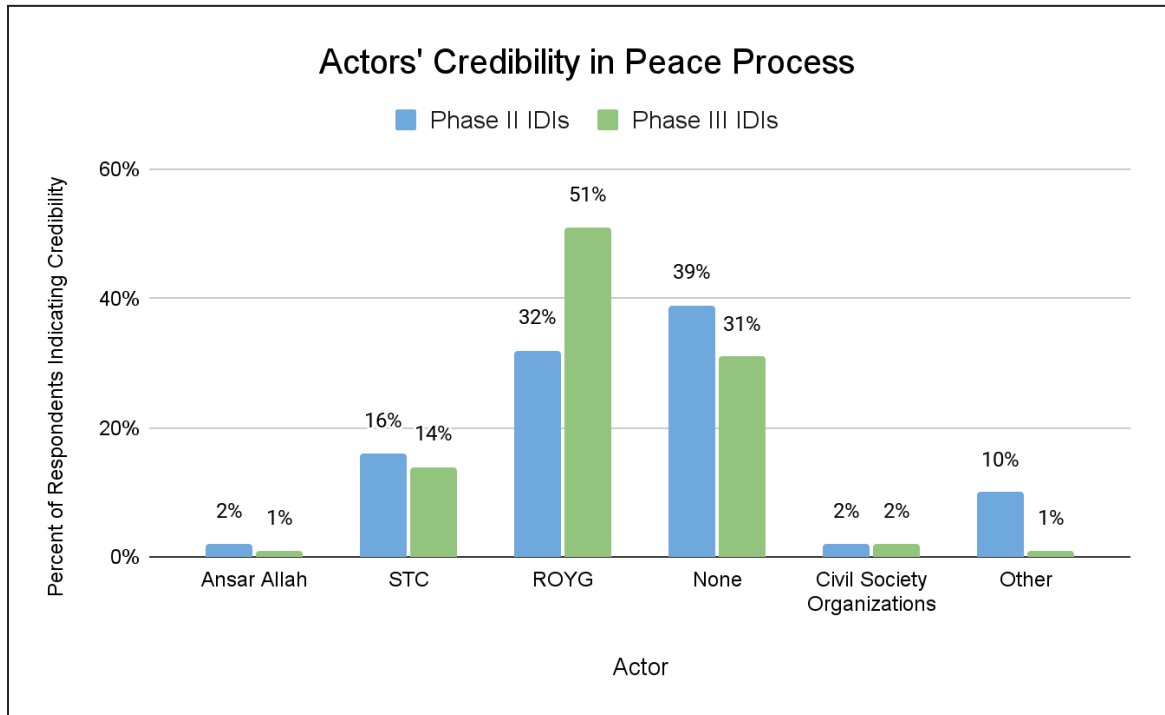
participate in negotiations.²⁹ Respondents expressed the highest trust in the official government (83%) and civil society organizations (CSOs) (78%), while only 26% of respondents expressed trust in political parties, and 16% expressed trust in “armed groups,” which would include the armed Houthi militias supporting Ansar Allah. At that time, less than a third of the respondents (28%) believed armed groups should participate in the peace process, and only 10% believed “rebel groups” should be involved, which would encompass the Houthi militias and Ansar Allah respectively. A majority of respondents felt the official government (83%) and CSOs (84%) should participate in the peace process. Finally, respondents indicated that inclusion of the following groups was important: youth (96%), “citizens like you” (89%), business leaders and groups (78%), women (76%), diaspora groups (74%), and international organizations (71%).

Attribution of Credibility

In the Phase II and Phase III qualitative interviews, the survey asked “In your opinion, who is the most credible actor/party in the peace process?” Credibility trends from 2020 to 2021 include a significant decline in the credibility of non-Yemeni actors, including the United Nations and foreign countries like the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and a nearly 20% increase in the ROYG’s credibility from 32% to 51%.

²⁹ “Now, I am going to read you the names of some groups in society. I would like you to tell me how much input each of the groups SHOULD have in the negotiations to end the conflict in our country. Should each one have a great deal of input into the negotiations, some input, not too much input or none at all? If you aren’t sure, you can tell me that too. Relevant choices included the official government, political parties, the United Nations, national CSOs, and local committees.

Figure 1: Actors' Credibility in the Peace Process



Republic of Yemen Government

The ROYG emerged in the interviews as the *least bad choice* for many Yemenis seeking peace. A man from Lahj explained, “If the choice is between the parties to the conflict, the legitimacy is the most credible compared to the other parties, but there are forces that limit its credibility.”³⁰ Another man from Taiz explained, “[i]n my opinion, all parties in the peace process have lost their credibility and trust with the people, but I believe that Legitimacy carries the most credibility.”³¹ Despite anger at the leadership’s exile in Saudi Arabia discussed above, among interviewees who identified a credible actor, nearly half cited the ROYG.³² The majority of participants in the 2020 focus group sessions named the Legitimacy government as a credible actor, stating “it represents the state” and “holds international recognition.”³³ Focus group participants noted that the Legitimacy government was “elected by the people it represents,” “made concessions for peace,” “signed the Stockholm Agreement,” and “agreed to the

³⁰ LM03, Phase II.

³¹ TM11, Phase III.

³² Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

³³ Output of focus group sessions.

ceasefire in Hodeida which was designed to allow for more food imports through the port.”³⁴ Commitment to citizen well-being and improving the humanitarian situation, rather than from political projects, formed the basis for credibility. Interviewees indicated that the ROYG had moved towards peace by agreeing to the initiatives proposed by the United Nations’ envoys, whereas the Houthis were inflexible (although none of these interviewees come from Ansar Allah held governorates).

The Yemeni public’s view of the ROYG’s credibility is nuanced, praising it as credible for its commitment to peace agreements, yet also weak for being the first to sign on to said commitments. Multiple pro-ROYG interviewees characterized it as “losing out to others’ unwillingness to make peace,” and “the only party to abide by ceasefire resolutions.”³⁵ However some Phase II interviewees described the government as weak. These interviewees felt the ROYG has been forced to make concessions, and has been consistently the first to sign agreements that other actors then violate. A woman in Aden noted the weakness of the Legitimacy government (led by the ROYG) and that “the conflict between [parties making up the anti-Houthi coalition]” prevented it from achieving more credibility.³⁶ Since commitments to change for citizens are central to perceptions of credibility for Yemenis, this sense of weakness might be alleviated if the legitimate government can follow through on agreements and promises. While returning to negotiations on old agreements may not be fruitful or worthwhile, if the PLC were to enter into new negotiations and agreements, it may be able to capitalize on its recent pledge to only enter into such agreements in which they have sufficient reason to believe that other parties will uphold their ends. Overall, the PLC will have to balance its commitment to peace with its potential willingness to enter into precarious agreements to maintain its credibility among Yemenis.

The Southern Transitional Council

Of those who named the STC as a main actor, a substantial minority also indicated it was credible. A portion of interviewees in Phase II (15%) and Phase III (20%) spontaneously mentioned the STC as the most credible, or among the most credible political parties.³⁷ This may be partly due to the STC’s ability to pay

³⁴ For more information regarding the Hodeida Agreement and developments that followed, see Ibrahim Jalal, “Yemen’s peace process: The Hodeida Agreement that never was?” (Sept. 16, 2019), *available at* <https://www.mei.edu/publications/yemens-peace-process-hodeida-agreement-never-was>

³⁵ Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

³⁶ XF04, Phase II.

³⁷ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III. For an overview of how the STC compares to other southern political parties, see PILPG-APPY Policy Paper 4, “The Southern Question.”

public sector salaries within its territory without resorting to economically riskier means such as printing money (which is the case in ROYG controlled territories).³⁸ Another interviewee, a woman in al-Dhale'a attributed perceived credibility to "the way they deal with people, solve problems and stand up for people's rights..."³⁹ and others discussed their perceived commitment to the goals of the south (although unclear if interviewee preferences are for an independent south, or if interviewees simply lack faith in the ROYG or believe that the STC's commitments will help end the war).⁴⁰ Essentially, those who spoke to the STC's credibility attributed it to its local and active presence, as well as its commitment to do better for southern Yemenis, meaning that participants believed that the STC was truly working to improve life for the people (unlike the ROYG or the Houthis). It may also be true that others named the STC as one of the most credible parties due to name recognition only, rather than actual support or perceived trustworthiness.⁴¹

A number of focus group participants, namely those Abyan, al-Dhale'a, Lahj, and Aden, also expressed confidence in the STC's presence on the ground (in contrast to governing from outside the country like ex-President Hadi's administration), and favored the STC playing an active role in future peace negotiations.⁴² Participants related the STC's credibility to its willingness to respond to Saudi Arabia's call for peace [the Riyadh Treaty process], its relinquishing of self-administration in the Riyadh treaty, and its success entering the political discussion, given that it did not participate in the Stockholm negotiations.⁴³ It should be noted that participants did not look to the STC alone to represent southern interests, and some noted that other factions, such as Hiraak and the Hadramaut Conference, ought to participate in the peace process for there to be a truly representational and durable negotiation.

Ansar Allah and Other Parties

Only three interviewees indicated Ansar Allah or the Houthis were credible actors, citing their platform.⁴⁴ Although Ansar Allah's anti-corruption messaging

³⁸ DF02, Phase III.

³⁹ DF02, Phase III.

⁴⁰ Output of in-depth interviews, Phase III.

⁴¹ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III.

⁴² Interviewees expressed the STC's perceived commitment to the peace process, as well as being "functional and engaged," as factors in determining credibility. Output of in-depth interviews, Phase III.

⁴³ Output of 2020 focus group sessions.

⁴⁴ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III.

may have resonated, it appears that in ROYG territory the vast majority had little confidence in its commitments to peace.

In 2020, 10% of interviewees found international and regional actors most credible, specifically naming the UN's commitments to peace.⁴⁵ This dropped significantly to 1% in 2021, which may reflect the U.N.'s inability to enforce prior agreements. This may not be a meaningful trend, however: when surveyed in 2021 and specifically asked if they trust international organizations in peace negotiations, 84% of respondents (n=3000) expressed some (40%) or a great deal of trust (44%), while fewer than 20% of survey respondents had little to no trust in international organizations.⁴⁶

Changes in Reported Credibility of Main Political Actors in the Peace Process

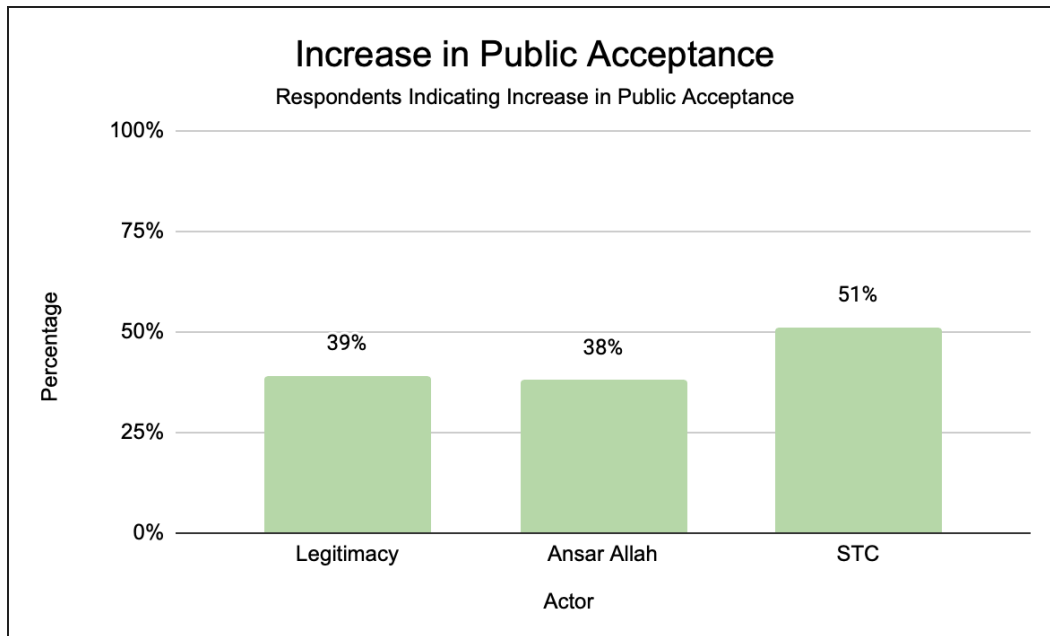
Perceived public acceptance and credibility have distinct meanings in the data. A respondent might report the belief that the public has increased acceptance of a party for reasons other than being credible or trustworthy, such as through force or patronage. Credibility, as mentioned, relates to trustworthiness of the particular actor and perceived capability to act on promises. Public acceptance, on the other hand, while a factor of credibility, could correlate to a respondent's belief about how others see a party. For example, while very few interviewees reported that Ansar Allah was credible, 38% of survey respondents believed its public acceptance had increased, compared with 39% for the ROYG. In contrast, more than half the respondents believed that public acceptance of the STC had increased.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, there was consistent variability in views on credibility between the in-depth interviews and survey responses through both phases II and III. Interviewees were more likely to trust the legitimate government, while survey respondents consistently expressed a less favorable view of all actors. Importantly, data collection took place in ROYG controlled areas prior to the transfer of power to the PLC, potentially affecting what can be inferred from the results.

Figure 2: Increase in Public Acceptance of Actors

⁴⁵ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III.

⁴⁶ PILPG - APPY Survey, Phase III (2021).



When asked how their opinion about the main actors to the conflict changed over the preceding six months, roughly 70% of interviewees in Phase III stated that their view of the main actors in the conflict had not changed. Just two individuals, a male interviewee from Mukalla in the Hadramaut Coast and a male interviewee from Qalansiya and Abd al-Kuri in Socotra, stated that their views changed because of increased stability.⁴⁷ Of the remaining respondents, most claimed their views became more negative as a result of past outcomes.⁴⁸

Of these negative changes, interviewees generally agreed their change in views were due to a range of events: the failure of the Riyadh and Stockholm Agreements to end the conflict; the economic collapse; and a loss of hope for Yemeni parties' ability to negotiate an end to the conflict. Additionally, some blamed this change on the failure to rely on the United Nations and other international and regional actors to resolve the conflict.⁴⁹

Yemen is experiencing one of the worst inflation crises the world has ever seen, and civilians are often unable to afford basic food and necessities. Interviewees blamed Yemeni political parties for the deep economic crisis, seemingly equating the role of “main actor in the war” to party with direct responsibility for economic conditions. In particular, one male interviewee from

⁴⁷ HM02, Phase III, and SM05, Phase III.

⁴⁸ “How have your views (if any) changed about the main actors in the conflict over the past six months?” *PILPG / Resonate Qualitative Survey*, Phases II and III (2020, 2021), on file with author.

⁴⁹ Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

Mudhaffar in Taiz said that his view changed negatively, due to “the weakness of the legitimate authority in containing the economic and military collapse,”⁵⁰ while other interviewees described the Houthis and the ROYG as the main contributors to various economic issues such as the ongoing depreciation of local currency, the continuous deterioration of the standard of living, and the growing number of internally displaced people.

Interviewees believed that foreign interests have played an outsized role in manipulating the conflict parties through financial and other support. A male interviewee from Marib City felt it was “clear that the war was being controlled from the outside” and that financial support swayed local actors; he felt this was the reason the main conflict actors had transitioned from being “local to regional, and international.”⁵¹ Interviewees expressed loss of hope in the countries of the Saudi-led “Arab Alliance” which was “keen on the status quo to serve their own interests.”⁵² A female interviewee from Mukalla on the Hadramaut Coast said her view of the parties changed after “waiting for reconstruction by the coalition, but instead there was a greater re-destruction.”⁵³

Sixty-nine percent of Phase III interviewees indicated a credible actor in the peace process. Within this group, there was almost a 20% increase in mentions of Legitimacy/ROYG. These qualitative findings contrast with the nearly 60% of Phase III quantitative survey respondents who indicated that public acceptance of the ROYG had decreased in the past year.⁵⁴ Phase III interviewees were also asked if they believed the newly formed government under the Riyadh Agreement would be able to bring peace and order to Yemen.⁵⁵ The majority did endorse this belief, claiming the group was not qualified or competent, or “did not represent the people.” This may indicate that while public perception of the peace process remains pessimistic, individuals still prefer the Legitimacy government to other parties.

The percentage of interviewees who reported that the STC was the most credible actor increased only slightly across governorates to 14% (Qualitative Interviews, Phases II and III). In contrast, roughly 55% of Phase III survey

⁵⁰ TM12, Phase III.

⁵¹ MM04, Phase III.

⁵² Output of in-depth interviews, Phase III.

⁵³ HF01, Phase III.

⁵⁴ It should be noted that the question asked survey respondents to select if acceptance either increased or decreased, whereas interviewees were able to answer with a neutral position.

⁵⁵ “How have your views (if at all) changed about the main actors in the conflict over the past six months?” *PILPG / Resonate Qualitative Survey*, Phases II and III (2020, 2021), on file with author.

respondents reported that public acceptance of the STC had increased.⁵⁶ This could indicate a range of possible public opinions, from increased support for a southern state, to lack of progress on behalf of the ROYG to maintain a peace agreement or to provide better circumstances for the Yemeni people, or belief that the STC may be a strong actor in future peace negotiations.

Preference: Negotiated Settlement or Decisive Victory

All three qualitative surveys included the question “Which would you prefer – a negotiated settlement to the conflict and a compromise outcome, or continued fighting until one side achieves a decisive victory?”⁵⁷ The prolonged war and the inability of any of the political actors to settle the conflict militarily to their advantage impacted the interviewees’ preferences in favor of a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Eighty-nine percent of Phase II interviewees and 81% of Phase III interviewees indicated they favored a negotiated peace settlement.⁵⁸ Interviewees preferred a negotiated settlement for a range of reasons, including that it would end the bloodshed and prevent future casualties, especially women and children casualties. They argued that after years of war, none of the conflict parties had achieved a decisive military victory, and the prolonged fighting has compounded citizen suffering and the economic impact. Settlement is within reach according to some, but others noted a lack of trust in political actors who they believe cannot make decisions and who represent foreign interests.

Fewer than 15% of Phase III interviewees (14%) preferred “continuation of the war until one of the parties involved can achieve a decisive victory.”⁵⁹ They indicated the dialogue had dragged on for so long and all prior peace talks failed. These interviewees noted that settlement is not possible in light of the multitude of parties involved in the conflict with such different objectives and personal interests in addition to the lack of any good faith commitment on the part of the Houthis.⁶⁰ Four male interviewees from Marib described the Houthis as intransigent, and so the conflict would not end with any negotiation.⁶¹ Indeed, the Houthis have escalated violence in Marib, as both they and the legitimate government have failed to come to an agreement or settlement brokered by foreign actors.

⁵⁶ Output of surveys, Phase III.

⁵⁷ *PILPG / Resonate Qualitative Survey*, Phases I, II and III (2019, 2020, 2021), on file with author.

⁵⁸ Output of in-depth interviews, Phases II and III.

⁵⁹ All three qualitative surveys included the question “Which would you prefer – a negotiated settlement to the conflict and a compromise outcome, or continued fighting until one side achieves a decisive victory?” *PILPG / Resonate Qualitative Survey*, Phases I, II and III (2019, 2020, 2021), on file with author.

⁶⁰ Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

⁶¹ MM01 Phase II, MM03 Phase II, MM04 Phase II, and MM06 Phase II

The remainder of the answers expressed by the interviewees ranged from those who believe that settlement may be within reach for the legitimate government and the STC, to those who voiced their lack of trust in any possible political settlement because of the interference of the regional and international actors.⁶²

Conclusion and Recommendations

The war in Yemen has resulted in terrible human tragedy. The objectives of the military intervention set out by the Arab Alliance (also known as the Saudi-led Coalition) have not been met. The rounds of talks and negotiations have failed, causing disrupted enforcement of the agreements signed between the ROYG, the Houthis, and the STC. All of these factors have impacted the Yemeni public's view of the credibility of political actors. The ROYG has been deemed the most credible political actor by the highest number of the respondents, though it was also characterized by many as a weak player. The STC holds the second position in credibility, while the Houthis were deemed credible by only a few individuals. However, many expressed their lack of trust in all political players. With no universally credible actor and a common belief that all parties in the conflict are acting in their own best interest, most prefer that the conflict be settled through political consensus, such that all conflicting parties make concessions and prioritize national interest above any other consideration. This may change with the takeover of the PLC. With the situation continually developing, especially regarding the PLC and its new role in leadership in the conflict, this study of public opinion and views of political actors' credibility should be expanded. Policymakers should also push for more inclusion of women, youth, and civil society organizations in peace negotiations, as respondents regularly placed more trust in agreements and organizations that consulted with these groups.

A future peace in Yemen will require Yemeni political actors to address the well-known challenges to their credibility and rebuild public trust. There is no simple roadmap for this process in a country whose citizens have been deeply disappointed by its political class. International policymakers can however monitor and assess parties' credibility to help shape decisions about financial and technical support. Recommendations based on the above analysis include:

- Engage with the PLC and other credible actors to facilitate peace and humanitarian relief throughout Yemen;

⁶² Output of in-depth interviews, Phase II.

- Advocate for inclusion of women, youth, marginalized groups and civil society organizations in peace negotiations;
- Collect data regularly on public trust, credibility, representativeness and inclusivity of political parties using the same set of questions and methods over time to produce clear insights; adapt credibility research to the installation of the Presidential Leadership Council as of April 2022, to measure the impact on Yemeni parties' credibility.
- Support the peace process by facilitating dialogue where useful,⁶³ and building capacity through training and humanitarian and other aid.

⁶³ For analysis and recommendation for a successful national dialogue, see PILPG-APPY Policy Paper 8, "Intra-Yemeni Dialogue."

About the Public International Law & Policy Group Policy Planning Initiative

PILPG's Policy Planning Initiative supports the development of long term, strategic policy planning that is crucial to international accountability, global conflict resolution, and the establishment of international peace. The Initiative provides timely and accurate policy planning analysis and work product on pressing and future policy conundrums by leveraging PILPG's deep network of talent within the international legal and policy communities and experience with its *pro bono* clients globally. PILPG Policy Planning focuses on advising policymakers, policy shapers, and engaged stakeholders on pressing issues within the arenas of international law, war crimes prosecution, and conflict resolution efforts. This includes identifying and addressing gaps within existing policies, anticipating key conundrums and questions that will riddle future policy decisions, applying lessons learned from comparative state practice, and proactively producing and sharing work product to inform such policies and avoid crisis decision making.

Annex I: Methodology

Beginning in March 2019 and ending in December 2021, Yemeni civil society organizations that are part of the Civil Alliance for Peace (CAP), with support from Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG) and Resonate! Yemen, conducted quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) throughout Yemen. In total, there were two quantitative surveys with 5,750 respondents. The team conducted over 350 in-depth interviews and held 159 focus group discussions over all three years. (See Table 1).

Surveys

The surveys were developed by Yemeni civil society leaders in collaboration with non-Yemeni survey design experts. In Phase I (March and April 2019), the CAP conducted 2750 in-person surveys about Yemeni views on and recommendations for the international peace process. Seven governorates including Abyan, Aden, Hadramaut, Ibb, Lahj, Marib and Taiz were polled, with a conscious effort to include underrepresented voices and vulnerable populations.

In Phase III, (July - September 2021), the team conducted in-person surveys of 3000 Yemenis about their views on and recommendations for the international peace process. Ten governorates currently controlled by the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) including Abyan, Aden, al-Dhale'a, al-Mahra, Hadramaut, Lahj, Marib, Shabwa, Socotra, and Taiz were polled. For security reasons, the quantitative survey was not implemented in areas currently held by Ansar Allah.

In-depth Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Phase I (March-July 2019)

In addition to the survey component, CAP members conducted qualitative FGDs and IDIs in May, June, and July 2019. FGDs and IDIs took place in 14 governorates: Abyan, Aden, Amran, Dhamar, Hadramaut, Hajja, Hodeidah, Ibb, Marib, Raymah, Sa'ada, Sana'a municipality, Sana'a governorate, and Taiz. In total, the CAP conducted 64 FGs and 115 IDIs. For participation in FGs and IDIs, the CAP targeted influential social figures, academics, civil servants, business people, civil society activists, women, youth, and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Phase II (September-November 2020)

Between September and November 2020, PILPG and its partners carried out 83 focus groups (FGDs) and 101 in-depth interviews (IDIs) in Arabic in ten Yemeni governorates currently controlled by the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG). These governorates included Abyan, Aden, al- Dhalea, al-Mahra, Hadramaut (Coast and Valley), Lahj, Marib, Shabwa, Socotra, and Taiz. All surveys were conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, except for one focus group led in person (February 2020).

Phase III (July-December 2021)

In July 2021, PILPG and its partners carried out 100 in-depth interviews (IDIs) in Arabic in nine Yemeni governorates currently controlled by the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG), including Abyan, Aden, al-Dhale'a, Hahramaut, Lahj, Marib, Shabwa, Socotra, and Taiz. In November and December 2021, PILPG and its partners carried out an additional 100 in-depth interviews (IDIs) in Arabic in nine Yemeni governorates currently controlled by Ansar Allah, including Amana Capital, al-Bayda, Amran, Mahweet, Dhamar, Hajja, Ibb, Rayma, and Sana'a. All interviews were conducted remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Limitations

While the quantitative data provides rich insights into trends, it is limited by a number of factors. While there was significant overlap in the subject matter of each survey instrument, many questions were phrased differently in each phase. Some questions varied significantly, and sections of the data collection tools were added or removed across phases, making trend analysis challenging. The large number of IDIs and FGDs represents an important source of qualitative insights, but representative generalized statements about population beliefs in the governorates surveyed cannot be inferred from the sample.

Table 1: APPY Data Collection Sample, 2019-2021

APPY DATA COLLECTION 2019-2021		Phase I			Phase II		Phase III	
		March-July 2019			September-December 2020		July-December 2021	
Governorate		Survey	PH I IDIs	Focus Group Discussions	IDIs	Focus Group Discussions	IDIs	Survey
ROYG/STC Controlled Areas	Abyan	248	6	3	9	6	7	271
	Hadhramaut	470	20	12	16	23	15	513
	Lahj	260	6	3	8	5	7	210
	Marib	400	20	12	15	13	15	485
	Taiz	620	20	12	16	13	21	510
	al-Dhale'a	-	-	-	10	4	7	183
	Shabwa	-	-	-	7	7	7	230
	Socotra	-	-	-	5	3	5	131
	al-Mahra	-	-	-	4	2	-	60
	Aden	502	13	6	23	10	16	420
Ansar Allah Controlled Areas	Amran	-	3	10	-	-	5	-
	Dhamar	-	3	2	-	-	6	-
	Hajja	-	3	2	-	-	6	-
	Ibb	250	5	3	-	-	8	-
	Rayma	-	3	2	-	-	4	-
	Sanaa	-	3	2	-	-	15	-
	Amana Capital	-	-	-	-	-	10	-
	Al-Bayda	-	-	-	-	-	5	-
	Mahweet	-	-	-	-	-	8	-
	Hodeidah	-	3	2	-	-	-	-
Saada	-	3	2	-	-	-	-	